



GUNNHILDUR AND THE MALE WHORES

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PROLOGUE

Queen Gunnhildur is one of the most evil Norwegian female characters in the Middle Ages. She appears in many old stories where she is usually the female agent for ill in the sagas; she is wicked, promiscuous and very often skilled in magical arts.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on how the medieval writers treat Gunnhildur, the sources about her, historical and fiction, and most of all her relationship with Icelandic farmers. The aim is to cast new light on her love affair with those men, which produces evidence for the proposition that they sold their affection to the Norwegian queen to make their way to fortune and fame in Norway.

TROLL WOMAN

In Old Icelandic the word *troll* meant a being skilled in magical arts.¹ The oldest written source of the word is thought to be the compound adjective *trollkund* (i.e. troll-like) which is to be found in the ninth century poem *Ynglingatal* by *Þjóðólfr of Hvin*, where it is used for a witch who caused a nightmare to ride King Vanlandi and tread him to death.² The word *troll* is used far and wide to refer to witch-like beings in the old stories. *Landnáma* tells of a woman named Geirhildr who is malicious and versed in the magical arts, and therefore she is called a *troll*.³ In the 14th century the old meaning of the word slowly began to make way for the supernatural beings, usually called giants, which occupy a place in the fairy tales and legends. Yet a number of examples of the older meaning are to be found in fairy tales, such as *Hundurinn Svartur*.⁴ The story tells of 'troll-women' who seem like ordinary people, they run homes and farms, but in addition to that are extremely skilful in sorcery. Traces of this old meaning are still to be found in the Icelandic compound words *trölldómur* and *tröllskapur*.

Queen Gunnhildur is said by both Icelandic and foreign sources to be skilled in magical arts and eminently wise. She is versed in the magical arts in *Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar*,⁵ and shrewd and skilled in magic in *Haralds saga hárfagra*.⁶ In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* Gunnhildur is said to be wise and well versed in the magical arts⁷ and her skill is likewise



mentioned in *Harðar saga og Hólmverja*.⁸ In *Brennu-Njáls saga* Gunnhildur uses her magical skills⁹, and in other Icelandic sagas where Gunnhildur is mentioned she is usually remembered for her evil deeds and cruelty. In foreign sources there are very similar stories. Saxo hardly mentions Gunnhildur in his Danish history, and only for her witchcraft¹⁰, and in the Norwegian histories there are the same descriptions of the queen: *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum* tells of her magic¹¹ and *Nóregs konunga tal* mentions her skills,¹² Brother *Theodoricus* says she's evil and bloodthirsty¹³, and in one of the oldest Norwegian histories, *Historia Norwegiae*, Gunnhildur is given the name she deserves, i.e. the evil troll-woman.¹⁴

THE EVIL STEPMOTHER

Gunnhildur is a *troll* and is treated as one; the descriptions of her are usually very exaggerated and fantastic, and remind one of the troll women in the Icelandic fairy tales, especially the evil stepmother.¹⁵

The stories about the evil stepmother are well known all around the world and have also been very popular in Iceland. The stepmother motif was well known in Iceland in around 1200 and the story, about the evil stepmother, can be found in full length in sources from 1300. The oldest preserved Icelandic source of Gunnhildur is *Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar* by Brother *Oddur Snorrason*, which was probably written in 1170-1190. In the prologue Oddur mentions "the dubitable stories about the stepmothers told by herdsmen, which always make the king appear very insignificant".¹⁶ Even though it is far from Oddur to make his story adventurous, his description of Gunnhildur may well befit a troll, i.e. a witch from another world; Gunnhildur is skilled in magic, full of treachery and tricks and well known for many deceitful things.¹⁷

Evil stepmothers are most often found in isolated places, distant from all civilisation. They are known to lure men to them, whom they charm with their beauty and politeness, and as soon as the king sees his queen-to-be he is immediately love-struck. The stepmother usually turns out to be skilled in the magical arts, and in the Icelandic stories she often turns out to be an ugly troll, which *Einar Ól. Sveinsson* assumes to be an Icelandic invention.¹⁸ Yet Sveinsson says it is very difficult to fully distinguish the witch from the troll in the stepmothers' nature, since the trolls in the fairy tales are usually skilled in magical arts. The evil stepmother usually seeks wealth and power, but commonly does not achieve sexual fulfilment with the old king, and therefore lusts after his young heir. She attempts to harm her stepchildren, and often hates her stepson when he is not willing to have sex with her.



