AÐALHEIÐUR GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR

"How Do You Know if it is Love or Lust?"

On Gender, Status, and Violence in Old Norse Literature

Abstract

This article examines attitudes towards behaviour relating to women within Old Norse literature, focusing both on chivalric romances (translated and original, the *riddarasögur*) and the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), texts that were mostly written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The written chivalric romances arrived in Iceland from Norway and southern Europe, and thus they often exhibit different values from those found in the *fornaldarsögur*, which tend to reflect indigenous Nordic and heroic storytelling traditions. The article explores differences between the two traditions regarding male emotions and attitudes towards women, with an emphasis on texts in which women are abused. In particular, the article seeks to investigate the relationship between social status and gender roles in these texts, and whether a woman's rank affects her role and status according to gender. It focuses particularly on romances (especially those featuring courtly love) and *fornaldarsögur* in which women are either idealised as goddesses, or mistreated and even sexually abused because of their gender. The article concludes by asking how far the contrasts within the texts reflect a Norse 'emotional community,' as compared with continental European values, and whether these textual differences reflect actual difference in the social expressions of emotional behaviour.

Ketils saga hængs is an Icelandic legendary saga which is usually dated to the fourteenth century. In one episode the protagonist, Ketill, comes to a farm and asks for hospitality for the night from the master of the house, Brúni. Brúni grants this request and asks Ketill immediately whether he would prefer to sleep with his daughter or alone. Ketill accepts the offer and says he would like to have the daughter with him; the saga then says that he enjoyed himself with her during the night. Judging from the saga, and related ones, one might sometimes think it used to be regarded as good manners for the host – the father of the unmarried girl – to invite a visitor not only

to stay for the night, but to do so in his daughter's bed, with the daughter in it as well.

In this article I intend to examine this and other similar incidents in further detail, and throw light on male attitudes towards women in medieval Icelandic literature, focusing primarily on legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and romances (the *riddarasögur*) composed in Iceland, on the one hand, and on the translated Sagas of Chivalry (*riddarasögur*) on the other. I will begin by examining the differences between texts originating in continental Europe and those of Nordic origin and then consider the way they depict a consciousness of social status, and whether social status or rank plays a part in women's roles, the status assigned to them in the text, and the way men conduct themselves towards them. I will then ask how far this difference can be attributed to the difference between Nordic and continental European societies – that is, whether it reflects a difference in general attitudes towards women in these two cultural regions, or whether literary texts, which are generally composed as part of a certain tradition, perhaps fail to tell the whole story and therefore cannot be considered as a mirror of their society.

1 Medieval Icelandic literature

French chivalric literature is usually divided into three traditional categories: the *matière de France*, the *matière de Bretagne*, and the *matière de Rome*, all influenced by the tradition of *trobadors* and *trouvères*, and ideas about 'courtly love' (in French *amour courtois*),[1] itself having been influenced by authors such as Ovid (43 BCE–17/18 CE), Andreas Capellanus (André le Chapelain, *c.* 1150–1229) and others.[2] In addition, more 'realistic' tales, known as *fabliaux* (sing. *fabliau*), enjoyed popularity to some extent during the Middle Ages, and were written and told by *jongleurs*.[3]

Chivalric material became well known in Scandinavia through various translations, most of them made in the thirteenth century. It is usually believed that the majority of these translations were commissioned by Hákon Hákonarson (1204–63), King of Norway, though they became particularly popular in Iceland, where they circulated in manuscripts for centuries.[4] In Iceland, chivalric literature was known not only in the form of the translated works, but also in original Icelandic works, *riddarasögur*, that were mostly written in the fourteenth century. Furthermore, the chivalric romances influ-

1. The tradition of the troubadors flourished between the end of the 11th century and 1323, a period which is usually divided into four generations. In the last generation, the emphasis shifted from the love of noble ladies to the love of the Virgin (Topsfield 244–52). Courtly love came into being, and was primarily practised, within royal courts, and it became a subject commonly treated by poets. It was above all very much idealised, involving for the most part secret infatuation and, in particular, the love of a young, unmarried knight for the wife of a nobleman. Love was therefore essentially both one-sided and unrequited, resulting in a mixture of happiness and frustration. The French historian Georges Duby maintains that courtly love was primarily an educational game, teaching young men to love and respect their master (56–63). On courtly love, see further Bornstein 667–74; Kelly 301–27; and Erich Köhler's writing on the 'sociology' of *fin'amor*.

2. *E.g.* Aelred of Rievaulx, who served at the court of Scotland and wrote the important work *De spirituali amicitia* in the early twelfth century (Jaeger 110–14). Ovid wrote his *Ars amatoria* (the *Art of Love*) at about the time of the birth of Christ, or shortly afterwards (Jaeger 28–30, 79–81; Reeve). Andreas Capellanus worked at the court of Troyes in France in the late twelfth century (on his discussion of courtly love, see Andreas Capellanus 28–36; 184–86).

3. The *fabliaux* can be distinguished from courtly romances as being more humorous, down to earth and not confined to the nobility. Only one *fabliau* was translated into Old Norse, and therefore, this particular genre will not be treated in this article.

