

Hrólfs saga kraka:
A Tragedy, Comedy, History, Pastoral, Pastoral-Comical,
Historical-Pastoral, Tragical-Historical, Tragical-Comical-
Historical-Pastoral . . . Romance

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Polonius, in *Hamlet*, famously jumbles all the different forms of dramatic verse into one confusing mess;¹ but to be fair to poor Polonius, genre is actually a difficult concept to define. *Hrólfs saga kraka* is one of the most widely-known *fornaldarsögur*, and itself encompasses elements of tragedy, comedy, history, and romance.² Traditionally the *fornaldarsögur* (“stories of ancient times”) have been loosely defined by their narrative setting, which is typically in a mythic, presettlement period of Icelandic history; and thus these sagas have been descriptively classified as the legendary sagas.³

However, Hermann Pálsson and Marianne Kalinke have both defined the *fornaldarsögur* as secular romances.⁴ In fact, Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards in *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* argued that the

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Tucker Brooke and Jack Randall Crawford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 2.2.397–405.

2. *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 1–105; “King Hrolf and His Champions,” in *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 221–318. All subsequent references are to this edition and this translation.

3. For a standard description of the *fornaldarsögur*, see Hermann Pálsson, “*Fornaldarsögur*” in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 12 volumes, ed. Joseph Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982–89), volume 5, p. 138.

4. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland*, *Studia Islandica* 30 (Reykjavík: Heimspekideild Háskóla Íslands and Menningarsjóður, 1970), p. 17; Hermann Pálsson “*Fornaldarsögur*,” p. 137. Marianne E. Kalinke, “Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*),” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 324–7.

fornaldarsögur function simultaneously as both secular romances and as legendary fiction.⁵ How then is this hybrid genre of romance and legend defined? And how does this classification affect our understanding of the *fornaldarsaga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*? More specifically, for purposes of this article, I would like to analyze how *Hrólfs saga kraka* functions as a romance. To begin, however, I want to examine more closely how Hermann Pálsson defines the *fornaldarsögur* as romances.

Hermann Pálsson points out that the term romance actually encompasses a wide variety of literary texts, and he turns to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to try to establish a definition of the genre. Frye's study is heavily derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Frye categorizes and then analyzes literary texts around an identification of the central protagonist's *kind* and *degree* of power in relationship to his larger environment. Thus a myth is characterized by a hero who is superior in *kind* to his world, and a romance involves a hero who is superior in *degree* to the other elements in his environment.⁶

Using this very basic definition of romance, as predicated on the nature of the hero, Hermann Pálsson then subdivides the *fornaldarsögur* into hero legends and adventure tales. The heroic legends are characterized by a tragic mode and predominantly center around the death of the hero, and the adventure tales are structured around a series of quests that typically end happily and often involve the themes of love and marriage.⁷ Both narrative groups, however, feature a central protagonist who is greater *in degree* than his environment. He is thus always a romance hero, and he operates within the narrative world of the romance. And, although the narratives are often shaped by a masculine warlike ethos and marked by Viking raids, the world of romance mediates this picture—and the Vikings may wear full armor, joust on horseback, or rescue imprisoned maidens.⁸ In addition to the trappings of chivalric romance, which can also be reflected in descriptive details of fabulous clothes, food, and sundry objects, there is also the infusion of folkloric motifs.⁹

5. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, p. 17.

6. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, pp. 10–2; and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 33–4.

7. Hermann Pálsson, "Fornaldarsögur," p. 138.

8. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, pp. 16 and 22–3.

9. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, pp. 23–4; Hermann Pálsson, "Fornaldarsögur," pp. 140–1.

Hermann Pálsson, quoting Frye, emphasizes the influence of folklore and folkloric motifs on romances in general:

The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. Here we have moved from myth, properly so called into legend, folk tale, *Märchen*, and their literary affiliates and derivatives.¹⁰

Thus Hermann Pálsson has defined romance by classifying the nature of the hero, by the use of language or images influenced by chivalric romances (perhaps a circular argument), and the strong influence of folkloric motifs. In addition to the obvious role that love, courtship, and marriage would also play in shaping the narrative mode of a story, how do these elements apply to *Hrólfs saga kraka*?

Hrólfs saga kraka represents a fusion of Hermann Pálsson's subdivision of the *fornaldarsögur* into heroic legends and Viking romances. While the saga operates on many levels as a romance (or shows a strong influence of romance elements), the saga which ends with the heroic battle scene and the death of Hrólfr and his men, ultimately remains a tragedy. What I would like to do now, however, is explicate the levels on which the saga does function as a romance, albeit as a tragic romance.

On a very basic narrative level, *Hrólfs saga kraka* relates the stories of five failed romances: King Helgi and Queen Ólöf, Helgi and a mysterious elfin-woman, Helgi and his daughter Yrsa, and the romance of Böðvarr's grandparents and his parents. Also interwoven is a heavy influence from folklore, in particular in the characterization of the elfin woman, the story of Böðvarr's parents and his father's transformation into a bear, in Böðvarr's slaying of the troll-monster at Hrólfr's court, and even in the journey that Hrólfr and his men make to King Aðils's court to retrieve Hrólfr's treasure, and their subsequent encounters

10. Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, p. 10; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 33–4.

with Óðinn on the journey. There are also several striking instances of the use of descriptive language clearly influenced by chivalric romances. I want to explore all these elements as contributions to the saga's participation in a larger romance paradigm.

