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Expanding the Repertoire. Theft as a Means of Whetting in the Sagas of Icelanders

The role of female characters in the feuds of the Sagas of Icelanders has been the subject of wide discussion. Far from being exempt or excluded from saga feuds, women are active participants, both as potential targets for violence (or seduction and abduction) but also as aggressors themselves.¹ Scholars have noted that the role of women in incitement through the *hvøt* and other means of whetting, »involved them centrally in the family politics of honour and inheritance, theoretically male terrain.«² The grieving widow has been ascribed a central role in the feuding process, as by selecting the target of her goading, she chooses an avenger, thereby »organizing the vengeance-taking group.«³

Whilst normally not directly involved in crimes like manslaughter and murder, there is an offence, which due to its secret nature is open to female characters: theft. In Old Norse literature, clandestine theft is presented as a most condemned crime that is always depicted as evil, shameful and roguish and, moreover, associated with a lower social stratum. In this article, I will look at the few highborn female thieves in the Sagas of Icelanders and discuss the narrative function of their crime. In doing so, I will suggest that theft is an active and direct way for a female character

¹ See for example Clover 1993 (esp. pp. 368–9), Miller 1990 (esp. pp. 207–8, 211–4), Kress 2008, Jochens 1986 and Beck 1978.

² Clover 1993, p. 368. See also Clover 2002, Wolf 1965 (esp. pp. 109–47), and Anderson 2002, pp. 426–7.

³ Miller 1983, p. 190. See also Clover 1993.

to participate in a feud and to incite a conflict with strong parallels to the *hvøt*. After a general introduction to whetting scenes in the Sagas of Icelanders and connotations of theft in Old Norse law and literature, I will turn to three case studies from two sagas, *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*; as it is only in these two sagas, that female thieves appear.⁴ I will argue that the reason why theft functions similarly to whetting is the result of the semantics of cowardice and effeminacy. Thus, the crime comprises the semantic components that male characters are accused of during the *hvøt*. The use of meaningful tokens is central to many whetting scenes and the presence of the stolen objects functions accordingly.

Components of whetting scenes in the Sagas of Icelanders

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen calls the female characters of the Sagas of Icelanders »[æ]rens vogtere«⁵ and the *hvøt* or *frýja* the most notable example for their participation in male conflicts. He notes that the *hvøt* is related to *níð*, as both forms of accusation consist of reproaches of effeminacy, cowardice and lacking assertiveness. The difference is that *níð* is used in homosocial conflicts to deprive the opponent of his honour, whereas a *hvøt* is performed by a closely related character to help the goaded man in reacquiring honour.⁶ Whilst male relatives, such as elderly fathers, can also perform a *hvøt*, it is most often a female character who incites the male hero to

⁴ Andersson 1984, p. 504 considers Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir to be the only one female thief, Kress 2008, p. 36 adds Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. Although she touches upon Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir, too (p. 32), she does not include her into her considerations on female thieves, which I will do here.

⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, p. 238; »guardians of honour« (my translation).

⁶ Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, p. 239.

bloody action. As a narrative technique, the *hvøt* speeds the action and forces an evaluation of the conflicting intradiegetic moral values represented by the participating characters.⁷

Rolf Heller has identified 51 cases of saga women engaging in whetting, which makes the »Hetzerin«, as he calls this stock figure, the most common female role appearing in the Sagas of Icelanders.⁸ Forty percent of all whetting scenes discussed by Heller are found in *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. As these sagas feature extraordinarily strong and colourful female characters, it is hardly a surprise that accordingly, thieving female characters can also be found in these texts. While Miller distinguishes between purely verbal whetting scenes and ritualised ceremonies that include blood-stained tokens of the victim,⁹ Heller argues for an ascending order of *hvøt*-components: accusations of cowardice, reproach of effeminacy and the display of the bloody clothes of the killed relative.¹⁰ However, in both paradigms, tokens work as intensifiers of the verbal charge. Theft performed by female characters as a means of whetting functions according to the same principles as the verbal charge, and the presence of the stolen object can be compared to the bloody tokens in *hvøt*-scenes. In the following examples, theft can be seen as one of only a few means of engaging in feuds open to most women, and the last desperate act highborn female characters resort to, after all other efforts have failed.

⁷ Cf. Mundal 1993, p. 724.

⁸ Cf. Heller 1958, p. 98.

⁹ Cf. Miller 1983, p. 181.

¹⁰ Cf. Heller 1958, p. 98.

Connotations of theft in *Grágás* and the Sagas of Icelanders

Old Norse laws and sagas distinguish between theft and robbery using other criteria than most modern societies do.¹¹ It is not the grade of violence or brutality involved in the crime that sets them apart, but the level of secrecy in which it is carried out. While a robber, performing a so called *rán*, takes the goods openly – »in bright daylight« –, a thief comes »in the shadow of night« and hides his crime afterwards, *oc leynir þíof lavnom*,¹² in the phrasing of the medieval Icelandic law code *Grágás*. Theft and robbery are thereby distinguished according to the same principles as *víg* »manslaughter« and *morð* »murder«. While manslaughter and robbery occur overtly, murder and theft are wicked crimes, planned and carried out in secrecy. The extreme contempt acts such as theft and murder evoked can be explained by their clandestineness, which violates the norms of openness and obviousness inherent in early Germanic laws;¹³ the uncontrollability of these crimes makes them especially threatening.