4. In some of the texts, King Hákon and his descendants are mentioned as the instigators (Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion* 218). As Sverrir Tómasson has pointed out, this might, however, be a literary topos, and in some cases it is found only in late Icelandic paper manuscripts ("Hvenær var Tristrams sögu snúið?" 55, 69, 75). For some English translations of the Old Norse romances, see Kalinke, *Norse Romance*.

enced other genres of Icelandic literature, *e.g.* the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), such as *Kormáks saga*, *Víglundar saga* and *Laxdæla saga* (Karlsson 67–82; Einarsson 6, 40 *et passim*).[5]

French chivalric literature, like that of other Western European countries, tends to present love in thwarted relationships, depicting the obstacles that are placed in the way of the lovers. The heroines, who are more often than not kept captive by their fathers or their (usually older) husbands, are beautiful, pure and refined. With few exceptions they are of high birth and above all they are worshipped and sought after by desperate admirers and/or suitors. These basic characteristics can be identified in many of the Old Norse translations, for example in *Elís saga ok Rósamundu*, *Ívens saga*, *Strengleikar* and *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, even if the Norse translators tended to shorten or even omit scenes involving love and emotion (see *e.g.* Barnes 532). Nevertheless, emotions can be quite complex in texts such as *Ívens saga* and *Erex saga*, and it is probable that the Nordic audience learned about different varieties of love while listening to the translated romances.[6] One of the chivalric tales that was translated into Old Norse is *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* (from the French poem *Floire et Blancheflor*, thirteenth century: see *e.g.* Degnbol 71 ff.), in which the young lovers are the son of a pagan king and the daughter of a Christian serving-maid. Naturally, the king is opposed to their relationship and does everything he can to keep them apart. The hero, Flóres, is handsome, sensitive, emotional and very dramatic in all his reactions. Not only is he constantly weeping, but he also faints again and again when he is informed that the girl has been sent away (Kölbing 22).

Reading this, one can only wonder how a contemporary Icelandic audience, and particularly the male part of it, responded when this saga was read. According to the Icelandic sagas, men – or at least those who were regarded as 'real' men – were of a completely different nature, and they most certainly did not weep. Also, it was not the custom to waste many words on their relations with the opposite sex but rather to get straight down to brass tacks. For example, we could mention two incidents from one of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Grettis saga* (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, *c.* fourteenth century), where the protagonist's interactions with women are, to say the least, interesting.[7] First, we have the incident on the ship to Norway, when he shirks participating in the work of the men on board, and they upbraid him for being more interested in "klappa um kviðinn á konu Bárðar stýrimanns" ("stroking the belly of Bárðr's wife" [Bárðr being the ship's

5. A popular example from this genre is that of Gunnlaugr ormstunga, the protagonist of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, expressing his feelings for his lost love in unusually emotional poetry (Einarsson 260–65). In a similar vein, we might mention *Friðþjófs saga frækna*, from the corpus of the legendary sagas, which is in many respects a love story, greatly influenced by chivalric literature, or the courtly romances.

6. In order to study depictions of emotions in the Old Norse translations, scholars have increasingly focused on single texts, as the material may differ from one translation to another (see *e.g.* Larrington 79–94). Recently, a whole issue of *Scandinavian Studies* – 87.1 (2015) – was dedicated to the depiction of emotions in Old Norse Arthurian literature.

7. It should be kept in mind that the protagonist, Grettir, is not necessarily the role model for male heroes in this particular saga genre, or even Icelandic sagas in general. He is, in other words, not a typical representative of 'real' men in the sagas, who certainly do not all behave in a similar fashion.

mate]: Jónsson 51–52);[8] later in the same saga, when Grettir grabs a serving girl, he simply "svipti hann henni upp í pallinn" ("snatched her up onto the bench": Jónsson 240; Scudder 118).[9] These are not extensive accounts, but according to the traditional Icelandic saga style, they simply relate the necessary outlines. Like much of Icelandic saga literature, *Grettis saga* was turned into *rímur*, the typical Icelandic form of epic verse that remained popular for many centuries from the fourteenth century onwards. In the *mansöngur* (the introductory stanzas to the *rímur*), the fifteenth-century poet simply states that it is not his intention to waste words babbling about matters of love ("Venris lat", lit. "Venus making a fuss") when entertaining; the story must go on (Jónsson 1.55 [3.4]). This is a common attitude in medieval Icelandic literature, and is frequently encountered. In his study of the *Íslendingasögur*, the Russian scholar M. I. Steblín-Kamenskíj states that it was not only that descriptions of romantic feelings were unfit for saga literature; there were no appropriate words to describe them (70–71). Accordingly, emotions were something that the audience had to read between the lines.

But how similar or different were the heroes of the chivalric romances from those of the Icelandic narrative tradition, or the Norse world? In fact, when we read medieval Icelandic literature we notice that the Icelandic language did not only have limited vocabulary when it came to emotions and love, but also when it came to sexual relations in a broader sense, including violence. For example, despite some clear instances of rape in the Icelandic sagas (*e.g.* Ljungqvist 434), the texts seem to lack a specific term for the act (the rape), which makes it in some cases difficult to pin down sexual violence against women in Old Norse texts. Many of the texts, particularly the *Íslendingasögur*, reveal that while rape "was socially unacceptable," it "was considered primarily an offense against the woman's male relatives," as "the Old Norse code of honor included demands of male control over female sexuality" (Ljungqvist 431–32). Thus, when rape is addressed, it is not the women's will that is of primary interest (Ljungqvist 433 *et passim*). This may be seen, *e.g.*, in the cruel treatment of Yngvildr *fagrkinn*, as described in *Svarfdæla saga* (*c.* 1300 or later), which reveals an extremely gross and elaborate kind of misogyny, where the woman can be said to be the subject of men's attention in their constant conflicts (Kristjánsson, "Eyfirðinga sǫgur" 200–04; Waugh 151 ff.).

But in what ways did characters like Flóres from *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* resemble, or differ from, the heroes of the Norse saga tra-

8. My own translation, cf. Scudder 24. The incident is reminiscent of strophes in other *Íslendingasögur*, where the stamina, labour or courage of men who work on board ship or fight a battle is contrasted with the pleasure-oriented activities of landlubbers, often depicted as enjoying comfort and sexual relations with women (Perkins 192–95 *et passim*). It is, however, unique, in that Grettir is said to be enjoying a relationship with the captain's wife.