The very first section of *Hrólfs saga kraka* (the *Fróða þáttir*) introduces Helgi as a young boy and clearly establishes his bravery and general superiority when he avenges his father's (Hálfðan's) murder. In a comparison to his brother, Hróarr, Helgi is described as: "hermaðr mikill, ok þótti allt meira til hans koma" (p. 13; a great fightingman, and he was thought to be the more important man altogether, pp. 232–33). Thus Helgi has been established as a hero who is greater in degree to his environment, and he is a romance protagonist by the basic definition of romance posited by Frye and Hermann Pálsson. In addition, at the beginning of the second section of the saga, the *Helga þáttir*, Helgi becomes a Viking-lover when he decides that he wants to marry Ólöf, a bellicose and powerful woman who rules Saxland and is remarked to be the best match known in the North. She is described as a warrior maiden who wears a shield, corselet, helmet, and sword. She is moreover, "... væn at yfirliti, en grimm í skapi og stórmannlig" (p. 14; lovely of countenance, but fierce-hearted and haughty, p. 234). Ólöf is thus depicted as a typical *meykongr*, or maiden king.¹¹ True to the paradigm of maiden-king narratives, she refuses to marry any suitors. The beginning of this story suggests that Helgi and Ólöf will be the protagonists in a typical maiden-king romance in which a proud and fierce, but beautiful, *meykongr* rejects and abuses all suitors, until the male hero outwits her and persuades her to marry him.¹²

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this paradigm will be subverted. In the usual bridal-quest narrative there is a generic happy ending; the *meykongr* agrees to marry the worthy suitor. There is also the sense, inherent in romance, that the desired woman and the wooer are rare and superior individuals in respect to learning, intelligence, and wit. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, however, this is true of neither Ólöf nor Helgi. While both monarchs are exceptional in many ways (and thus on a basic level function as romance protagonists), they also both

11. See Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica* 46 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 69.

12. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 65.

exhibit cruel and thoughtless behavior and they both commit acts of violence and betrayal.

Helgi has heard of Ólöf and the queen's arrogance and has decided to enhance his fame by marrying her, whether or not she consents to the marriage. Helgi thus makes no attempt to woo Ólöf's affections. In fact, he surprises her with a large retinue of men before she can collect her own retainers, and proclaims that they will be married immediately. Their conversation reveals Helgi's own arrogance:

Hún sagði: “Of brátt, herra, þykkir mér at þessu farit, en eigi þykkir mér annarr maðr kurteisligri en þú, ef ek skal þat verða upp at taka at þýðast karlmann, enda vænti ek, at þér vilið þat eigi með svívirðingu gera.”

Konungr sagði, at henni væri þat makligt fyrir dramblæti sitt ok stórlæti,—“at vit búum nú bæði saman slíka stund sem mér líkar.” (p. 15)

(“In my opinion, sire,” she replied, “that is to proceed over-abruptly. No man alive strikes me as more admirable than you, if I have no opinion but to yield myself to a husband, but I trust you are not proposing to act dishonourably in the matter.”

The king replied that what she deserved for her arrogance and pride was that “we spend as much time together as I please.” [p. 235])

In this exchange Helgi reveals his aggression and potential violence. While these traits are fitting for a pagan warrior, they are not appropriate in a suitor. Maiden kings are, themselves, often ambiguously characterized. As Kalinke has pointed out, they represent the “quintessence of feminine virtue,” but they are also noted for their cruel treatment of all suitors. The male protagonists, however, generally are sincere and honorable in their desire to marry.¹³ It is thus unusual to have such a violent proposal of marriage. The characterization of Ólöf as a warrior-maiden, an indigenous Icelandic motif, both constructs and develops Ólöf's character. Ólöf will be grievously misused by Helgi, but she is a character in her own right, and, like the maiden

13. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 74.

kings of romance, a strong female figure who is equally capable of exacting revenge.

Helgi becomes too drunk to consummate their nuptials in bed, and to ensure that he will stay asleep, Ólöf sticks him with a sleeping thorn. She also shaves and tars him, sticks him in a leather sack, and has him taken to his ship in disgrace. This physical abuse of a suitor while he is in a deep (induced) sleep is a common motif of the maiden-king romances. In fact, the shaving and tarring, in particular, also occur in two other sagas.¹⁴ By these acts, Ólöf has quite visibly rejected Helgi's offer of marriage. When given the opportunity, she has, like Helgi, also used the element of surprise to gain the upper hand.

Helgi returns to Denmark in disgrace:

Siglir Helgi konungr nú heim í sitt ríki með þessa sneypu ok svívirðing ok unír stórilla ok hugsar oft, hversu hann megí fá á drottningu hefnt. (p. 16)

(King Helgi now sailed back home to his kingdom with this shame and dishonour. He was full of resentment and often studied how he might be revenged on the queen. [p. 236])

Meanwhile, Ólöf's arrogance and tyranny, "ofsi ok ójafnaðr" (p. 17), grow greater than before. Within a short time Helgi returns to Saxland to enact his own revenge. He comes in tatters, disguised as a beggar, and pretends to have discovered a large fortune hidden in the woods. He encounters one of Ólöf's thralls and tells him of the treasure (the thrall then in turn tells the queen). The promise of wealth tempts Ólöf into the woods, alone at night, for she is a "kvenna féágjörust" (p. 21; most avaricious of women, p. 237), and there she encounters Helgi.

Helgi confronts her and Ólöf admits that she had misused him previously, and she asks him now to arrange their marriage. It is not clear whether this is sincere or a strategic ploy; nonetheless, Helgi refuses to forgive her earlier actions and proceeds to rape her over the course of several nights. At this point, what has appeared to be a potential romance turns into a tragedy. Both rulers have been charac-

14. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 76–7. She cites *Sigurðar saga þogla* and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*.

terized as cruel and selfish individuals. Ólöf's avarice and arrogance and Helgi's violence, in particular, have been emphasized, and neither ruler embodies the traditional qualities of a notable lover.