As *Grágás* lists full outlawry as penalty for open as well as for secret seizure (if property worth a half-ounce or more is involved), it may have been that this division is a theoretical one without

¹¹ Concerning medieval Iceland, the crime of theft is covered within § 227 (*rann socna þátrr*) of *Grágás*. Theft under the provisions of other medieval Scandinavian law codes is e.g. summarised by Maurer 1910, pp. 45–9. The most recent and complete study of thieves in European literature is Gehrlach 2016.

¹² *Grágás* § 227, p. 162; *þjóf-laun* (n. pl.) is a specific term for the »thievish concealment of a thing« (cf. Cleasby / Vigfusson 1957, p. 740, and Dennis et al. (transl.) 1980, p. 177).

¹³ Cf. von See 1964, p. 204 and Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, p. 208. On the open versus secret distinction in Germanic laws, see also Wennström 1936, pp. 70–1, Ehrhardt 1986, p. 991 and Moser-Rath 1981, p. 625, who points to a corresponding distinction in early Jewish laws.

pragmatic relevance. Yet, the passage immediately following in *Grágás* clarifies the need for this distinction:

Ef maðr stefnir manne ífa lavst vm þat at hann hafe því stolet ef quiðr ber hann osanan at oc er þa sócn til illmalisens. Hann a cost at nefna ser vatta þa þegar ef hann heyrir oc stefna vm illmalit. oc telia varða fiorbavgs garð. oc sekia við váttorð.¹⁴

(If a man summons someone with a doubt-free charge that he has stolen something and a panel gives him a verdict of not guilty, then right of prosecution for the slander does exist. If he hears the summons, he may choose to name witnesses at once and summon him for the slander and claim his penalty is lesser outlawry and prosecute it with testimony.¹⁵)

The possibility to take the accuser to court for the intention of defamation reveals that the question of openness or secrecy is close-knitted to personal honour and thereby extremely sensitive. To accuse someone of thievery is a direct and public offence against his honour; the denouncer has to anticipate the culprit's revenge.¹⁶

In »The Thief in *Beowulf*« Theodore M. Andersson summarises how the social acceptance and honour of these crimes vary accordingly in literature: »The difference is confirmed by passages in the sagas which indicate that to be a *ránsmaðr* »robber« was a straightforward matter, but to be a *þjófr* »thief« was a disgrace.«¹⁷ While an open *rán* can contribute to a saga character's

¹⁴ *Grágás* § 227, pp. 162–3.

¹⁵ Dennis et al. (transl.) 1980, p. 177.

¹⁶ Cf. Andersson 1984, p. 497 and Miller 2014, pp. 20–1.

¹⁷ Andersson 1984, p. 497. On *rán* see also Miller 1990, pp. 77–83 and Miller 1986, pp. 23–35. Legal aspects of theft have received comparably little attention. The crime is briefly discussed in Maurer 1910, pp. 48–51, and touched upon in Heusler

reputation,¹⁸ theft is always condemned as a most dishonourable act. In his investigation of saga passages, Andersson is concerned with the semantics of theft in the Sagas of Icelanders and concludes:

A secret crime was a cowardly and womanish crime. Cowardice and womanish conduct belonged to the range of meaning in the concept *ergi* and led through this concept to the further implications of sorcery and sexual perversion which we find in the Icelandic sagas.¹⁹

The semantic range of secret theft thereby comprises cowardice, effeminacy and closeness to other unsavoury crimes such as witchcraft.²⁰

Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir

It is a woman that instigates the most famous theft of the Icelandic sagas. Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir is introduced in chapter one of

1911, pp. 99–110. See also Lúðvik Ingvarsson 1970, pp. 396–401 and Miller 1990, p. 250.

¹⁸ For example, Hrútr in *Laxdæla saga* uses a *rán* to seize his heirloom. Thereby, he proves himself worthy of the family's reputation, as his brother's wife Jórunn acknowledges: »[H]efir hann þat nú sýnt, at han vill eigi vera hornungr lengr þess, er hann átti, eptir því sem hann átti kyn til« (*Laxdæla saga* c. 19, p. 47); »He has now shown that he no longer intends to be deprived like some bastard of what is after all his birthright« (Magnús Magnússon/Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 84).

¹⁹ Andersson 1984, p. 505.

²⁰ For an overview of saga passages that confirm this connection, cf. Andersson 1984, pp. 498–505. A very compelling example is that of the sorcerer Þórólfr sleggja in *Vatnsdæla saga* c. 28, who is said to have *frá mǫrgum stólit ok gort svá mart ómannligt annat* (p. 73); »stolen from many and done many other unmanly things« (my translation). See also Kress 2008, p. 35, expanding Andersson's argument.