9. The saga relates how the serving girl laughs at Grettir for having a small penis. When Grettir grabs her and pulls her up to the bench, she screams loudly, but when they part afterwards, she cannot complain about anything. The episode has been interpreted as a rape, as the girl falls silent after having first screamed (Kress 201; Ljungqvist 436; Friðriksdóttir, "Ideology and Identity" 115); this is debatable.

dition? Let us consider some interactions between men and women in medieval Icelandic literature, beginning with the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), which were written at the same time as the Sagas of Chivalry (the translated and the original *riddarasögur*) mostly in the thirteenth, fourteenth and even the fifteenth centuries,[10] some of them contemporaneous with the work of famous medieval authors like Boccaccio in Italy and Chaucer in England, who both reworked material from the earlier *fabliaux*. In some of the *fornaldarsögur*, their authors made use of stylistic features from texts that entertained the lower ranks of society, as Chaucer did on occasion (Lindahl 144), when entertainment value was their primary aim. These sagas admittedly reflect the culture of the Norse world. However, one must always bear in mind that they are set in the distant past, and therefore it may be they are at times coloured more by notions about that past age, literary *topoi* and narrative motifs, and that they reflect attitudes that were generally current at the time they were written rather than the actual situation in the distant past.[11]

Examples of male attitudes towards women in the *fornaldarsögur* vary considerably, and, needless to say, the female characters themselves may also play different roles within the texts. Many of the sagas include notably strong female characters, or even women engaged in warfare. Strong women are, indeed, traditional in Old Icelandic literature, and characteristic for the *Íslendingasögur*, where they frequently influence the course of events. Apart from this, we have the troll-women/giantesses, who are specifically prominent in sagas that were composed in the fourteenth century.[12] However, by comparing the *fornaldarsögur* in general with the translated *riddarasögur*, we immediately find a different tone. The Swedish scholar Daniel Sävborg, who has studied the portrayal of love in medieval Icelandic literature, points out that the treatment of love and attraction between men and women takes a different form in these two groups of sagas (61–63, 67). In itself this is hardly surprising, since the *riddarasögur* came to the Norse world from more southerly parts of Europe and can be expected to embody values that differ from those of the home-grown products of Norse tradition.[13] But as stated above, the *fornaldarsögur* are far from being a unified group. It is not possible to say that the depictions of love or the general attitudes towards women found in them are all of one type. Certainly, though, it can be said that the Norse heroes conduct themselves in a very different way from the heroes described in the *riddarasögur*, and the *fornaldarsögur* – as well as in other genres of Old Norse literature and

10. Many scholars have studied these sagas in recent years, and not all of them agree on the definition of the 'genre,' or how many texts should be considered as 'actual' *fornaldarsögur*, see *e.g.* Quinn *et al*. On the origins of this category as literature, see Tulinius 44–69. For a general introduction to the *fornaldarsögur*, see Mitchell 8–90.

11. We must, however, also assume that these works appealed to their contemporary audience as otherwise they would not have proved so popular as attested by their survival in numerous copies.

12. The descriptions of the troll-women in the *fornaldarsögur* are usually extremely grotesque, and have been interpreted as showing misogynistic attitudes (*e.g.* Kress 119–28; Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom* 145–47; Friðriksdóttir , *Women in Old Norse Literature* 59–77). However, the role of troll-women in saga literature might be considerably more complicated, and much has been written on relations between male human heroes and giantesses, *e.g.* Lozzi Gallo 2–12. Cf. Arnold 116–24; Lavender 158–64.

13. As already mentioned, the Old Norse translators tended to shorten the passages about love and sentiments (Barnes 532; see also discussion in Sävborg 49–50).

actual historical sources[14] – contain examples of what would be regarded today as gross disrespect towards women, and even violence. This is not to say that the authors of the sagas would necessarily have agreed with this view, whether the tales were taken seriously or what effect they had on their contemporary Icelandic audiences. While some of the sagas were probably meant to address societal affairs, they were also meant to entertain, or, as the American scholar William Ian Miller claims: "Violence is the stuff of good stories [...]. It has been felt to be the proper stuff of narrative since the first written records" (87). So, what can we learn about the violence *per se*?

2 Gender and violence in the *fornaldarsögur*

'Negative' attitudes, or attitudes based on gender roles and the inferior position of women (including troll-women) are frequently found in the *fornaldarsögur*. A typical example of this would be, for example, where men verbally abuse troll-women when they first meet, for example by remarks on their ugliness. In many cases, the role of troll-women, who "could be seen as representing the lower and/or slave classes" in saga literature (Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature* 66, 68–69, 73), belongs to the entertainment value of the sagas, as does their appearance.[15]

In other instances, some of the male heroes may say derogatory things about women in general, remarks that can hardly be considered to have been funny, while they clearly display a certain attitude. One such is when Vilhjálmr, a figure in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (fourteenth century), says that "kvenna skaplyndi er ómerkiligt" ("No notice should ever be taken of women's whims": Rafn 3.306; Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrolf's saga* 81).[16] Other saga heroes do not stop at comments, however. Examples of male protagonists who fight or abuse women physically include the ones who go on long journeys to Finnmark in the high north to fight troll-women.[17] In *Örvar-Odds saga* (fourteenth century), we are introduced to a certain Guðmundr, who boasts about his adventures up north in Finnmörk, and says: "ok hefi ek þat svá gørt, at mér þykkir mest gaman at grœta Finnurnar" ("and I've had the time of my life, making the Lapp women cry": Boer 26).[18] Apart from Lapp women, Norse women are also harassed; in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (thirteenth century) we are told of a certain Grímr, who dishonours the daughter of a poor woman every single day, even though the mother constantly complains

14. This is to some extent traditional, and can also be found in earlier Icelandic literature, especially in skaldic poetry and Kings' Sagas (*konungasögur*), where there are various examples of violence towards women. These examples indicate that it was customary for Norwegian warriors in the eleventh century to rape the wives of defeated opponents in foreign countries, and even abduct them, as a kind of booty. This seems to have been an accepted behaviour at this time, in order for the conquerors to show their authority. The same men would, however, not treat the women of their own country in such a way (see *e.g.* Bandlien, *Å finne den rete* 46–47 *et passim*; Ljungqvist 441). For various kinds of disrespect towards women in the Íslendingasögur (*Kjalnesinga saga*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Grettis saga*) and the Kings' sagas (*Haralds saga gráfeldar* and *Knýtlinga saga*), see Ljungqvist 434 ff. For examples of actual happenings in Icelandic history that are reminiscent of the literature, see *e.g.* Bandlien, "Arthurian Knights" 16. It should be kept in mind, however, that women being mistreated or raped by soldiers is not a phenomenon confined to Scandinavian warriors of medieval times, but has been practised throughout the centuries in most parts of the world.