Ólöf, for her part, returns home pregnant and has a beautiful daughter, Yrsa (named after her dog), whose existence she keeps secret. Yrsa is fostered by peasants and never told of her true parents. On a return trip to Saxland, Helgi, once again disguised as a beggar, discovers Yrsa, who by now is thirteen years old and is tending a herd. Helgi is struck by her beauty, and takes her home to marry, despite her protestations not to do so: "bað hann þat eigi gera" (p. 20). Ólöf hears of the marriage but does not reveal Yrsa's parentage. The narrator comments that she was deceitful and not sincere ("flárað . . . ok eigi heilbrjóstuð," p. 20). This horrendous act of omission completes the subverted romance of Helgi and Ólöf. The narrative originally set up the expectation that the two would marry, but instead in a strange inversion, the father and daughter wed. This narrative twist serves in many ways to emphasize the deficiency of Helgi and Ólöf. Both rulers have such fatal flaws (their violence and greed)—that it is impossible for them to become the protagonists of a traditional romance; instead their character flaws precipitate a tragedy.

Helgi and Yrsa, however, live happily together for a period and have a son, Hrólfr. Obviously, despite their happiness, this is not a marriage that fulfills the expectations of a traditional romance; fathers and daughters are not meant to marry, and the romance between Helgi and Yrsa is doomed. Indeed, Ólöf eventually appears and tells Yrsa of her parentage. Shocked, Yrsa leaves Helgi and returns home with her mother. She is later encouraged to marry Aðils, King of Sweden (another disastrous marriage and failed romance).

The third significant "romance" of the saga is Helgi's third relationship with a woman. This relationship occurs after Yrsa has left him to marry King Aðils, and Helgi is alone and despondent. One Yule evening when the weather is miserable, a poor and tattered hag comes to his door asking for shelter. Helgi realizes that it would be "ókonungligt" (p. 27; unkingly, p. 246) not to let her in, and he opens the door. The woman remarks that he has acted well. Helgi then tells her to lie down on some straw and take a bearskin for warmth, but she asks to share his bed, for, as she remarks, "líf mitt er í veði" (p. 28; my very life is at stake, p. 246). Helgi balks at this intimacy, but

lets the woman into his bed. This act transforms her back into her true shape, a comely young woman. She then reveals that her stepmother had placed a curse on her that would only be removed when a king had allowed her to share his bed.¹⁵

It is remarkable that the word “ókonungligt” was used in this conversation. There has been no discussion of Helgi as king in the saga *per se*, and use of “ókonungligt” immediately emphasizes that Helgi is indeed a king, and a certain level of behavior is expected of him as king. In this particular instance, kingly behavior means being kind to a wretched creature despite her appearance. While Helgi does allow the woman to enter and share his bed, he does not maintain the same level of kingly behavior as the episode progresses. When Helgi sees the changed appearance of the woman, he informs her, as he had told Ólöf, “skal nú gera til þín skyndibryllaup” (p. 28; now we must patch up a wedding for you, p. 247), and shows great interest in sleeping with her. Like Ólöf and Yrsa, she resists, but to no avail, and Helgi rapes her.

On leaving, she tells him that because of his lust they will have a child whom he must claim in a year’s time or else pay the consequences for it. Helgi neglects to do this, once again failing to act honorably in a relationship with a woman. By using the word “ókonungligt,” the narrator reminds the audience that a certain level of behavior is expected of King Helgi, an expectation that he does not fulfill.

This failure is emphasized even more so when the child from his union with the enchanted woman is eventually brought to him. She is a daughter aptly named Skuld, a name that resonates with the notions of ‘fault’, ‘guilt’, ‘cause’, ‘debt’, and ‘responsibility’.¹⁶ Helgi is told that he is going to regret not claiming the girl at the appointed time. The theme of betrayal is clear in Helgi’s treatment of the enchanted woman

15. Evil stepmothers are a common folkloric motif (see note 20). Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 27 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), p. 249. See T418, “The Lustful Stepmother.” There is also the general motif of transformation, and in particular the transformation of the “Loathly Lady.” See, Cathalin B. Folks and Carl Lindahl, “Loathly Lady,” in *Medieval Folklore*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 142–8; especially pp. 245–6.

16. Kalinke, “Transgression in *Hrólfs saga kraka*,” in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2003), p. 163, n. 5.

and then his daughter by their union. This episode also introduces several folkloric motifs. The motif of the “loathly lady” and the motif of the discrepancy between appearance and reality are evident in the transformation of the elf-woman.

Thus end the disastrous romances of Helgi. Helgi had the potential to be a true romance hero in that he embodied on a basic level great intellectual and physical ability; and yet tragedy intervened. Because the larger *Hrólfs saga* is based on antecedent sources (albeit legendary ones), on one level the saga author was restricted in the ways that he could develop the trajectory of Helgi’s character.¹⁷ However, the inclusion of the story of the elfin-woman is a new addition to the story material and could be interpreted as a desire on the part of the author to emphasize Helgi’s deficiency as a romance protagonist.

The saga continues to weave in other romance narratives with the inclusion of the stories of the marriages of Böðvarr’s grandfather, and also his mother and father. These stories are again new additions to the corpus of the Hrólfr legend, and thus reflect a narrative interest in romance on the part of the saga author. While the larger saga will always function as a tragedy on a meta-narrative level, there is also clearly an authorial interest in exploring the romance dimensions of the legendary material.