In most sources about Gunnhildur she is given an exotic and far-northern ancestry from which she draws a seductive strength, sexual liaison and magic. Gunnhildur charms the king with her beauty and politeness but soon she shows her real nature, she starts to be imperious and greedy, and she corrupts the kingdom. Gunnhildur has no stepchildren but she seduces young men to have sexual relationships with her although she is old enough to be the mother of at least some of them.

Jómsvíkinga saga describes Gunnhildur as promiscuous¹⁹, and various sources imply her sexual behaviour with young men. *Egils saga* hints at her sexual relationship with Þórólfur²⁰, and even more blunt is the description of her sex life in *Njáls saga*: There can be no doubt of what Gunnhildur has in mind when she gives Hrútr orders, as: "You are to lie with me tonight in my room upstairs, just the two of us".²¹ In *Laxdæla saga* a sexual relationship between Gunnhildur and Hrútr is never mentioned but Gunnhildur does, on the other hand, shower Hrútr with compliments and when they part her gesture seems to show much more than just friendship. She gives him a gold arm ring, in farewell, and then she "walked rapidly and stiffly towards town".²² Moreover there is Gunnhildur's relation with Ólafr Höskuldsson demonstrated in *Laxdæla* and Gunnhildur's reputation makes one think that more lies behind this than only friendship, like the rumour says: "Some people even said that she would have enjoyed Olaf's company regardless of who his kinsmen were".²³ Stories have also been told of Gunnhildur's malice when she didn't get what she wanted. In the *Flóamanna saga* there is an episode where Þorgils Þórðarson declines Gunnhildur's offer of joining the king's followers, and she literally kicks him: "The queen grew angry and kicked at him and pushed him out of the high seat".²⁴

One man is mentioned in company with Gunnhildur who stands much closer to her than the Icelandic farmers because of his nobility and pedigree, and that is Earl Hákon. According to the *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, their relationship is very unique: "Earl Hákon and Gunnhild were on the best of terms, though at times they schemed against each other and tried who could get the better of the other".²⁵ Hákon proves to be more cunning than Gunnhildur. *Ágrip* says that their relationship came to an end when Hákon convinced King Harald to lure Gunnhildur to his Danish kingdom with a deceitful proposal and adulation. Gunnhildur, is persuaded and as soon as she comes to Denmark she is drowned in a swamp.²⁶ Gunnhildur's fate, which is proper to an old and promiscuous witch, is the very last thing about her to be found in the



sources. This narrative has found its way in to the ancient history of Brother Theodoricus,²⁷ and to younger and more extreme stories, as *Jómsvíkinga saga*²⁸ and *Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar (hin mesta)* in Flateyjarbók.²⁹

THE MALE'S COUNSEL IS EVER CRUEL

Most of the sources that explain Gunnhildur's origin agree that she is the daughter of Qzur, who bears either the nickname toti or lafskeggur, and lives in the northern wilderness. According to the few Icelandic sources that mention Gunnhildur's origin, *Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar*, *Haralds saga hárfagra* and *Egils saga*, she is the daughter of Qzur from Hálogaland. Three Norwegian sources mention her origin, and two of them tell the story of her father Qzur: i.e. *Ágrip* and *Noregs konunga tal*. Guðbrandur Vigfússon is the first scholar who maintained that this must be a false report³⁰, and ever since then, scholars have considered the narrative in *Historia Norwegiae* to be closer to the truth. The author of this Latin history is unknown, and there is disagreement about the time of its composition, but it was probably written sometime in the period 1150-1230. The history is the only source that tells of Gunnhildur's Danish origin; she is the daughter of the royal couple, King Gormur and Þyri Danmerkurbót (i.e. Denmark's improvement). Despite this elevated origin, however, Gunnhildur still gets a bashing, here as elsewhere, for she is treated as a troll; she is described as a wicked troll-woman, arrogant and heathen.