15. The role of trolls in the saga literature is disputed, but troll-women are usually shown in a grotesque manner, as sexually demanding, and yet also sometimes as comic. Therefore, the grotesque image of the troll-women may simply represent exaggerated images of women.

16. Vilhjálmr claims the daughter of an earl for his wife, under false pretences. When she voices her opinion on the matter, and wants her father to postpone taking his decision, Vilhjálmr reacts by decrying the opinion of women, and stresses that men should not let women influence their decisions. As Vilhjálmr is a villain, it is doubtful that his words are meant to be understood in general terms, *i.e.* as the opinion of the saga writer.

17. This particular narrative motif, where male heroes fight trolls in the far north (H945.2 in Boberg 155), belongs to a more general theme in folklore and literature, where heroes test their bravery by fighting against the world of chaos and/or supernatural enemies, who may be a threat to their own ego, their male authority or to the human community they belong to (Guðmundsdóttir 21–26; Kress 119–27).

18. My own translation; cf. Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* 34.

about it (Detter 54–55). On top of this, some of the *fornaldarsögur* mention men of high social standing who set out on heroic escapades and find hospitality for the night – and rather more – at farms along the way.

Bósi, hero of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (*c.* fourteenth century), is the son of a great Viking and a shield-maiden, and the companion of the king's son Herrauður. He has the reputation, rightly or wrongly, of being the greatest playboy in Icelandic literature. During his journey to the north, he stops at three farms where he receives hospitality from farmers and sleeps with their daughters. The descriptions are explicit, and in fact unique in Old Icelandic literature, and one thing they have in common is that no force is used on the girls. Even if they do not take the initiative themselves, they are curious about the handsome guest, and share a bed with him of their own free will. All of them have learnt something more about the pleasures of this world by the time he leaves in the morning. Of particular interest is the fact that two of the girls accept a gold ring for their affectionate hospitality (Tómasson, *Bósa saga* 17–19, 29–30 and 37–38). *Örvar-Odds saga* contains another example of a hero who takes the initiative, as Bósi does, with the result that the girl enjoys the experience. This incident takes place when Örvar-Oddr stays for some time with a giant, Hildir, who looks on Oddr as being so small that he gives him to his daughter to look after. The daughter, who thinks that Oddr is just a baby, puts him in her bed. The saga says: "Oddr lék alt þat er lysti; gørðiz þá harðla vel með þeim" ("Eventually Odd played all the games he felt like, and after that they got on very well together": Boer 122; Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* 76).[19] The giant's daughter is left pregnant as a result. When Oddr leaves, he tells her to send him the child, if it is a boy; otherwise he does not intend to trouble himself about it (Boer 122–23).

Two other sagas contain very similar accounts of such encounters, except that they do not mention that the daughter accepts the proposal or enjoys the experience. In *Áns saga bogsveigis* (*c.* fifteenth century), Ketill, while travelling with King Ingjaldr and his fellow companions to Firðafylki in the north, leaves his company for a while, and arrives at a farm where he accepts shelter for the night from the farmer. The guest comes straight to the point and says he intends to share the daughter's bed and adds: "ok mun yðr eigi betr boðit" ("and this is the best offer you are likely to get": Rafn 2.340).[20] The girl's reaction is not mentioned, but her father does not seem to be pleased, and the saga says: "karli kveðst ekki mikit um þat" ("the

19. Tómasson believes that the sexual descriptions, both in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, were influenced by the literary *fabliaux* genre ("Bósa saga og Herrauðs" 60 ff.; "Í tröllahöndum" 74). While the descriptions may have been influenced by such stories, the basic structure itself, *i.e.* of a hero travelling to the north and lying with a woman of lower social standing, as discussed below, fits well within the Norse tradition.

20. My own translation; cf. Hughes 318.

old man said he did not like the idea": Rafn 2.340).[21] Later in the saga, we have the same incident as in *Örvar-Odds saga*, where the female protagonist, Drífa, falls pregnant, and the father of her child, who wishes to leave her, asks her father to send the child to him if it is a boy, but otherwise to keep it (Rafn 2.344); this is, however, not the same man who insisted on sharing her bed earlier. The other example, from *Ketils saga hængs*, is described above, where that Ketill accepts the farmer's offer to sleep with his daughter (Rafn 2.117–18).

Örvar-Odds saga and three other *fornaldarsögur* contain some more related incidents, except that the male protagonist is not only of a higher social standing than the woman in question, but a king. The first example is to be found in the text *Frá Fornjóti og hans ættmönnum* (*c.* fourteenth century), relating with very few words how King Raumr, drinking in honour of the Yule festival (*jól*) together with Bergfinnr, the son of Þrymr *jötunn*, went into Bergfinnr's sister's bed, and fathered three sons on her (Vigfússon and Unger 23). Further circumstances of the incident are not described, but we notice that Bergfinnr's sister belongs to the *jötnar*, and is therefore comparable to troll-women. Another incident, where a troll-woman (*gýgur*) is taken in order to deliver a baby to a king, is in *Örvar-Odds saga* (the longer version): "Var þat þá tiltekja þeira, at þeir fengu eina gýgi undan fossi stórum galdra fulla ok gjörninga, ok lögðu í sæng hjá Háreki konúngi, ok við henni átti hann son" ("They took an ogress living under this great waterfall, loaded her with magic and sorcery and put her in bed beside King Harek, so he had a son by her": Rafn 2.241; Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* 81).