The stories told about Böðvarr’s family are in some sense self-contained narratives, and they are marked by prominent folkloric features, including such folkloric motifs as evil stepmothers, magical

17. The story of Hrólfr kraki was preserved in oral tradition, but also recorded in written Icelandic sources thought to antedate the saga, namely in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1218), *Skjöldunga saga* (ca. 1200), Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál* (ca. 1220–30) and *Ynglinga saga* (ca. 1220), and in several chronicles including the *Chronicon Lethrense* (1178). Hrólfr is listed as Hrothwulf in the Old English *Widsith* (seventh century) in reference to early Germanic heroes, and in *Beowulf* (seventh to tenth century) where Hroþwulf is named as a nephew of King Hrothgar (Hróar). See: *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1931–57); *Skjöldunga saga*, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Íslensk fornrit 35 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1982), pp. 3–38; Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, 3 vols. ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26–8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941–51), vol. 1, pp. 9–83; Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), pp. 68–147; *Chronicon Lethrense*, in *Scriptores Minores Historiæ Danicæ*, ed. M. CL. Gertz (Copenhagen: Gad, 1917–18), vol. 1, pp. 34–53; *Widsith*, in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Phillip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 148–49; F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Boston: Heath, 1950).

transformations, and the use of tripling—of characters, incidents, and objects. Structurally, folktales often begin with a family of three boys, one of whom wants to go out into the world and win renown. The structure of the narrative is then generated by his adventures; and this is the narrative pattern used to tell the story of Böðvarr and his brothers.¹⁸

The story of Böðvarr begins with the forestory of the bridal quest of Böðvarr's grandfather, King Hringr. King Hringr is widowed, and has been urged to find a new wife. Hringr sends his men on a wooing mission, but their ship is blown off course and they end up in "Finnmark," where they discover a mother and her beautiful daughter who are in hiding. The mother, who is the mistress of the King of the Lapps, and her daughter, Hvít ("white"), are hiding from a suitor she has rejected. Since Lapps are associated in Old Icelandic literature with black magic and sorcery, the Lapp princess forebodes evil.¹⁹ King Hringr ends up marrying Hvít, but he is also an old man who is often out at war, and his young bride turns her attention to her step-son, Björn ("bear"). Amorous step-mothers are also a common motif of Icelandic folktales.²⁰

However, Björn loves Bera ("she-bear"), the daughter of a wealthy farmer. Hvít, angry at being rejected by Björn, harshly chastises him:

ok þykkir þér betra, Björn, at spennna heldr karlsdóttur, ok er þér
þat makligt, sem ván er á, ok svívirðiligra en njóta minnar ástar ok
blíðu . . . (p. 47)

18. Carl Lindahl, "Folktale," in *Medieval Folklore*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 142–8; especially pp. 145–6. See also Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, trans. John Niles (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 24–36. The story of Svipdagr in the saga also follows this typical structure. Thus, in Sweden a wealthy farmer who was once a great champion has three sons who are strong and handsome. One of the sons, Svipdagr, wants to go out into the world and win renown. Svipdagr first joins Aðils's court, but he then leaves to serve Hrólfr.

19. For example, in a stanza in *Óláfs saga helga*, the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson blames the ineffectiveness of King Óláfr's sword in battle on the spells of Lapp sorcerers—"galdrar fjölkunnigra Finna" (*Óláfs saga helga*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornit 26–8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), vol. 2, p. 383–4. Hvít's name is also perhaps an ironic commentary on her true nature.

20. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, p. 249. See T418, "The Lustful Stepmother."

(You prefer, Bjorn, to embrace a churl's daughter rather, and that is good enough for you, inferior as it is, and more dishonouring than to enjoy my love and favours. [p. 264])

In her great anger, Hvít places a spell on Björn that transforms him into a bear during the day (although he regains his human form at night). Bera discovers Björn in his transformed bear shape and is able to recognize him by looking at his eyes; and there is the sense that Bera and Björn share a great and deep love. Indeed, despite his transformation, the two lovers live together in a cave, and they share the nights when Björn again takes the form of a man.

Björn eventually foresees his imminent death and he tells Bera, who is carrying triplets, that he will be killed in a hunt the following morning. Presciently, Björn instructs her to avoid eating any of the bear flesh (his body) that his step-mother will try to force upon her. Everything goes as Björn predicts, and despite her resistance, Bera is forced to eat two bites of bear meat. As a consequence, when the children are born, the first son is an elk from the waist down (Elg-Fróði), the second son is a dog from the feet down (Þórir Hound's Foot), but the third son, Böðvarr bjarki²¹ is radiant and unspoiled.²²

As each of the sons reaches maturity, Bera directs them to the cave where Björn has left each of the boys some treasure, but also a weapon which corresponds symbolically to their personalities. Reminiscent of Arthurian romance, embedded in a rock, there are a large sword, an axe, and a short sword. Elg-Fróði, who is wild and angry by nature, is upset to find that he can only draw the short sword from the rock. He takes his gifts and leaves home. He proceeds to build a hut for himself to live in, and where he lies in wait for travelers whom he then murders for their riches.

Þórir then goes to the cave to claim his inheritance, and he is able

21. Bjarki presumably derives from the feminine name Björk and in *Hrólfs saga* presumably means "little bear"; Böðvarr derives from *böð*, genitive *böðvar* 'battle,' a word found only in poetry.

22. While this entire tale resonates with the general motif of transformation, Stith Thompson identifies specific folk motifs that involve the marriage to a bear (B601.1), and the eating of the meat of one's bear-lover that then causes the unborn child to have bear characteristics (B635.1.1).

to pull only the axe from the rock. He sets off from home and goes to see his brother Elg-Fróði. When Elg-Fróði recognizes Þórir, he offers him half of his newly accumulated ill-gotten gains, but Þórir refuses them. Elg-Fróði then tells his brother that Gautland is looking for a new king and explains that the Gauts choose their king at an assembly where a chair large enough to hold two men is brought out, and the man who best fits it becomes the new king. Elg-Fróði suggests that Þórir would be a good choice, and Þórir is eventually chosen king by the Gauts because of his great size.