Behind the adventurous tales of Gunnhildur stands a real, historical person, a wife and a mother, who lived during the 10th century (d. 999). It is interesting to note that in *Ágrip* it is said about such a magnificent person that she is "of all women the most beautiful; a woman small of stature",³¹ and *Nóregs konunga tal* mentions likewise her beauty and that she is "not a large woman".³² It is really astonishing that a delicate Danish princess would be treated as a seductive and wicked witch.

The Norwegian histories are the oldest sources concerning Gunnhildur, but the Icelandic sources are much more extensive and have certainly had the greatest influence on the myth about Gunnhildur. Gunnhildur's greatest role is in *Egils saga*, but Egill ignores her, never addresses her and barely mentions her in his poetry. Despite their different position, for Gunnhildur is a queen and Egill is a courtier in her service, he constantly displays his male chauvinism. Similar is the attitude found in other Icelandic sagas, it is very clear when Gunnhildur is made to disappear from the scene, and her fate is only illustrated in the Kings'



sagas. Gunnhildur is no daughter of a cottager though; she has both money and power, and she is surely proud. *Sigurður Nordal* explains her pride from her noble origin and her royal ideal that she has held from her upbringing: Gunnhildur wanted to teach the Norwegian people proper manners and receive a title of honour like the one her mother sustained with glory in Denmark; Gunnhildur wanted to be the Norway's improvement, but instead she became a Norwegian plague, she became a misfortune for herself and every one else.³³ *Sigurður Nordal* thinks that Gunnhildur was ahead of her time, but was misunderstood and therefore she receives this treatment in the Icelandic oral tradition and sagas: Everything seems to be backwards, says *Sigurður*, she is not from the south, from a more mature society and civilisation, but from the north, from remote and primitive conditions. She is not a messenger of the future, but instead a representative of ancient times. Her determination becomes violence, her counsel magic, her realisation conjury.³⁴ But always glints at Gunnhildur's magnificence and nobility and *Sigurður Nordal* wonders why she receives a senseless treatment in *Historia Norvegiae*, where her true origin is known.

This unfair approach to Gunnhildur is not surprising, compared to the treatment of many strong and powerful women in the Icelandic sagas. A well-known example is the faith of Hallgerðr langbrók, but *Njáls saga* leaves her with a group of villains, and Skarphéðinn's disparaging remarks echo her miserable stature: "Your words don't count, for you're either a cast-off hag or a whore".³⁵ Another example is the Irish Queen Kormlöð, but her description is very merciless: "She was a very beautiful woman and her best qualities were in matters outside her own power, but it was commonly said that her character was evil in matters which were within her own power".³⁶ Those women are, like Gunnhildur, advocates of evil in the stories. Sometimes proud women are even treated like giantesses in the old stories, as is the case with Yngvildr fagurkinn in *Svarfdæla saga*. *Helga Kress* says that men think that the best way to deal with such shrews is to use armed violence against them, and she thinks that Old Icelandic literature is unique for showing:

The context between the oppression of women and the Icelandic male authority in the time during which it is coming into being. The men's methods are first and foremost of all armed force and blood brotherhood, but also violence and treachery. The women's options in this society are oppression, outlawry and death.³⁷

These strong and powerful women are worth telling of because they stand out in a crowd; few women act as agents in the Icelandic Commonwealth sources. Women were outside of the



sphere of authority and their social position was weak; they could not have any influence or take any political decision except under the protection of men. *Grágás*, the 13th century law of the commonwealth, shows different attitudes towards the sexes and there is a big difference between the social position of men and women.³⁸ *Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir* points at even though *Grágás* contains many legal provisions which restrict the rights of women, the position of women was different from the laws in many ways, as can be shown f. ex. in *Sturlunga saga*.³⁹ Here can be found stories of great and outstanding women who influenced the course of events, either directly or indirectly: "Women did not wear armour or swords, but they goaded the men on and they were their's instructors and counsellors in the political battle".⁴⁰ *Agnes* says, however, that there are more women in *Sturlunga saga* which are nothing but empty names, since women's ability dependent on their social status: "The marriage gave a housewife on a large farm indirect political influence through her husband, and a direct authority through her status".⁴¹ Still, women could never gain as much through their marriage status as men did and as the time passed the position of women got worse. *Agnes'* theory is that in the beginning of the Commonwealth there was more balance in the power structure, not only between families, but also between different areas of authority of both men and women, domestically as well as outside the house.