Brennu-Njáls saga, long before Gunnarr or even Njáll appear on the stage. Seeing the child Hallgerðr for the very first time, her uncle Hrútr wonders ›*hvaðan þjófsaugu eru komin í ættir vórar*.²¹ In this way, the very first chapter points towards Hallgerðr's act of theft. There seems to be something thievish and defective about the beautiful girl, which turns out to be fatal for many men in the course of the saga. During her marriage to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi her temperament is the cause for many conflicts of her even-tempered husband, one of them subsequent to his unsuccessful attempt to buy food at Otkell's farmstead. Instead of food, the slave Melkólfr is sold to Gunnarr, the slave henceforth lives with him and his wife at Hlíðarendi. Dissatisfied with the outcome of Gunnarr's expedition, Hallgerðr sends Melkólfr to steal butter and cheese from Otkell's, escalating the conflict between her husband and his opponents. Melkólfr hesitates to fulfil the order:

Þrallinn mælti: ›Váandr hefi ek verit, en þó hefi ek aldri þjófr verit.‹ ›Heyr endemi!‹ segir hon, ›þú gerir þik góðan, þar sem þú hefir verit bæði þjófr ok morðingi, ok skalt þú eigi þora annat en fara, ella skal ek láta drepa þik.‹ Hann þóttisk vita, at hon myndi svá gera, ef hann færi eigi; [...].²²

(The slave said, ›I've been bad, but I've never been a thief.‹ ›Listen to you!‹ she said. ›You make yourself out to be so good, when you've been not only a thief but a murderer. Don't you dare refuse this errand, or I'll have you killed.‹ He was quite sure that she would do this if he did not go [...].²³)

²¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 1, p. 7; »how the eyes of a thief have come into our family« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 4).

²² *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 48, p. 123.

²³ Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 81.

Eventually, Melkólfr acts as he is asked to: he sneaks to Kirkjubær, steals the food (enough to load two horses), sets fire to the pantry and even kills the dog who did not bark. Before the dining scene, it is briefly stated that he gave the food to Hallgerðr, who was pleased. Despite her efforts to keep the theft secret by having the pantry burned,²⁴ ironically, Hallgerðr has to reveal the crime in Gunnarr's presence to unleash its powers. Asked where the food comes from, she answers: ›*Þaðan, sem þú mátt vel eta, segir hon, »enda er þat ekki karla at annask um matreiðu*.²⁵ Her indirect confession corresponds to the secret nature of her act, but is indeed clear enough to reveal the whole story to her husband and their guests. Referring to male and female terrain in her response,²⁶ she touches on the semantic range of the crime discussed before: after Gunnarr's open and honourable methods have failed, his wife takes over, using a more ›feminine‹ method of laying the table. The couple leaves the room afterwards, without the narration's viewpoint following them – the audience is left with the remaining dinner guests, who are now served something else, *ok ætluðu allir, at*

²⁴ ›[E]n þú skalt leggja eld í útibúrit, ok munu allir ætla, at af vangeymslu hafi orðit, en engi mun ætla, at stólit hafi verit« (*Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 48, p. 123); »Then set fire to the storage shed, and they'll think it was carelessness, and no one will suspect that anything was stolen« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 81).

The burning of stolen goods or crime scenes – thereby destroying any evidence – evidently serves the aim to conceal the crime (see also Kress 2008, p. 58 and Müller 2000, p. 200). Kress wants to push the point further by connecting fire with magic in general (because magicians were burned), which seems too loosely linked (›Eldur og galdrar heyra saman, og voru galdrmenn, hvort heldur þeir voru konur eða kvenlegir karlar, brenndir á báli« Kress 2008, p. 58).

²⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 48, p. 124; »From such a place that you can well enjoy eating it, she said. ›And besides, it's not for men to busy themselves with preparing food!« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 82).

²⁶ Female terrain is most often referred to as the world *innan stokks*, »within the household«, including the responsibility for cooking, serving, childcare etc., cf. Clover 1993, p. 365.

*þat myndi þykkja fengit betr.*²⁷ The secret nature of the crime is mirrored by the way it is narrated, due to Hallgerðr's ambiguous confession and the omission of the dialogue between the couple. Thus, the intradiegetic concealment corresponds to the omission on the extradiegetic level, a literary technique that is frequently used in theft episodes.²⁸

Concerning her motives, Miller argues that Hallgerðr wants to equalise the humiliation done to her husband, and thereby to the whole household,²⁹ and Robert Cook judges her motivation to be »a noble one.«³⁰ Although evening up is one of her motives, overall the two scholars seem to be too generous towards Hallgerðr. Indeed, she wants to avenge the humiliation done to her husband and the household, but there is a more personal component, too. The reasons for her seemingly disproportionate reaction can be found in her character portrayal throughout her marriage to Gunnarr. When she and her husband meet for the first time, she is obviously attracted by the symbols of power he is wearing, representing his braveness and fighting power, and she states clearly that she has certain expectations regarding her future husband:

*Gunnarr var í tignarklæðum þeim, er Haraldr konungur
Gormsson gaf honum; hann hafði ok bringinn á hendi,*

²⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 48, p. 124; »and they all guessed that this was because the meat had come in an honest way« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 82).

²⁸ The same narrative technique is used in describing the thefts of Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir, see below. For another example of destabilised narration in a theft episode, see also Schmidt 2016 (this volume) on an incident in *Færeyinga saga*.

²⁹ Cf. Miller 2014, p. 112. Heinrichs 1994, p. 346 on the other hand sees her theft as first step in her fight against Gunnarr, which started when she realised that he will not be on her side against the people of Bergþórshváll.

³⁰ Cook 2008, p. 28. He argues that Hallgerðr wants to defend Gunnarr's honour that was exposed to public humiliation when Otkell refused to sell him food. Therefore, it is even more offending for Hallgerðr that Gunnarr now exposes her to the same public humiliation when he slaps her in front of the guests.