Böðvarr, rather than claiming his inheritance from the cave, instead first asks his mother who his father was. When Böðvarr hears of the horrible machinations of Hvít, he comments that both Elg-Fróði and Þórir should have taken revenge for their father's death (and that Elg-Fróði should leave off murdering travelers for their riches). Böðvarr and Bera then go to see King Hringr, but Bera warns Böðvarr to be careful of Hvít's black magic. Bera then tells King Hringr what had happened to Björn, which does not surprise him, as he had suspected something along those lines. He offers Böðvarr compensation for his father's death and promises him the kingdom when he dies, if Böðvarr refrains from harming Hvít. Böðvarr declares that he has no interest in being king:

Böðvarr kveðst ekki konungr vilja vera, heldr kvaðst hann vilja með konungi vera ok honum þjóna. "Ertu svá fanginn fyrir þessum óvætti, at þú heldr varla viti þínu né réttum konungdómi, ok skal hún hér aldri þrífast upp frá þessu." (p. 56)

(But Bothvar said he had no desire to be a monarch; he had rather stay with the king, he said, and do him service. "You are so besotted with this monster that you hardly retain grip of your senses or your rightful dominion; but from this day forth she shall not flourish." [p. 273])

Böðvarr proceeds to kill Hvít as vengeance for his father's death. Hringr dies shortly thereafter. Böðvarr rules for only a short period after Hringr's death. He soon convenes an assembly at which he marries his mother to an earl, and then he leaves his kingdom. Böðvarr now goes to claim his inheritance from the cave, and perhaps it is only because he has avenged his father's death that he is able to pull

the great sword from the rock, an act his two brothers could not accomplish.²³ This act also clearly establishes him as a hero, and more specifically as a romance protagonist by the definition proposed by Hermann Pálsson and Frye.

Böðvarr then visits his brother Elg-Fróði. Elg-Fróði offers Böðvarr half of his wealth, which Böðvarr refuses (adding that murdering people for money is clearly wrong). Elg-Fróði disingenuously explains that he has often let small and weak men go free and Böðvarr is cheered by this information, but he also reiterates that Elg-Fróði should not kill people in general.

Elg-Fróði then expresses concern about his brother's strength, and before Böðvarr leaves him, Elg-Fróði cuts open his own leg and has Böðvarr drink some of his blood. A variation of this motif occurs when Böðvarr subsequently takes the character Hǫttr under his wing at King Hrólfr's court. This act is also reminiscent of the *Nibelungenlied* material where Sigurðr drinks some of Fáfnir's blood (another corpus of stories that merge legendary and romance motifs and themes).²⁴

Before Böðvarr departs, Elg-Fróði tells him to go to Hrólfr's court because he has heard that all the great champions wish to be there:

... því at þar vilja allir vera inir mestu kappar með honum, því at stórlæti hans er miklu meira, rausn ok hugþryði, en allra konunga annarra. (p. 59)

(... for all the foremost champions wish to be where he is, because his munificence, splendour, and courage are greater by far than those of all other kings. [p. 276])

This small set description of Hrólfr's court, while not specifically drawn from any romance text, does carry overtones of descriptions

23. Like many great swords this sword has certain conditions associated with its use. The sword cannot be drawn without killing someone, it cannot rest under a man's head, or be stood on its hilt, and finally, it can only be used three times in its owner's life. Magic swords or objects are a common folklore (and romance) motif, see Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, pp. 32–3; and Lindahl, *Medieval Folklore*, pp. 145–6. Tripling is also common in folklore, as is the role of the youngest son as the true hero in a tale.

24. The story of Sigurðr is of course told in multiple sources, including the *Poetic Edda*, specifically in the lays *Grípisspá*, *Fáfnismál*, and *Sigrdrífumál*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Das Nibelungenlied*.

from chivalric romances. There is in fact an even longer description of Hrólfr that occurs earlier in the saga. The farmer Svipr also suggests to his son Svipdagr that he should join Hrólfr's retinue:

Svá er mér sagt frá Hrólfi konungi, at hann sé örr ok stórgjöfull, trúfastr ok vinavandur, svá at hans jafningi mun eigi finnast. Hann sparar eigi gull né gersemar nær við alla, er þiggja vilja. Hann er lágligr at líta, en mikill at reyna og torveldr, manna fríðastr, stórlátr við ómilda, en ljúfr ok hógværr við vesala ok við alla þá, sem ekki brjóta bág í móti honum, manna lítillátastr svá at jafnblítt svarar hann fátækum sem ríkum. Svá er hann mikill ágætismaðr, at hans nafn mun eigi fyrnast, á meðan veröldin er byggð. Hann hefir ok skattgilt alla konunga, þá sem at eru í nánd honum, því allir vilja honum fúsir þjóna. (p. 40)

(I am told this of king Hrolf . . . that he is liberal and free-handed, trustworthy, and particular as to his friends, so that his equal is not to be found. Nor is he sparing of gold and treasures to well nigh all who care to receive them. He is not all that much to look at, but mighty and enduring under pressure; the handsomest of men, harsh towards the oppressor but kindly and gracious to the needy, as to all those who offer him no resistance; the humblest of men, so that he answers the poor as gently as the rich. So great and glorious a man is he that his name will never be forgotten as long as this world is lived in. Further, he has levied tribute on all kings who dwell near him, for all are ready and anxious to do him service. [p. 258])