Two similarly short accounts, including abduction of the girls, are to be found in *Gautreks saga* (thirteenth century),[22] which tells of King Gauti, who loses his way while hunting in the woods and ends up in a cottage with a farmer and his family, where he accepts food and a place to sleep. After some words with the farmer's daughter, he says: "'Þikjumzt ek sjá, at þú munt mær vera, ok skalltu sofa í hjá mér í nótt.' Hun bað konung því ráða" ("'I take it you're still a virgin, so you'd better sleep with me tonight.' She said it was entirely up to him"); as a result, the girl falls pregnant, and King Gauti, who knows that she will give a birth to a boy, asks her to go with him (Ranisch 6; Pálsson and Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* 141). The fourth king, Helgi in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* (fourteenth century), takes the maiden-king Ólöf by force to his ships and lies with her for several nights, leaving her pregnant. This is in fact an act of revenge, as the maiden-king had previously humiliated Helgi – as

21. My own translation; cf. Hughes 318, "the old man did not say much to that." In the *rímur* version of the saga, *Áns rímur bogsveigis*, it seems to be the girl's mother who replies to Ketill, and says: "Þad er mier seggurenn sizt j ged / at selia hana so illa" ("It is, man, the least I would do / to give her away that poorly"): Halldórsson, *Áns rímur bogsveigis* 119; my own translation.

22. *Gautreks saga* tells of the father and son Starkaðr *jötunn* and Stórvirkr. Starkaðr abducts Álfhildr, the daughter of King Álfr, and makes her pregnant. Álfhildr gives birth to Stórvirkr, who later abducts Unnr, the daughter of an earl, and fathers a son, Starkaðr, on her. Unnr's brothers attack their farm during the night, and burn them both to death, while young Starkaðr survives (Ranisch 12–13).

maiden-kings usually do in Old Norse literature (Slay 22). The author of the saga makes it very clear that Queen Ólöf oversteps the limits of normal and accepted behaviour with her arrogance and greed, and so deserves what she gets (Jakobsson 179). Later in the saga, King Helgi rapes another woman, an elf-woman who seeks his hospitality on Christmas Eve (Slay 32).

From the above examples it is clear that the four kings do not need anyone's approval for sleeping with the woman. In *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*, however, the sexual encounter takes place with the approval of the girl's father, or at his suggestion, rather like the situation in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, where all three fathers seem not to be put out at all by Bósi's conduct or that of their daughters; a similar attitude is to be found in *Gautreks saga*, where the father does not interfere at all in what is happening under his roof. In only one case, that of *Áns saga bogsveigis*, is the behaviour of the male hero – Ketill – seen as being inappropriate.[23]

In the incident in *Ketils saga hængs*, the hero, Ketill, who accepts the farmer's offer, falls in love with the girl, Hrafnhildr; something similar happens in *Örvar-Odds saga*, where the male hero and the giant's daughter get on well together, and even in *Gautreks saga*, where the king asks the girl to join him with their son. As a result, the three heroes may hold the audience's sympathy, but otherwise it is impossible to say whether the medieval audience accepted the fathers' approval, or the heroes' behaviour.[24] That the fate of the women as depicted in the above-mentioned sagas could have raised questions among the medieval audience is indicated not only by *Áns saga bogsveigis*, but also by the late medieval *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, where a similar scene, that of a young woman being offered to a travelling champion, has been turned into a parody.

In *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* (*c.* fourteenth–fifteenth century), a troll-woman offers a visiting hero access to her daughter's bed, but when he has accepted her offer, taken off his clothes and lain down beside the girl, Gríðr, the troll-woman, threatens to kill him, and asks him if he really thought that she would let him dishonour her daughter (Lavender 274–75). What is interesting in this case is that the parent mocking the hero is female: the daughter's mother, and not her father, as in the older sagas. In this respect, the incident might be interpreted as a parody, criticising the earlier and more traditional texts and the prevailing male sovereignty presented there (cf. Lavender 163). Another twist on the same motif is to be found in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (fourteenth century), when Véfreyja, an elderly woman,

23. Ketill is, in fact, severely punished by Ánn, one of his fellow travellers, who puts out one of his eyes and gelds him as well. As a result, his plans with the farmer's daughter come to nothing, and King Ingjaldr drives him away from his troop (Hughes 319).

24. On the love story, see *e.g.* Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature* 69–70.

who is almost blind because of her age, asks her guest, the young protagonist Sturlaugr, if he wants to sleep alone during the night, or with her. When Sturlaugr replies that he would rather be close to her, she places a block in her bed to separate them (Rafn 3.605); the comic aspect of the incident is obvious. Perhaps related to the theme of mockery so explicit in these late *fornaldarsögur*,[25] are episodes in traditional ballads and folk tales, recorded from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, where the heroines have to play tricks on the men who have planned to rape them (*e.g. Kvæði af herra Pána og Gunnvöru* in Ólason 253–55; *Sagan af Birni bragðastakk* [*Björn Shifty-Cloak*] in Eiríksson 296–99).[26]

While it is open to question how closely the examples in the above-mentioned texts (especially *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, Örvar-Odds saga, Ketils saga hængs, Frá Fornjóti og hans ættmönnum* and *Gautreks saga*) would come to what we would now define as sexual compulsion, violence or even rape, it is clear that in no case do the girls initiate the sexual activity; on the contrary, it is the result of a decision taken either by the guest or by their fathers. That this was not, however, regarded by all as an acceptable behaviour on the part of saga heroes is indicated by *Áns saga bogsveigis* and *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*.