Hákonarnaut. Þau tóluðu lengi hátt. Þar kom, er hann spurði, hvárt hon væri ógefin. Hon segir, at svá væri, – »ok er þat ekki margra at hætta á þat,« segir hon. »Þykki þér hvergi fullkosta?« segir hann. »Eigi er þat,« segir hon, »en mannvond mun ek vera.«³¹

(Gunnar was wearing the stately garments given him by King Harald Gormsson; on his arm he had the bracelet from Earl Hakon. They talked aloud for a long time. Eventually he asked if she were unmarried. She said that she was – »and there aren't many who would take the risk.« »Is there no one good enough for you?« he said. »It's not that,« she said, »but I'm very demanding when it comes to men.«³²)

As Cook points out, the adjective *mannvond* has two meanings: »that she is indeed hard to please (this would answer Gunnarr's question) and that she is very difficult towards men.«³³ Both meanings might have challenged Gunnarr in a flirtatious way, but indeed, she warned her future husband. During their marriage, he does not fulfil her expectations in guarding the household's honour, which reflects on her personally. As in her feud with Bergþóra, she is not content with his decisions: »Fyrir litit kemr mér [...] at eiga þann mann, er vaskastr er á Íslandi, ef þú hefnir eigi þessa, Gunnar.«³⁴

Gunnarr is an even-tempered man, trying to avoid armed conflicts, whereas his wife is not scrupulous in choosing her means

³¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 33, p. 86.

³² Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 53.

³³ Cook 2008, p. 13.

³⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 35, p. 91; »There's little use to me in being married to the most manly man in Iceland, [...] if you don't avenge this, Gunnar.« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 57) – this quote stems from the much earlier seating episode.

if she feels her honour is in danger. By stealing the food, Hallgerðr is trying to put pressure on her husband and to force him to react. During her conflict with the people of Bergþórshváll, she has already sent assassins, wanting to provoke Gunnarr's reaction. Now, by sending a thief, she uses a similar weapon. While even the killings commanded by Hallgerðr could not enrage Gunnarr against Njáll and his family, her new attempt is more successful, partly because Otkell and his partners are not connected to Njáll and thereby not affected by Gunnarr's friendship ties.

However, it was already suggested to Gunnarr by Þráinn Sigfússon to simply take what he needs and he stated clearly: »*Með engi rán vil ek fara, segir Gunnarr.*³⁵ This use of the legal term *rán* remarkably contrasts the situation with the later term *þjófnaðr*, used for Hallgerðr's crime. As Gunnarr learns that his wife has gone even further than Þráinn had suggested, – by stealing secretly instead of robbing openly – he loses his temper and gives Hallgerðr a slap, which he will later pay for with his life. Interestingly, he does not focus on her deed, but on the outcome for his personal reputation: »*Illa er þá, ef ek em þjófsnautr*³⁶ – the crime of his wife affects his personal honour directly. None of Hallgerðr's wicked deeds in the whole feud with Bergþóra made him as angry as this theft. Being involved in her stealing seems to dishonour him substantially more than all her previous goading and killing. The presence of the stolen cheese in public epitomises the theft, making Gunnarr's humiliation visible for all dinner guests. After Hallgerðr's stealing, Gunnarr makes generous offers to reach a settlement, but there is no agreement to be reached. Gunnarr is forced to defend his honour using violence in the following course

³⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 47, pp. 121–2; »I will not do any robbing,« said Gunnarr. (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 80).

³⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 48, p. 124; »It's a bad thing if I'm partner to a thief.« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 82).

of the narrative, which is always accompanied by positive reactions from Hallgerðr.

In this example, theft works as a way for a female character to incite actively a conflict between men and it allows a woman to intervene directly in a feud as well. As the men of good standing will not give in to her pressure, Hallgerðr uses her high social standing and turns to a subordinate slave. In relation to Melkólfr, she is in a powerful position, corresponding to Carol Clover's argument for a gender binary that does not simply divide society according to biological sex.³⁷ While not being able to put pressure on Gunnarr, a man of her own standing, Hallgerðr is able to command subordinate male members of her household. Hallgerðr's crime as well as the presence of the stolen object force Gunnarr to react, as he cannot tolerate the disgrace it will cause without compromising his honour and manliness. The two female thieves in *Laxdæla saga* use quite similar methods to those employed by Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*.

Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir

The first female thief in *Laxdæla saga* is Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir, sister to Kjartan. The episode begins when her father Óláfr brings Geirmundr gnýr to Iceland, whom he has met in Norway.

³⁷ Instead, Clover argues for a binary of strong/powerful versus weak/powerless that is more important than a simple male versus female dichotomy. Cf. Clover 1993, p. 380. While Laqueur's *one-sex model*, to which Clover is referring in her article, has been challenged (cf. Tirosh 2014, pp. 48–52 for an evaluation of scholarly discussion), Clover's general observation that the dichotomy powerful versus powerless is more important than the division according to natural sex within these texts will be retained here, since it still works as a very useful paradigm. See also Rau / Greulich 2014, pp. 88–90.