The chivalric- or romance-inspired vocabulary is even more pronounced in this speech, and this portrayal of Hrólfr, in fact, prompted Ármann Jakobsson to argue that Hrólfr is presented as an ideal chivalric king in the saga.²⁵

25. Ármann Jakobsson, "Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies*, 72 (1999), pp. 139–65. Interestingly, however, in the very next scene, Hrólfr contrives underhandedly to force his brother-in-law, Hjörvarðr, to pay him tribute: "Hjörvarðr varð þessu ákafliga reiðr ok verðr þó at láta svá standa, ferr heim við svá búit ok unir illa við sinn hlut, seldi þó skatt Hrólfi konungi eftir því sem aðrir hans undirkonungar, þeir sem honum áttu hlýðni at veita," p. 44; Hjörvarth was incensed by this, but had to let it stand even so. He returned

Before proceeding to King Hrólfr's, Böðvarr visits his brother Þórir (who ends up not being at home). However, Böðvarr resembles his brother so closely that the retainers believe him to be their king, and they place him on the throne and treat him as their ruler. Moreover, he is put to bed nightly with Þórir's wife, although he refuses to share the common blanket—a fact that the queen finds odd until Böðvarr tells her that he is not her husband. Thus, the two spend the nights in conversation until Þórir returns, and Böðvarr reveals his identity to everyone. This bed scene evokes a similar episode in the *Nibelungenlied* material between Brynhildr and Sigurðr.

When Þórir returns he comments that Böðvarr is the only man he would have trusted to share a bed with his wife. Þórir proceeds to offer Böðvarr half of his wealth or retinue, both of which Böðvarr refuses. This small scene serves the larger purpose of establishing Böðvarr's trustworthiness and general moral nature. Interestingly, Böðvarr starts to become the moral compass of this part of the saga. He states very clearly that his father's death needed to be avenged, and then he does it himself. He also forcefully tells Elg-Fróði that he is acting dishonorably. In contrast, Böðvarr himself acts very honorably when he shares a bed with Þórir's wife. At several critical points Böðvarr will subsequently become a moral guide for Hrólfr, so that Böðvarr comes to embody, more than any other character, the qualities of a true hero and a true leader.

Böðvarr leaves Gautland, and the romances proper of the saga have all been told. What continues to operate on the story is a more generalized influence from the world of romances. There are several notable passages where Hrólfr is described with chivalric-inspired language, and the influence from folklore (with its close connection to romance) also continues.

After Böðvarr leaves Gautland, he encounters Höttr's parents and he learns of their son's plight at King Hrólfr's court. Höttr is being tormented by the warriors at the court who continuously pelt him with bones, so much so, that he has built himself a protective wall of bones

home with this for his pains, and was deeply resentful of his lot. But with it all he paid tribute to king Hrolf, just like those other tributary kings of his who had no choice but to do him homage, p. 261). This contradicts the comment that the other tributary kings on whom he levied tribute "were ready and anxious to do him service."

to hide behind. Böðvarr's first action at Hrólfr's court is to save Hötttr from the horrible game.²⁶

Moreover, Böðvarr does not simply rescue Hötttr, but he helps bring about Hötttr's transformation into a warrior. Böðvarr does this by slaying a "winged creature" that had been plaguing Hrólfr's court, and having Hötttr drink the creature's blood, just as Elg-Fróði had Böðvarr drink his blood. Hötttr also eats some of the creature's heart and is transformed into a strong and fearless warrior (a scene again reminiscent of Sigurðr and Fáfnir). Böðvarr also arranges to have the creature positioned so that it actually still looks alive and Hötttr is able to "slay" it in full view of the court. Böðvarr is consciously trying to erase or neutralize Hötttr's previous reputation at the court and wants to establish him as an important warrior. Hrólfr acknowledges this transformation in Hötttr, but also suspects Böðvarr's role in it, and Hrólfr renames Hötttr Hjalti, that is, 'hilt,' after Hrólfr's sword, Gullinhjalti, which Hötttr had borrowed "to slay" the creature. Hrólfr welcomes Hjalti into his company of warriors.

Böðvarr has gone out of his way first to rescue Hötttr, and then to help transform him. The motif of transformation, which reflects a discrepancy between appearance and reality, underlies much of the saga and strikingly so in the Böðvarr story. Böðvarr's father, Björn, is transformed into a bear by his stepmother whose beautiful appearance belies an evil personality. Bera's lowly social status belies her noble nature, which is in part revealed through her ability to recognize Björn in his disguised state, her nobility implying a heightened sense of perception or understanding. Böðvarr is also able to see through Hötttr's wretched state and recognize in him a potential warrior.

After Böðvarr joins Hrólfr's court, Hrólfr asks him whether he knew of any king his equal or ruling over such champions (p. 73); and Böðvarr reminds Hrólfr that he has never claimed his father's patrimony from Aðils who had murdered Helgi (Aðils believing that

26. In the process of rescuing Hötttr, Böðvarr kills one of Hrólfr's men by catching a bone aimed at Hötttr and hurling it back at the warrior who had originally thrown it. Hrólfr forgives Böðvarr for this because he declares that he had told his men previously to stop their cruel game because it has brought dishonor ("óvirðing") to himself and on them "stór skömm," that is, great shame (p. 64). One has to ask whether Hrólfr can be considered a great hero if he allows such "dishonorable and shameful" behavior to occur in his own hall.