Women were in charge domestically but they always had to bow for the authority of men. This could be the main reason for the unfair approach to *Gunnhildur*; her origin does not matter, even though she is the Queen of Norway she receives no forbearance, and she is only treated that way because she is a strong and powerful woman. *Helga Kress* points at that when the strong women in Old Icelandic literature are discussed people blend the concepts strong with independent. The strong women which are described in this literature are not independent but they are strong and they refuse to be oppressed, without any success, but their protest can be seen throughout the texts: "In that way the men's fight with strong women, the oppression of women and the feminine side of society and within the men themselves, is one of the main themes in this literature".⁴² It is interesting to note that *Laxdæla saga* treats *Gunnhildur* in a much more favourable light than any other source, and there is not one word to be found about her evil mind, which is natural if it is correct, as has been assumed, that the author of *Laxdæla saga* was a woman.

There are two women skilled in magical arts who figure prominently in *Egils saga*, i.e.



Gunnhildur and Þorgerður brák.⁴³ The women could not be more different. Þorgerður brák is an imposing servant woman, as strong as a man and well skilled in magic. She is said to have fostered Egill in his childhood, but is not mentioned in the story until she rushes nearly without notice onto the scene of action to settle the ferocious dispute between father and son at Borg. Skalla-Grímur was playing a ball game with the boys Egill and Þórður Granason and grew very tired. After sunset he was filled with such strength that he seized Þórður and thrashed him so fiercely that he was killed. When he seized his son Þorgerður appeared, without any notice:

Brak said, "You're attacking your own son like a mad beast, Skallagrim." Skallagrím let Egil go, but went for her instead. She ran off, with Skallagrim in pursuit. They came to the shore at the end of Digranes, and she ran off the edge of the cliff and swam away. Skallagrim threw a huge boulder after her which struck her between the shoulder blades. Neither the woman nor the boulder ever came up afterwards. That spot is now called Brakarsund (Brak's Sound).⁴⁴

Þorgerður's nickname is thought to be a tool which was used to make skin softer and the narrow sound has presumably reminded the people from early ages of the look of the Brák, since the tool has probably existed on every farm.⁴⁵ It is likely that Þorgerður's work was to use that tool to treat the skin because she was a servant and with strength as a man. Her role in the story might be to explain the place name but also, and no less importantly, her part shows Skalla-Grímur's terrible temper. Þorgerður is not missed in the story, and though she is supposed to have fostered Egill, it is without any doubt in name only and just for the purpose of explaining her intervention and concern for Egill. Her death does not seem to have any consequences: When Egill kills his father's favourite servant it is most likely to revenge the death of Þórður, for the story says that he had accompanied Egill for a long time and in much friendship. *Helga Kress* has discussed the killing of Þorgerður, and she says:

According to the declared ethics of Old Icelandic literature, women are not killed. But this does not apply to abnormal women, i.e. ones who threaten the community of men with their wisdom or disobedience. Witches and women skilled in magical arts can be killed with impunity in the society that this literature describes.⁴⁶

Helga Kress says that normally those women are stoned or they are drowned, which turns out to be the faith of those two women, Þorgerður brák⁴⁷ and Queen Gunnhildur. The few sources that explain Gunnhildur's destiny all agree that she was drowned like any other witch, and it seems that these are her just deserts, because Gunnhildur is described as both evil and skilled



with magic. *Sigurður Nordal* thinks the ideas about her magic appear because her influence and capability were thought to be unbelievable. When an explanation was sought it was naturally assumed that she had studied magic in the north of Finnmark and likewise that she originated from that area.⁴⁸ I.e. it was thought to be unbelievable how a woman could have so much authority! Gunnhildur is a strong character and she has more authority than most men around her. Brother Oddur Snorrason says that Gunnhildur is the "Queen of the whole of the Norwegian kingdom".⁴⁹ Her power is also evident in her husband's obedience, along with the fact that their sons are usually called Gunnhildarsynir (i.e. sons of Gunnhildur) and what's more, the time her sons ruled Norway was called "the Age of Gunnhildur".⁵⁰