Geirmundr carries the sword *Fótbítir*, an exceptional weapon that is described in detail. He tries to woo Þuríðr and gains the support of her mother Þorgerðr, who finally persuades her husband Óláfr to give his daughter to the stranger. As their marriage is not very cheerful, Geirmundr decides to leave Iceland after three years. He plans to leave without caring for his wife or daughter or at least leaving them money so they can provide for themselves. Óláfr, who never wanted this marriage in the first place, is not willing to stop Geirmundr – on the contrary: he provides him with a suitable ship to leave Iceland. Þuríðr and her mother try to persuade him to act, but are not successful:

Þetta líkar þeim mæðgum stórum illa ok segja til Óláfi, en Óláfr mælti þá: »Hvat er nú, Þorgerðr, er austmaðrinn eigi jafnstórlátr nú sem um haustit, þá er hann bað þik mægðarinnar?» Komu þær engu á leið við Ólaf, því at hann var um alla hluti samningarmaðr.³⁸

(Thurid and her mother were furious over this and told Olaf. »What's the matter now, Thorgerd?» said Olaf. »Is the Norwegian not so generous now as he was that autumn when he wanted to become your son-in-law?» They got nowhere with Olaf, for he was a very peaceable man; [...].³⁹)

Þuríðr now takes her matters into her own hands, following Geirmundr to the ship and bringing their daughter with her. Nine servants who help her in her plan also accompany her:

Allir menn váru í svefni. Hon gekk at húðfati því, er Geirmundr svaf í. Sverðit Fótbítir hekk á hnykkistafnum. -

³⁸ *Laxdæla saga* c. 30, pp. 80–1.

³⁹ Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 113.

Þuríðr setr nú meyna Gró í húðfatit, en greip upp Fótbít ok hafði með sér [...].⁴⁰

(All the crew were asleep. She went over to the hammock in which Geirmund was sleeping. His sword, »Leg-Biter«, was hanging from a peg. Thurid laid the little girl, Groa, in the hammock, seized hold of »Leg-Biter«, and took it away with her.⁴¹)

When Geirmundr wakes up and realises that someone has stolen his sword, Þuríðr has already left the ship and has taken precautions so that Geirmundr and his men cannot follow her. In their (obviously shouted) dialogue from ship to land, Geirmundr offers to pay a large amount of money to get his sword back. Seeing how much he longs for the sword, Þuríðr becomes even more unwilling to give it back. Geirmundr warns her that the sword will not bring her good luck, but Þuríðr is prepared to risk it. Geirmundr answers:

»Þat læt ek þá um mælt, segir Geirmundr, »at þetta sverð verði þeim manni at bana í yðvarri ætt, er mestr er skaði at, ok óskapligast komi við.«⁴²

(»Then I lay this curse upon it,« said Geirmund. »May this sword bring about the death of the man in your family who would be the greatest loss, and may it come about in the most atrocious way.«⁴³)

⁴⁰ *Laxdæla saga* c. 30, pp. 81–2.

⁴¹ Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 114.

⁴² *Laxdæla saga* c. 30, p. 82.

⁴³ Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 115.

Back in Hjarðarholt, Þuríðr gives the sword as a present to her cousin Bolli, who will wield it from this moment onwards. There is no mention of the sword for quite a long time, until Bolli and Kjartan face each other for their final battle scene, when (as a result of another theft) Kjartan wields a bad sword, while Bolli stands there with *Fótbítr*.⁴⁴ Finally, *Fótbítr* wins the fight and Kjartan loses his life. Thus, Geirmundr's curse has come true: the most valued man of Þuríðr's family has lost his life. However, Bolli is not blessed with luck while he carries the sword either: the next mention of the sword is during Bolli's death scene.

Interestingly, there is absolutely no use of legal vocabulary in the whole episode; therefore, it cannot be decided properly if this is a secret theft or an open *rán*. In addition, offender and victim are still married, which makes a legal evaluation even more complex. Þuríðr sneaks onto the ship by night and steals the sword secretly; however, when she is caught red-handed, she does not try to conceal it. After returning to her family, she does not attempt to hide the story of the sword either. According to the definition found in *Grágás*, this is an open *rán*, as the criterion is whether the thief wants to hide his crime. In the saga, there is not a word mentioned about Þuríðr's crime and no other character comments on it. Is this due to ›morak‹ reasons? Was she morally entitled to steal the sword and to harm Geirmundr because of his bad behaviour? Alternatively, is it her gender and social standing that prevents her from being accused of theft or robbery? Most likely, there is a pragmatic reason: she is not accused because Geirmundr and all his men leave Iceland and die during their journey – there is no one left who could bring her to court. In any case, there are no legal consequences for Þuríðr or her family, and her family members make no moral judgement. She has to pay the price of her

⁴⁴ *Laxdæla saga* c. 49, p. 153.

theft on another level – the cursed sword remains in her family and her daughter is killed in the sinking ship.

Þuríðr's theft obviously bears a special symbolic component, as it is not only a theft but also an exchange: she steals the precious and beloved sword and leaves Geirmundr with their baby in return. In Loren Auerbach's words: »She swaps her baby, the symbol of maternity and domesticity, for a sword, a symbol not only phallic but also one of war and battle, traditionally ›male‹ pursuits.«⁴⁵ The scene's symbolism is indisputably evident, and Helga Kress interprets the scene as an act of castration, with Þuríðr turning Geirmundr into a woman.⁴⁶ While the sword is described in detail, loved whole-heartedly and will remain present in the course of the whole saga (even in its extension, the *Bolla þáttr*), the child Gróa is never described as a character, is abandoned without any hesitation and her death is never mourned or even mentioned by anyone. Therefore it seems too general to regard Gróa as a »symbol of maternity and domesticity« as both components are never connected to the relationship between Þuríðr and her child.