Apart from cases of forced sexual intercourse and/or oppression of women, there are various examples in the sagas of women being treated savagely or with violence in a way that directly reflects their gender or their role in sexual relations. In *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, around the time of Yule, when Hjalti *hinn hugprúði* is with his concubine, he asks her, in fun, whether she would prefer two men aged twenty-two or one man aged eighty (cf. "huǫrtt þiki þier betre tueir tuÿelleftir eda einn attrædur": Slay 113). When she answers promptly that she would prefer two twenty-two-year-old men, this seems to cause the hero serious disappointment. His reaction is to call her a whore and attack her, biting her nose off so she is disfigured for life.[27] After that he goes out to where the king and his companions are drinking in honour of the Yule festival, rouses them from their stupor and tells them that there is more virtue in fighting than in sleeping with women. We might ask whether this was the spirit in which nobles generally celebrated Yule.[28]

More misogyny of the same intensity is shown by Yngvarr, the hero of *Yngvars saga víðförla*.[29] When a band of women approach him and his men, he warns his men to be on their guard against them as they would against poisonous snakes. The most noble of the women

25. Also akin to the same theme is an episode in *Grettis saga*, where Grettir tricks a gang of *berserks*, who were used to abusing farmers' daughters without consequence. The parody is to be found in an episode in which Grettir dwells at a certain farm in the absence of the farmer. One day, when *berserks* make an unexpected visit to the farm, Grettir greets them well, offers them drink and promises that they will have the women of the house all to themselves. They accept his offer, and tell him that they want to have the housewife, her daughter, and all the other women too. The women are frightened and start to weep. Þórir, the leader of the gang, considers the reaction of the women irrelevant: he simply states that he doesn't care about the moaning of women. Grettir's purpose is simply to lure the *berserks* to a certain place, where he can lock them in, in order to kill them (Jónsson 64–69). It is obvious that the author of the saga plays with the standardised image of the *berserks*, referred to above.

26. Some of the traditional ballads, which were chanted as an accompaniment to dances in Iceland from late medieval times until the 18th century, deal with important and delicate social matters, such as incest and rape (Vésteinn Ólason 79–80, 229–55); similar ballads were sung in the Scandinavian countries (Jonsson, Solheim and Danielson). Icelandic folktales dealing with themes as incest or rape usually belong to international tale types (Sveinsson, *Verzeichnis Isländischer Märchenvarianten*, *e.g.* type 706).

27. This act is, in fact, reminiscent of a fixed literatry motif in which unfaithful women are punished. The punishment itself is believed to reflect actual punishments according to law (Budal 216–23).

28. See also the violence against Queen Hvít and Queen Skuld, who are tormented (Slay 67, 124). On violence against women in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, see Jakobsson 177–84.

29. Some scholars have rejected the status of *Yngvars saga víðförla* among the *fornaldarsögur*, as it has some fundamental elements that differ from most of them (see *e.g.* the discussion in Phelpstead, "Adventure-Time"). The saga is, as Lönnroth claims, "a strange mixture of history and myth, Latin clerical learning and Old Norse folklore," probably mostly from the eleventh and the twelfth century (101 and 111). *Yngvars saga víðförla* was, however, originally written in the late twelfth century, in Latin, while the preserved version is from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. It is partly based on the *fornaldarsögur* tradition, and should be examined in close connection with other *fornaldarsögur*.

then seeks closer acquaintance with Yngvarr, which proves to be an unwise move. His response is to draw a dagger and stab her in her private parts (Olson 26), resulting in physical disfigurement, like that inflicted by Hjalti on his concubine in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*. The role of the female characters, as shown in these two sagas, is different from the women in the above examples, the one being a concubine and the other one a seductress. In the case of *Yngvars saga víðförla*, the role of the seductress is obviously meant to shed light on the steadfastness of the male hero and his power over his own sexual desires (Bagerius, "Romance and Violence" 87). As the role of the seductress was already long known in continental literature (*e.g.* Jaeger 83), *Yngvars saga víðförla* does not represent a Norse attitude towards women *per se*.

Finally, two instances of fatal violence against women should be considered. The first example, in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, tells of an old woman (*kerling*) and her dealings with a certain Ásmundr, who is in the company of a king. First, she asks the king whether he can cure her from old age. When the king replies that he can not, Ásmundr tells the woman that he will cure her. She then asks him if he will do so in her bed. He reacts to her question by telling her to approach him and kneel, and she thinks that he is going to speak with her in privacy; Ásmundur then decapitates her with his axe. The king himself does not approve of one of his men simply killing an innocent and poor old woman, but "Ásmundr kvað undarligt at verða illa við slíkt" ("Asmund said he couldn't see what all the fuss was about"), and claims that he had never seen the king become so angry over such an insignificant matter (Detter 55; Pálsson and Edwards, *Hrolf Gautreksson* 116); the life of a ridiculous old woman was surely not worth a lot. Finally, we have an interesting incident from *Örvar-Odds saga*, where King Herrauðr offers to hand over to Oddr his shield-maiden, who has previously been at his side in many a battle. Though he accepts the gift, which was presumably the proper thing to do, Oddr is highly sarcastic about his new 'possession' and treats the shield-maiden disgracefully: at the first opportunity, he throws her into a marsh and leaves her there to drown (Boer 173–74). The killing of the shield-maiden might have had some comic value, and indeed, the example reminds us that while discussing violence in the sagas, we might want to consider what role it has, remembering that episodes such as this one could have had an entertainment value, and might be interpreted accordingly. Other incidents in which violence has a comical touch are certainly present in the sagas, in which cas-

es we might even suggest that it is hidden within male humor and hence without narrative depth.

Even if the incidents found in the above listed *fornaldarsögur* are descriptive and shed light on the variety of examples where women are treated badly, it is worth noting that the list is not exhaustive and comparable episodes are to be found in other texts as well. However, it is obvious that they provide us with examples of women being subjugated by male heroes, both because of their gender and their 'inferior' social status. They include farmers' daughters, daughters of poor old women or troll-women, and troll-women in general; their newborn baby girls are also of small significance. An exception is the social status of the seductress in *Yngvars saga víðförla* and the maiden-king in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, who must be considered as an equal to the king, while, at the same time, the rape can be seen as an act that is supposed to put the maiden-king in her rightful place, *i.e.*, beneath the male king. But even if the sexual encounter in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* is an obvious example of a rape, the texts in general do not define the given incidents as such, and neither do they describe the women's point of view, except for the three cases in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*; in addition, in the case of *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*, we are told that the incident resulted in a relationship.