Queen Gunnhildur is a provocation to the heroes' manliness. A solution was found in making a troll out of this talented and proud woman, and concurrent with that, she lost all features of a human being. Gunnhildur's wild and bestial sex drive has found its way into folktales, as *Jónas Jónasson* from Hrafnagil narrates in his literary work about Icelandic folk customs:

Queen Gunnhildur was a very promiscuous woman, and it is said that she took the shape of different animals to copulate with the male animals. It is said that she told about her experience of those relationships with these words: "A useless stallion, a ruthless bull, few maidens could withstand a male lamb to full".⁵¹

MALE WHORES

Gunnhildur's sexual behaviour is not prominent in the Norwegian and Icelandic histories, but when it comes to the Icelandic sagas, sexual descriptions are truly striking. Writers in the Middle Ages were men, and for that reason it may be expected that the stories reflect that. Gunnhildur is therefore their image, roused out of Icelandic farmers' sexual fantasies.

A large number of stories tell of Icelanders' journeys to Norway, looking for fortune and fame. Usually they came to the king's court, received his recognition and accepted gifts. The heroes considered in this paper all had interests to protect in Norway, either an inheritance, like Hrútr and Þorgils Þórðarson, or a matter of ambition and honour, like Þórólfr and Ólafr. Brother Oddur Snorrason claims that Gunnhildur was the Queen of the whole of the Norwegian kingdom, and therefore it must have been very important for the Icelandic farmers to make her happy if they wanted to achieve their goals.

In relations between Gunnhildur and Icelandic farmers, sexual relationships are either hinted at or stated explicitly. Gunnhildur has hardly been introduced in *Egils saga* when her close



relationship with Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson is brought up: "Thorolf and Gunnhild struck up a close friendship".⁵² This is emphasised later in the story, when the king reminds her that: "once you were fonder of Thorolf than you are now".⁵³ While Þórólfr still enjoys the queen's favour, he is well treated at the court, and he returns to Iceland with honour, in great friendship with the royal couple and with "a great amount of wealth and many precious things".⁵⁴ Þórólfr goes abroad for a second time, even though his father tries to dissuade him, he turns down the king's offer to stay at the court and consequently he turns his back on the queen and becomes the object of her anger. Other stories are known of the queen's anger, the most memorable being the description in *Flóamanna saga* of when Gunnhildur kicks at Þorgils Þórðarson and pushes him from the high seat, in both a literal and symbolic way, so he cannot defend himself; without her friendship he is just a foreigner without any rights: "[The queen] denied him his property, saying he did not know how to accept an honour".⁵⁵

Hrútr, however, finds it advantageous to fall into the outstretched arms of Gunnhildur, as is clearly demonstrated in *Njáls saga*, and Gunnhildur's words make it explicit what Hrútr gains: "If Hrut listens to my advice I will look after his property claim, as well as anything else he may undertake, and I will also put in a good word for him with the king".⁵⁶ Gunnhildur takes Hrútr under her protection and cares for him in every respect; she takes care of his lawsuit, his clothing, the king's reception and last but not least, his body.⁵⁷ When Hrútr has obtained his advantage he wishes to return to Iceland, and he deceives Gunnhildur at their most sensitive moment, when they are separating. Gunnhildur's feelings for Hrútr, however, seem to be very genuine, according to *Laxdæla saga*:

He was such a favourite with Gunnhild, the queen mother, that she maintained that none of the king's followers was his equal, neither in word nor deed. People might make comparisons of men, and praise men's excellence, but it was obvious to everyone that Queen Gunnhild considered it nothing but lack of judgement, if not envy, if anyone was compared to Hrut.⁵⁸