The most obvious function of the theft is that of female vengeance in the episode of Geirmundr and Þuríðr. Þuríðr's father is not willing to protect her honour, which is threatened when Geirmundr wants to leave her and the baby. Thus, her crime can also be seen as an act of accusation against her father – and perhaps her brothers – as none of them is willing to stop Geirmundr. An interesting parallel in the same saga, the vengeance of Auðr against

⁴⁵ Auerbach 1998, p. 35.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kress 1992, p. 214 and Frölich 2000, p. 162. The thesis of emasculation is, for example, supported by Heide 2001 and repeated by Kress 2008, p. 32. While more episodes of female vengeance in *Laxdæla saga* will be discussed below, none of these acts will be discussed as an ›act of castration‹. Reducing the scenes to a possible symbolic meaning will not add to a deeper understanding of the variety of the actual repertoire of female vengeance.

her former husband Þórðr, supports this reading. He divorced Auðr in order to marry Guðrún, and based his claim on the accusation that she used to wear men's clothing. Although her brothers are not pleased over this, they do not react: *Bræðrum Auðar líkar illa, ok er þó kyrrt*.⁴⁷ Auðr reacts with a short stanza that describes her as being left alone: *Vel es ek veit þat, | vask ein of látin*.⁴⁸ Now she actually takes on men's trousers and a sword, chases Þórðr and injures his nipples in a most shameful way. Similarly left alone, Þuríðr chooses a more underhand way of fighting back: by sneaking out in the shadow of night to steal her husband's most valuable possession.

This episode presents theft as a possibility for a woman to hurt a man directly after her male relatives fail to compensate her for her loss of honour. She is aware of the symbolic value of the precious sword and obviously not interested in its high material value as she is neither willing to sell it to Geirmundr for the large amount offered, nor is she concerned with money afterwards, giving it as a present to Bolli. In addition to Geirmundr being effeminate in this scene, Þuríðr is depicted as a very powerful character: she is capable of ordering the servants to help her in her crime, abandons her daughter, recognises the value of the weapon and seizes it. Interestingly, as with Hallgerðr's theft in *Njáls saga*, the crime begins secretly, bearing connotations of dishonourable, ›feminine‹ theft, but is revealed as soon as the object is taken, turning the crime into an open *rán*. As the nature of the crime changes during the narrative from secret to open, the offender ignores her weak status in favour of a more powerful course of action.

⁴⁷ *Laxdæla saga* c. 35, p. 96; »Aud's brothers were greatly annoyed, but there the matter rested« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 126).

⁴⁸ *Laxdæla saga* c. 35, p. 96; »I'm glad I know | I've been abandoned« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 127).

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir

Another case of female theft occurs in the same saga – probably the better-known example for most saga readers, as it leads directly to the escalation of the conflict between Bolli, Guðrún and Kjartan. Kjartan brought two precious goods from his journey to Norway: a gold encrusted headdress and the sword *Konungsnautr*. The headdress is given to him by Ingibjörg, the king's sister, and is particularly intended for Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who shall receive it as a wedding present. Nevertheless, Kjartan marries Hrefna, who thus receives the headdress, a most valuable present, instead of Guðrún: *ok var sú gjof allfræg, því at engi var þar svá vitr eða stórauðigr, at slíka geseimi hefði sét eða átta*.⁴⁹

During its presence in the narrative, the material value of the headdress is emphasised repeatedly and is always connected to the social position of the woman who possesses it.⁵⁰ Like *Fótbítr*, the sword *Konungsnautr* comes accompanied by fateful words. The king gives it to Kjartan and says: *›látu þér vápn þetta fylgjusamt vera, því at ek vænti þess, at þú verðir eigi vápnbittinn maðr, ef þú berr þetta sverð*.⁵¹ When Kjartan and Hrefna visit Bolli and Guðrún for the first time, Kjartan wields *Konungsnautr*, but had asked Hrefna not to wear the headdress. Nonetheless, Guðrún persuades Hrefna to show it to her *í hljóði* – in secret.

After the next visit (this time in Hjarðarholt), the sword has vanished. Kjartan immediately thinks it must have been stolen by

⁴⁹ *Laxdæla saga* c. 45, p. 138; »And this gift caused quite a stir, for no one there was so cultured or so wealthy that he had ever seen or owned such a treasure« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, pp. 162–3).

⁵⁰ Cf. Sauckel 2014, p. 21.

⁵¹ *Laxdæla saga* c. 43, p. 132; »›Let this sword never leave your side, for I believe that no weapon will ever bite into you as long as you bear this sword« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 157).

some member of Guðrún's group. After a long search, *Konungsnautr* is eventually brought back to Kjartan, but the scabbard is never found again. It is obvious that Guðrún's brother Þórólfr had something to do with the theft, although the precise circumstances remain unclear. Kjartan wants to pursue the theft, but his father calms him down, who also manages to talk him into visiting the other couple again. In addition, Kjartan's mother pressures Hrefna to wear the golden headdress this time – it disappears the very next day:

*Guðrún kvað þat líkast, at heima myndi eptir hafa orðit
motrinn, eða hon myndi hafa búit um óvarliga ok fellt niðr.*⁵²

(Guðrún said the chances were that the head-dress had been left behind at home, or that Hrefna had packed it so carelessly that it had fallen out on the way.⁵³)

Again, Kjartan recognises the theft immediately and wants to react. His father tries to calm him down, but the act so deeply offends Kjartan that he confronts Bolli about it in public. Guðrún seems to be especially pleased afterwards:

*›Nú þó at svá sé, sem þú segir at þeir menn sé hér nokkurir, er
ráð hafi til þess sett, at motrinn skyldi hverfa, þá virði ek svá, at
þeir hafi at sínu gengit.*⁵⁴

(›Even if you are right in saying that there are people here who have seen to it that the head-dress should disappear, I reckon they have only taken what by right was theirs.⁵⁵)

⁵² *Laxdæla saga* c. 46, p. 143.