Of special interest are episodes in which farmers, peasants, giants, or troll-women offer a visiting hero – in most cases travelling to the north – access to their daughter's bed (or, in some cases, do not seem to be bothered when the hero helps himself to their daughter's bed). These are, in general, standardised and must have been regarded as an apt literary motif that the saga authors used when their heroes sought for hospitality in the north. The travelling heroes are in all cases of higher social rank than the farmers, being kings or king's sons (Raumr, Hárekr and Gautr), companions/warriors of kings (Bósi, Illugi and Ketill of *Áns saga bogsveigis*) or sons of chieftains/wealthy farmers (Ketill of *Ketils saga hængs*, Sturlaugr and Örvar-Oddr). But do such narratives merely demonstrate the imagination of storytellers? It has been pointed out that the literary motif itself may reflect an actual custom among certain peoples, such as the Sami living in various parts in Norway, mostly in the north; it may have been traditional for the men to offer sexual relations with their wives to distinguished Scandinavian guests (Mundal 353–54).[30] This could then possibly be the basis of the literary motif, where the visitors seem to expect this kind of hospitality, or take it for granted.

30. This is also believed to have been a tradition among Eskimos (/ Inuit) (Kjellström 167–72).

In general, the above examples from the *fornaldarsögur* cannot be interpreted in the same way; while some of them deal with rape or violence, others may merely reveal a non-prudent attitude to sex; yet other episodes may above all be comic. All of them, however, highlight the subjugation of women, which reflects, in a broader sense, the patriarchal world-view of the sagas.

3 The Icelandic *riddarasögur*

The indigenous Icelandic *riddarasögur* are not a unified group of sagas, any more than are the *fornaldarsögur*. With much simplification, we might describe them as being medieval romances, modelled on the translated Sagas of Chivalry, while also forming part of the Norse saga tradition – and therefore closely related to the *fornaldarsögur*. Because of how strongly connected they are to the translations, however, it might be interesting to see if we come across different values here than in the *fornaldarsögur*.

Unlike the translated sagas, the Icelandic romances usually do not deal with matters of love, even if the ideas of courtly love are discernable in some of them (Sävborg 51); rather, they are tales of adventure and chivalry, cf. "riddara sǫgurnar rísa af því, / at rekkar kómu þrautir í" ("the *riddarasögur* originate / where men face difficulties").[31] Therefore, we do not expect knights to lose their reason because of unrequited love; nor do we expect male attitudes towards women to be homogeneous. What we immediately notice, however, when examining violence in particular, is that while we do not have any cases similar to the ones in the *fornaldarsögur*, where a travelling hero is offered to sleep with the daughter of a host, or takes it for granted, we have even clearer cases of rape than in the sagas described above, for example in *Gibbons saga* (fourteenth century), *Sigurðar saga þögla* (fourteenth century), *Ölvis rímur sterka* (cf. *Bragða-Ölvis saga*, sixteenth century or earlier), *Mágus saga jarls* (longer version, *c.* 1350) and *Samsons saga fagra* (fourteenth century).[32]

In *Gibbons saga*, the hero of the saga, Gibbon, rapes a maiden-king, after having himself being humiliated; this is not unlike the aforementioned incident in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*. What is different here, however, is that while Gibbon has intercourse with the maiden-king – who is temporarily paralysed – his companions rape her attendant maidens, all of whom are kings' daughters, who

31. The quotation is from *Skikkjurímur*, a fifteenth century recreation of the thirteenth century *Möttuls saga* (Jónsson 2.352 [3.78]); my own translation.

32. *Mágus saga jarls, Gibbons saga, Sigurðar saga þögla, Samsons saga fagra* and *Ölvis rímur sterka* (or *Bragða-Ölvis saga*) have been categorised among the indigenous *riddarasögur*, but even though the literary genre in question is more or less modelled on the translated *riddarasögur*, they adhere in some respects to the Icelandic literary tradition and usually do not deal with love in the fashion of the translated *riddarasögur* (Sävborg 51); some of them therefore closely resemble the *fornaldarsögur* in this respect. This is the case with *Samsons saga fagra* and *Ölvis rímur sterka*, which are characterised by a mixed style, depending on the location of the scene, whether it is in the South or the North.

are all asleep in the same room (Page 75–76; Bandlien, "Arthurian Knights" 88–90).[33] Yet another incident of a maiden-king being raped is to be found in *Sigurðar saga þögla*, where the woman is forced to lie with three different creatures three nights in a row; the experience is, however, not all together bad for the victim, Sedentiana, who partly enjoys it (Loth 2.203, 206 and 209). What is the same here as in some of the aforementioned *fornaldarsögur*, is the underlying concept that forced sexual intercourse is supposed to evoke the women's love or passion (Vitz 10; cf. Friðriksdóttir, "Ideology and Identity" 113–14).[34]

Ölvis rímur sterka relates how the protagonist lies with Randiborg, the wife of a chief, "hvórt ath henne er liúft edur leitt" ("whether she likes it or not:" *Ölvis rímur sterk*a 4.11–19); later, we learn that the act was not only punishable, but merited the death penalty (5.22).[35] In *Mágus saga jarls*, a mighty king keeps the wives and daughters of other kings captive for some time so that he can enjoy himself with them. He then sends them home, some of them pregnant (Vilhjálmsson 2.404). A similar incident is to be found in *Samsons saga fagra*, where a certain musician enchants women into the woods with his harp playing and keeps them there as long as he pleases; when they become pregnant, he returns them to their fathers or husbands. Later in the same saga, King Goðmundr of Glæsisvellir makes war on Jötunheimar. One day when his cooks are preparing meal, they spot three women, and take the fairest one and bring her to the king, who is pleased and takes her into his bed. When she gives birth to his child and dies, the king abandons the child in the mountains (Wilson 7 and 32–33). In a few more cases, men threaten to rape the women in order to subdue them. For example, in *Haralds rímur hringsbana* (*c.* fifteenth–sixteenth century),[36] Haraldr threats to rape a queen if she will not heal him (Halldórsson, *Haralds rímur Hringsbana* 57–58).[37]