When they separate, Gunnhildur gives Hrútr a gold arm ring in farewell, as well as her best wishes, but her behaviour expresses more than words; she "hid her face in her shawl and walked rapidly and stiffly towards town".⁵⁹ Gunnhildur's attitude makes one think of the dramatic events in *Njáls saga* that give the narrative a deeper meaning, about betrayal and jealousy. Gunnhildur is a very close friend to Hrútr's uncle, Ólafr Höskuldsson, even though Hrútr had betrayed her. When Ólafur wants to sail to Ireland Gunnhildur supports his journey:



To this Gunnhild replied: "I shall support your journey so that you can go as well equipped as you wish." Olaf thanked her for the offer. Gunnhild then ordered a ship to be made ready and manned, asking Olaf how many men he wished to have accompany him on his journey. Olaf asked for sixty men, and stressed the importance of choosing men who were more like warriors than merchants. She promised to see to this.⁶⁰

It is quite clear, from the above, that the Icelandic farmers were in good hands if they fulfilled Gunnhildur's wishes and pleased her in every way. It has been pointed out that the sources are silent as to why those men succumbed to Gunnhildur's charm or charisma.⁶¹ My theory is that those men went for their own benefit into the outstretched arms of Gunnhildur, i.e. she was their ticket to prosperity, and that is why they truly are male whores.

NOTES

¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson has pointed out the noun's relation with the Icelandic verb *trylla*, i.e. 'to fill with magic', 'to drive someone to insanity', to cast a light on the old meaning of the noun (144). The verb *trylla* results in the Germanic word form < *trullian < *truzlian, and the old meaning was to accuse someone of magic. This same meaning is still to be found in neighbouring countries, i.e. *trylle* (Danish), *trylla* (New Norwegian).

² Finnur Jónsson, I 7; *Ynglingasaga*, 20-21.

³ *Landnámabók Íslands*, 115-116.

⁴ Jón Árnason, V 77-82.

⁵ Oddur Snorrason, 6.

⁶ *Heimskringla*, 95.

⁷ *Egil's saga*, 75 .

⁸ *The Saga of Hord and the People of Holm*, 213.

⁹ *Njal's saga*, 9.

¹⁰ Saxo Grammaticus, 271.

¹¹ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, 15.



¹² Nóregs konunga tal, 75.

¹³ Theodoricus Monachus, 7; 9.

¹⁴ Den eldste Noregs-historia, 35.

¹⁵ There are other parallels to Gunnhildur that will not be discussed here but are worth mentioning, such as the Goddess Freyja (see Sayers), and Ólína Þorvarðardóttir has reminded me of the elf queens.

¹⁶ „stivp meðra saugvr er hiarðar sveinar segia er enge veit hvart satt er. er iafnan lata konungia minztan i sinvm frasognum“ (17).

¹⁷ Oddur Snorrason, 6; 17.

¹⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 223.

¹⁹ Jómsvíkinga saga, 80.

²⁰ Egil's saga, 75; 90.

²¹ Njal's saga, 6. When Gunnhildur and Hrútr part she wants to know if Hrútr has a woman waiting for him in Iceland, he denies this, and Gunnhildur gets angry at him for his dishonesty. She punishes him by putting a spell on him, which is a very common motif in stories about evil stepmothers.

²² The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 21.

²³ The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 25.

²⁴ The Saga of the People of Floi, 280.

²⁵ Heimskringla, 136.

²⁶ Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum, 21

²⁷ Theodoricus Monachus, 9.

²⁸ Jómsvíkinga saga, 84.

²⁹ Flateyjarbók I, 167.

³⁰ Sigurður Nordal, 144.

³¹ Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum , 9.



³² „ekki mikil kona“ (Nóregs konunga tal, 74).

³³ Sigurður Nordal, 148.

³⁴ Sigurður Nordal, 150-151.

³⁵ Njal's saga, 109.

³⁶ Njal's saga, 209.