Helgi wanted to reclaim Yrsa as his wife). Hrólfr replies that Aðils is versed in black magic and that it would be very difficult to go up against him. The conversation between the two is telling, and Böðvarr's role as moral compass is apparent. Böðvarr tells Hrólfr that it is his shortcoming—"Þat skortar yðr" (p. 73)—that he has not attempted to recover his father's patrimony. Hrólfr once more stresses the difficulty of the task, but Böðvarr refocuses the conversation by emphasizing the fittingness—"sómir yðr" (p. 73)—of doing so; in other words, it is proper for a king to behave in such a manner. Hrólfr recognizes the rightness of Böðvarr's position that "eigum vér eftir föðurhefndum at leita . . . ok skulum vér á hætta" (pp. 73–4; we have to seek vengeance for our father . . . but we will take a chance, p. 288).

It is interesting to compare Hrólfr and Böðvarr. Böðvarr never hesitated to seek revenge for his father's death, and he also confronted Hvít's black magic. In contrast, Böðvarr has to tell Hrólfr twice that it is important for him to claim his father's patrimony. Hrólfr realizes that he needs to avenge his father's death and that he should have done so much earlier. In contrast, Böðvarr refused to claim the treasures left to him by his own father, until he had avenged his father's death. Böðvarr in many ways begins to emerge as the true hero of the story—and some of the narrative tensions in the story between the conflicting legendary and romance strands in the saga seem to be played out in the differing constructions of Hrólfr and Böðvarr. Hrólfr is firmly entrenched in the story as a legendary (and heroic figure) because of the antecedent sources of the story, and yet the story of Böðvarr in many ways eclipses the story of Hrólfr in the saga.²⁷

Hrólfr and his champions, his berserkers, and a hundred men eventually begin the journey to Uppsala to confront Aðils. On the way to Sweden they twice meet Óðinn, who is disguised as a farmer who calls himself Hrani. Hrólfr and his entourage stay at Hrani's farm, and on three occasions Óðinn subjects the men to three different tests (a common folkloric motif) in order to try their mettle before they get to Aðils's court; in this case the testing consists of trying to withstand great cold, great heat, and great thirst (pp. 74–6). All the men fail these

27. I develop the comparison between Böðvarr and Hrólfr in greater detail in my dissertation "Heroes and Kings in the Legend of Hrolf kraki," (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2006).

tests, with the exception of Hrólfr and his twelve champions. Hrani advises sending everyone else home since “er þá nokkur ván, at þér komið aftr, en engi elligar” (p. 76; there is some hope that you will return, but otherwise none, p. 292). Hrólfr comments, “Mikill ertu fyrir þér, bondi . . . ok þetta skal ráð hafa, sem þú leggr til” (p. 75), which conveys that Hrólfr is impressed by the farmer’s good sense, and he thus agrees to take his advice. Hrólfr is capable of appreciating the importance of Hrani’s advice, but subsequently he will scornfully refuse a gift of weapons from Hrani, thus angering his host, incurring his fury and later his revenge.

Hrólfr and his champions continue their journey to Aðils’s court. The description of their arrival again shows some influence of chivalric romance, or at least chivalric rhetoric:

Eftir þetta ríðr Hrólfr konungr ok kappar hans til hallar Aðils konungs, ok flykkist allr borgarmúgr upp í ina hæstu turna borgarinnar at sjá prýði Hrólfs konungs ok kappa hans, því at þeir váru búnir skartsamliga, ok þykkir mörgum mikils um vert um svá kurteisa riddara. Þeir ríða fyrst seint ok ríkmannliga, en þá er þeir áttu skammt til hallarinnar, þá létu þeir hestana kenna spora ok hleyptu þeim at höllinni, svá at allt stökk undan þeim, sem fyrir þeim varð (p. 77)

(After this king Hrolf and his champions rode to king Athils’s hall, and the entire citizenry of the town crowded up into the town’s highest towers to see the brave showing of king Hrolf and his champions, for they were handsomely arrayed, and many were lost in admiration of such courtly looking knights. At first they rode slowly and with state, but when they were only a short distance from the hall they gave their horses the spur and galloped to the hall, so that everyone standing before them fled from their path. [p. 292])

The use of the “kurteisir riddarar” (courtly looking knights) to describe the champions is a noteworthy example of the influence of chivalric literature on this mythical-heroic saga. The approach of the knights is “dramatized,” as the entire citizenry of the town crowd the ramparts to see the knights who are “búnir skartsamliga” (hand-

somely arrayed). The drama of the scene is also conveyed through its “staging”: Hrólfr and his knights first ride slowly and “ríkmannliga,” as powerful men would, up to the castle allowing everyone a good look, and then they spur on their horses to arrive at the door of the hall in a great flourish.

After successfully surviving the traps at Aðils’s court and retrieving Hrólfr’s treasures, the champions begin their journey home; and they once more encounter Óðinn disguised as Hrani. Hrani comments that the journey turned out much as he had expected, and Hrólfr comments that Hrani was “óreykblindan” (p. 91), not blinded by smoke, that is, not blinded by appearances. Hrólfr is, however, blinded by appearances, for when Hrani offers him some weapons, Hrólfr scornfully refuses them as “ferlig vápni” (p. 91), that is, absurd or monstrous. The narrator does not reveal what it is about the weapons that so offends Hrólfr. Hrani is furious over this gesture of disrespect: “Ekki ertu þér svá hagfelldr í þessu, Hrólfr konungr,” sagði Hrani, “sem þú munt ætla, ok eru þér jafnan eigi svá vitrir sem þér þykkizt” (p. 91; You are not so clever in this, king Hrolf, as you may think, said Hrani. Nor are you always so wise as you suppose yourself, p. 305). Indeed, it is lesson from folktales and romances that it is often dangerous to refuse a gift from a helper-figure.