⁵³ Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 166.

⁵⁴ *Laxdæla saga* c. 46, p. 144.

⁵⁵ Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 167.

After their departure, it is added: *Þat höfðu margir menn fyrir satt, at Þórólfr hefði brenndan motrinn í eldi at ráði Guðrúnar, systur sinnar.*⁵⁶ Like in the theft of *Konungsnautr*, Þórólfr is involved in the crime and will be called ›Þórólfr, þjófrinn‹⁵⁷ by Kjartan later on. Although Guðrún has played a major role in both thefts, these crimes are never directly attributed to her. Her brother Þórólfr is involved both times; he destroys the stolen goods and takes the sword. In both cases, there is no doubt as to the guilt of Ósvifir's family, nonetheless no legal consequences are initiated, nor is the explosiveness of this otherwise despised offense addressed elsewhere. Like Þuríðr, Guðrún is a female character who steals and is never prosecuted for her actions. The seizure of the headdress is clearly meant to be understood as secret *þjófnadr*, as the term *í hljóði* – in secret –, is mentioned three times when Guðrún's actions are described. Even the statement that the headdress has been burned on her order is accompanied by the expression *Þat höfðu margir menn fyrir satt*, thereby destabilising the narration and opening the case to the audience's interpretation: are *margir menn* right in their judgement? The narrator does not directly make any statement with regards to Guðrún's guilt in this matter. This may have led Dorothee Frölich to describing her theft as a ›disappearance‹ instead of a seizure of objects.⁵⁸

Guðrún's role in the theft of the sword is never verbalised in the saga. Nevertheless, Robert Cook clearly ascribes both crimes to her: ›Guðrún takes action of a shameful sort against Kjartan, but an

⁵⁶ *Laxdæla saga* c. 46, p. 144; »[B]ut many people believed that Thorolf Osvifsson had burned it at the request of his sister Gudrun« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 167).

⁵⁷ *Laxdæla saga* c. 48, p. 151; »That thief Thorolf« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 173).

⁵⁸ Cf. Frölich 2000, p. 64; »weniger [...] ein Aneignen als vielmehr [...] ein Verschwindenlassen von Gegenständen«.

action open to women: theft. She steals Kjartan's sword and then takes the head-dress which Kjartan gave to Hrefna.⁵⁹ Although Cook describes the theft of the sword falsely, he addresses an interesting point: by stealing the headdress, Guðrún has found an active way to contribute to the escalation of the conflict. It repeats a pattern that was established in Þuríðr's case. Again, a woman avenges an insult by stealing after the men of her family have not pursued revenge with sufficient determination. There is another strong link between the two incidents, as Kjartan decides not to wield the sword *Konungsnautr* any longer after the scabbard is lost due to the theft. Þuríðr's theft brings the cursed sword *Fótbíttr* into her family, which will eventually ›bite‹ the most beloved member of the family. When Kjartan receives the King's gift, the narration seems to offer a way out: Kjartan is turned into an *eigi vápnbitinn maðr*, he cannot be bitten by weapons. In terms of composition, the theft of the sword and Kjartan's resulting abandonment seals his death.

Although there are no direct moral judgements made upon Þuríðr's and Guðrún's theft by saga characters, catastrophic consequences follow for both women. In Þuríðr's case, the connection between her theft and Kjartan's death is highlighted verbally by the wording of the curse on the sword, which will be *þeim manni at bana [...], er mestr er skaði at, ok óskapligast komi við*.⁶⁰ Looking back on her actions at the end of her life, Guðrún is finally aware of the extent of her guilt, too (›*Þeim var ek verst er ek unna mest*‹⁶¹). In both cases, Kjartan is not mentioned by name, but

⁵⁹ Cook 1992, p. 41.

⁶⁰ *Laxdæla saga* c. 30, p. 82; »the death of the man in your family who would be the greatest loss, and may it come about in the most atrocious way« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 115).

⁶¹ *Laxdæla saga* c. 78, p. 228; »I was worst to the one I loved the most« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 238). As has been noted

described as the greatest loss and greatest love. Both could be interpreted as an indirect moral evaluation of the crime.