³⁷ „sahengi milli kúgunar kvenna og hins íslenska karlveldis á þeim tíma sem það er að myndast. Aðferðirnar sem karlarnir nota eru fyrst og fremst vopnavald og fóstbræðralög, en einnig ofbeldi og svik. Möguleikar kvenna í þessu samfélagi eru kúgunin, útlegðin eða dauðinn“ (Skassið tamið, 61).

³⁸ See e.g. Viðhorf til kvenna í Grágás and Gunnar Karlsson.

³⁹ Konur og vígamenn, 19. The scholar's opinions regarding the position of medieval women are divided, concerning both Iceland and Europe as a whole. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir points out that scholars who have discussed Icelandic women in the Middle Ages can be divided into two groups. Some scholars think that Icelandic women had more rights and more respect than women in Europe. Others believe that even though Icelandic women had not been deprived of all rights, they had not gained more power or respect than women in Europe at the same time (Konur og vígamenn, 21). As concerns women in Europe, concern opinions of their status are also very divided, as Judith M. Bennett points out in her article about feminist research of the Middle Ages: "Some feminist medievalists argue that the Middle Ages were a high point for women, a time when women enjoyed more opportunities and higher status than would be the case in the modern era; others argue that little changed in women's status from the medieval to the modern era. Some feminist scholars depict medieval women as active agents who, despite some obstacles, asserted considerable control over their lives and destinies; others tend to see medieval women as victims whose lives were ever circumscribed by patriarchal constraints" (321).

⁴⁰ „Konur klæddust ekki brynju eða héldu á sverði, en eggjuðu menn til dáða og voru leiðbeinendur þeirra og ráðgjafar í pólitískum hildarleik“ (Konur og vígamenn, 198).

⁴¹ „Hjónabandið gaf húsfreyju á stórhöfðingjabyli óbein pólitísk áhrif gegnum eiginmanninn, og bein völd í krafti stöðu sinnar“ (Konur og vígamenn, 201).



⁴² „Þannig er barátta karlanna við sterkar konur, kúgun kvenna og hins kvenlæga í samfélaginu og körlunum sjálfum, eitt af meginviðfangsefnum þessara bókmennta“ (Skassið tamið, 62).

⁴³ One other woman said to be skilled in magic is mentioned in *Egils saga* - Þórarna, a neighbour of Skalla-Grímur, but she is a name only, and does not play a role in the story.

⁴⁴ Egil's saga, 78.

⁴⁵ Bjarni Einarsson, 58-59.

⁴⁶ „Samkvæmt yfirlýstri siðfræði íslenskra fornbókmennta eru konur ekki drepnar. Sá mælikvarði gildir þó engan veginn um afbrigðilegar konur, þ.e. þær sem ógna samfélagi karla með visku sinni eða óhlýðni. Seiðkonur og fjölkunnugar konur eru réttðræpar í því samfélagi sem þessar bókmenntir lýsa. (Máttugar meyjar, 50).

⁴⁷ It can be said that Þorgerður brák is stoned and drowned at the same time.

⁴⁸ Sigurður Nordal, 141.

⁴⁹ „Drottning Noregs veldis“ (Oddur Snorrason, 8).

⁵⁰ „Gunnhildar Qld“ (Nóregs konunga tal, 202).

⁵¹ „Gunnhildur konungamóðir var kona ærið marglát, og sagt er, að hún hafi breytt sér í líki ýmsra dýra, til þess að ná samblendi við karldýrin. Reynslu sína frá þeim viðskiptum er svo sagt hún hafi orðað svo: „Linskeyttur foli, harðskeyttur boli, fæstar hygg eg dándismeyjar lambhrútinn þoli“ (Jónas Jónasson, 165; footnote no. 4).

⁵² Egil's saga, 75.

⁵³ Egil's saga, 90.

⁵⁴ Egil's saga, 75.

⁵⁵ The Saga of the People of Floi, 280.

⁵⁶ Njal's saga, 4.

⁵⁷ Gunnhildur's skill in magic might even have helped Hrútr in the sea-battle with the enemy Viking, Atla the outlaw (Dronke, 7).

⁵⁸ The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 21.



⁵⁹ The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 21.

⁶⁰ The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 26.

⁶¹ Sayers, 72.

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