Böðvarr later realizes Hrólfr’s mistake in rejecting Hrani’s gift, and he predicts that victory will not be theirs in future battles:

Eftir koma ósvinnum ráð í hug, ok svá mun mér nú fara. Þat grunar mik oss muni ekki allsvinnliga til tekizt hafa, at vér höfum því neitat, sem vér áttum at játa, ok munum vér sigri hafa neitat. (p. 91)

(Fools grow wise after the event, and it is so with me now. I fear we acted not overly-wisely when we refused what we should have accepted—and maybe what we refused is victory. [pp. 305–6])

Hrólfr agrees and concludes that Hrani must have been Óðinn (p. 92). Böðvarr advises Hrólfr to desist from war since he was uneasy as to “hversu konungrinn mundi sigrsæll upp frá þessu, ef hann treysti nokkut á þat” (p. 92; how victorious the king would prove for the future, should he make any trial of this, p. 306). In a gesture of heroic

resignation, Hrólfr responds that “Auðna ræðr hvers manns lífi” (Fate rules each man’s life) rather than Óðinn, whom he identifies as “sá illi andi” (p. 92; that evil spirit, p. 306).

The descriptive language during the last part of the saga continues to show some influence from romance vocabulary. For example, as Skuld and Hjörvarðr are gathering their troops outside Hrólfr’s stronghold in preparation for the final great battle, Hrólfr is depicted as concerned about other things:

Eigi gaf Hrólfr konungr gaum at þessu. Hugsar hann nú meira á stórlæti sitt ok rausn ok hugprýði, ok alla þá hreysti, sem honum bjó í brjósti, at veita þeim öllum, sem þar váru til komnir, ok hans vegr færi sem víðast, ok allt hafði hann þat til, sem einn veraldligan konungs heiðr mátti prýða. (p. 95)

(King Hrolf paid no heed to this. He was more concerned now with his munificence and pomp and pride and all that noble valour which filled his breast, with feasting all those who were come there, and that his glory be carried to the ends of the earth; and he had everything to hand which might enhance the honour of a king of this world. [p. 309])

And again in Hjalti’s comments on Hrólfr’s fighting ability in this last battle:

Mörg brynja er nú slitin ok mörg vápn brotin ok margr hjálmr spilltr ok margr hraustr riddari af baki stunginn, ok hefir konungr várr gott skap, því at nú er hann svá glaðr sem þá hann drakk öl fastast ok vegr jafnt með báðum höndum, ok er hann mjök ólíkr öðrum konungum í bardögum, því at svá lízt mér sem hann hafi tólf konunga afl, ok margan hraustan mann hefir hann drepit, ok nú má Hjörvarðr konungr sjá þat, at sverðit Sköfnungr bítr, ok gnestr hann nú hátt í þeira hausum. (p. 99)

(Many a mailshirt is now rent, and many a weapon broken; many a helm is shattered, and many a gallant knight dashed from his steed. Greathearted is our king, for he is now as happy as when he drank ale deepest, and smites with both hands alike. Quite different is

he from other kings in battle, for he appears to me to have twelve men's strength, and many a brave fellow has he slain; and now king Hjorvarth can see that the sword Skofnung bites, and rings aloud in their skulls. [p. 312])

Thus it is seen that Hrólfr does not savagely kill men on the battle field (as Böðvarr will do), but many a gallant knight is dashed from his steed. Bodies are not wounded, but many a mailcoat and helmet is rent and shattered, and many a weapon is broken. Hrólfr is great-hearted and has the strength of twelve men. Indeed, he kills many a brave man, not the enemy, with his sword Sköfnungr. As happens in romance, the battle here is a contest between equally brave knights, not a life-and-death confrontation with the enemy. This portrayal of Hrólfr contrasts with that of Böðvarr on the battle field:

Böðvarr bjarki ruddist nú um fast ok hjó á tvær hendr ok hugsaði nú ekki annat en vinna sem mest, áðr hann felli, ok fellr nú hverr um þveran annan fyrir honum, ok blóðugar hefir hann báðar sínar axlir ok hlóð valköstum á alla vega í kringum sik. Lét hann líkt sem hann væri óðr. (p. 102)

(Bothvar Bjarki now laid about him in earnest. He hewed on either hand, and no other thought than to achieve his utmost before he fell. Now they fell one across the other before him; and he had both arms bloodied to the shoulders, and encircling him on all sides a pile of corpses. He was as though he were mad. [p. 315])

Clearly, both Böðvarr and Hrólfr are presented as heroic fighters, but the language used to describe Böðvarr is much less romantic than that used for Hrólfr. There is, moreover, a constant narrative tension in *Hrólfs saga kraka* between how the legendary king is described and how he actually behaves. Interfacing with this tension is the residue of the earlier analogues which are filtered in the saga on many levels. Hrólfr, the legendary king, was a standard of great heroism, and yet the saga often subverts that reputation. In a discussion of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Valgerður Brynjólfssdóttir refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "literary consciousness," where "the contrasting speeches or world-views of characters demonstrate something that is not specifically

stated, but which appears in the conflicts/contrasts in the text.”²⁸ While she specifically links this tension to the burlesque element she sees operating in the saga, she raises an important point in general about the narrative contradictions in the saga. These contradictions seem to result from the fusion of romance elements with the older legendary material, which gets articulated in the contrasting characterizations of Böðvarr and Hrólfr.

Hermann Pálsson has argued that the *fornaldarsögur* function simultaneously as secular romances and as heroic or legendary tales, an observation that seems particularly true of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. There is clearly an interest on the part of the saga author to explore the world of romance within the legend of Hrólfr kraki, which also creates a pronounced narrative tension between the world of romance and the world of the heroic warrior.

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