Due to the theft of the headdress, the symbol of Hrefna as Kjartan's wife and most important woman of Iceland is taken from her.⁶² The motivation for the crime lies in the destruction of this symbol and not in Guðrún's greed, as is shown by the subsequent handling of the stolen goods: she lets her brother burn the headdress. Guðrún was never interested in its material value, but jealous of the social position symbolised by it. The destruction of this asset distinguishes Guðrún from ordinary thieves and makes her crime a seemingly justifiable deed, which – in her view – restores order to her world (›*þá virði ek svá, at þeir hafi at sínu gengit*‹⁶³). Just like Hallgerðr and Þuríðr, Guðrún has to make her crime public to unleash its effects, yet in her case the clandestine nature of the crime continues in her statement: ›*Nú þó at svá sé, sem þú segir at þeir menn sé hér nokkurir, [...]*‹⁶⁴ Here, the narrative pattern used to reveal Hallgerðr's theft is repeated and the secrecy of the act is mirrored by the way it is narrated.

Through these two thefts, the situation between the two families finally escalates. The thefts have offended Kjartan's honour so greatly that he is compelled to strike back against Guðrún's family. He locks them up in their farmstead for several days so that

frequently, her enigmatic statement could also point to Bolli, or even Bolli and Kjartan. Nevertheless, every interpretation includes the confession of her personal guilt.

⁶² On the symbolic value of the headdress see also Ármann Jakobsson 1998, pp. 359–60.

⁶³ *Laxdæla saga* c. 46, p. 144; »I reckon they have only taken what by right was theirs« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 167).

⁶⁴ *Laxdæla saga* c. 46, p. 144; »Even if you are right in saying that there are people here who have seen to it that the head-dress should disappear, [...]« (Magnús Magnússon / Hermann Pálsson (transl.) 1969, p. 167).

they have to defecate in their house. The thefts and this action are the last provocations before it comes to armed combat.

Some conclusions

Hallgerðr and Þuríðr use the help of minor figures in their crime – a slave and nine servants are involved in their deeds. This relates to the »rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)«,⁶⁵ which according to Clover, stands opposed to the able-bodied men of saga literature. Within this group, however, their high social standing becomes relevant; while not able to command the male characters of their own social status, these three highborn women are certainly entitled to dominate men of a lower social class. Guðrún's brother Þórólfr is the only highborn male who is obviously loyal to the »betrayed« woman. The communication between Guðrún and her brother is never mentioned, which again destabilises Guðrún's responsibility.

While the narrator of *Njáls saga* depicts Hallgerðr without much kindness and never makes allowances for her,⁶⁶ Guðrún is always treated sympathetically. Although the thief Hallgerðr can definitely be seen as a wicked woman in saga literature and is indeed accused of theft, the women of Laxárdalr are handled with much more caution and all legal vocabulary is avoided. Although Hallgerðr's theft is definitely judged negatively in the saga, female interference in male conflicts is not valued depreciatively in general. The same narrator depicts Hildigunnr, who performs the *hvøt* that finally contributes to the burning, quite positively, as Meulengracht

⁶⁵ Clover 1993, p. 380.

⁶⁶ Cf. Cook 1992, p. 24 and Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1971, pp. 107–9.

Sørensen argues.⁶⁷ Moreover, the dialogue between Njáll and his daughter-in-law Þórhalla during the *brenna* illustrates the same attitude. Leaving the house, she promises to goad her father and her brothers into avenging the burning and Njáll replies: »Vel mun þér fara, því at þú ert góð kona.«⁶⁸

Furthermore, these three thefts have a lot more in common: Þuríðr and Guðrún both steal from the men they once loved to avenge themselves for the humiliation they have experienced. Hallgerðr steals because of the same motivation, but from a male character who humiliated her husband and thereby the whole household. All of them tried to persuade their male relatives or husbands to act before, but they failed to do so; neither Óláfr nor Bolli want to react violently to the female goading, and even Gunnarr can control his temper until Hallgerðr sends a thief.

All these female thefts are planned and carried out in secrecy, but eventually have to be revealed in the right moment to achieve their effect as whetting instruments. This corresponds to the saving of tokens like the famous bloody cloak used by Hildigunnr in *Njáls saga*: after her husband's death, she collects his blood, folds the cloak and stores it in a chest, until the moment of revelation is reached during her *hvøt* against Flosi.⁶⁹ There is no use in keeping the secret forever; they have to confront their male family members at the right time. Heller's *hvøt*-components correlate with Andersson's »semantics of theft« perfectly: While in *hvøt*-scenes the components cowardice, effeminacy and tokens are used as an accusation, they are already included in the crime of theft.

⁶⁷ Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, pp. 243–7. See also Miller 2014, p. 21 and pp. 304–6 on the diverging evaluation of the women of *Njáls saga*.

⁶⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 129, p. 329; »You will do well, for you're a good woman.« (Cook (transl.) 2001, p. 220). See also O'Donoghue 1992, who gives a short outline of female characters in *Njáls saga*.

⁶⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga* c. 116, pp. 289–93.

Confronted with the theft of their female relatives, respectable men have to react violently to defend their honour. The stolen object corresponds to the bloody token and can't be ignored like verbal accusations. Thus, stealing expands the whetting repertoire of highborn women (Hallgerðr, Guðrún), or can be used as a direct tool of vengeance (Þuríðr, Guðrún). The three saga women use stealing as a final, desperate attempt to get their way after they failed to manipulate the men of their families by other means. This secret crime thereby enlarges the respectable arsenal that female characters in the Sagas of Icelanders control.

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Daniela Hahn, Andreas Schmidt (Hgg.)

Bad Boys and Wicked Women

Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature

Münchener Nordistische Studien
herausgegeben von
Anneloret Heitmann und Wilhelm Heizmann

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