In the above examples women are taken by force, and they are obviously being raped. By comparing these to the *fornaldarsögur*, we notice that the sexual violence is not restricted to the lower orders of society, and that it does not happen with the consent of the girls' fathers or the women's husbands. The women here are maiden-kings, not farmers' daughters: strong women that must be subdued, or else high-born ladies, and the male heroes are of high social standing too.[38] The circumstances are thus generally different from the incidents described in the *fornaldarsögur*, even if there are considerable similarities between the rape of the maiden-king Ólöf in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, and the maiden-kings from the *riddarasögur*,

33. See also *Dínus saga drambláta* where the rape is in revenge for humiliation (Kristjánsson, *Dínus saga drambláta* 64). See also *Klári saga* (Cederschiöld 47–51).

34. Another incident where a woman (a king's daughter) is taken by force, yet enjoys the experience, is to be found in *Adonias saga* (Loth 3.86).

35. In this saga, the woman, the victim of the rape, is only a subject of minor interest. The saga relates how a man is put under a spell, making him unable to have sex with his wife. Another man, Ölvir the Strong, comes along, and sleeps with the man's wife (see also st. 4.8 ff. in ms. AM 616 d 4to).

36. The story told in *Haralds rímur hringsbana* may well be categorised as a *fornaldarsaga*, as has in fact been done (Sveinsson, "Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda" 501), even though the *rímur* have not been included in any collection of *fornaldarsögur*.

37. Two similar incidents, where men threaten to rape women, can be found in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* and *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands* (Loth 2.62 and 5.165; Bagerius, "Romance and Violence" 85–86). Rape is also a common theme in late medieval Icelandic ballads, many of which reflect divisions between different social ranks, sexism and the authority of men over women (Ólason 79–80, 229–55). These are, however, most often translated from Danish, and are therefore not relevant in this context.

38. An exception might be the story of Goðmundr in *Samsons saga fagra*, where the social standing of the woman is not mentioned. That the location is, however, in Jötunheimar, may be a reference to the *fornaldarsögur*, where the women of the far north are usually of low social standing, and even represented as troll-women.

which is not surprising, since maiden-king romances are usually of a rather standardised nature.[39] The higher social standing of the female victims, as described in the *riddarasögur*, can probably best be explained by the direct influence from the Old Norse translations. It has, in fact, been pointed out that because of such influence, it is more difficult to draw any particular conclusions about medieval Icelandic society from the *riddarasögur*, than *e.g.* from the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Íslendingasögur* (Ljungqvist 433).

39. On maiden-king narratives in Old Norse literature, see Ríkharðsdóttir, "Meykóngahefðin í riddarasögum;" Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature* 108 ff. On bridal-quest romances, see Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*.

4 Gender and social status

The above examples from medieval Icelandic literature show that the two groups of sagas, the *fornaldarsögur* and the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, include various incidents of sexual exploitation and/or violence. Despite their differences, they shed light on male attitudes towards women in saga literature, which seem to be very much at odds with the behaviour of the knights as described in the translated literature. Indeed, the interaction between the sexes, and the immanent male authority described in these sagas, could hardly be farther away from the love relationships of the translated Sagas of Chivalry.[40]

In the *fornaldarsögur*, where we find female sexual promiscuity or violence against women, the majority of those involved are of low birth or common social status, while the indigenous *riddarasögur* usually tell of high-born women in the spirit of the translated romances. But even though both categories describe gender-based violence and/or exploitation, and therefore share some common features, there is a certain difference between the two. Firstly, in some of the *fornaldarsögur*, women of low social standing are 'handed over' to the male protagonists, who are of a higher social standing. In most cases, this is approved by the society (the girls' fathers), and the act is not considered to be a rape. The sagas show clear cases of patriarchy. Secondly, in the indigenous *riddarasögur*, women of high social standing are sexually violated by men of similar social standing. In the case of the maiden-kings the rape is accepted, as it re-establishes the accepted social order. In other cases, the rape is not accepted, and the men are seen as villains who do not act according to socially accepted rules.

This comparison indicates that the main difference between the two categories lies within the social context, and it is obvious that social standing plays a part in the women's roles. We therefore have to

40. As previously mentioned, we might want to keep in mind that the comparison is made with chosen examples, and that examples of male attitudes towards women in the *fornaldarsögur* and the Icelandic *riddarasögur* vary considerably. But even though there may be some examples of attitudes directly influenced by the translated Sagas of Chivalry when it comes to the interaction between the sexes, it is certain that the chosen examples reflect the main characteristics of the texts when it comes to sexual exploitation and/violence.

remember, when using literary texts as evidence about social structure, that status was important. Very different attitudes to women could exist side by side according to the rank to which the women belonged.[41] But apart from this, to what extent do the sagas reflect general attitudes towards women in Old Norse-Icelandic society, and are those attitudes then different from attitudes found in more southern regions?

The French romances are believed to reflect societal attitudes, since they were popular and were accepted by their audience,[42] and the same can be said about medieval Icelandic literature.[43] It is then natural to ask what sort of social context they would fit into. Did men in the Norse world see women so differently from the way their counterparts did further south in Europe? At first glance there would seem to be a huge gulf between these tales and the translated ones that reached Iceland from the continent, with their accounts of lovelorn knights and courteous maidens, and this proves to be the case on further examination too. Heroes like Flóres of *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*, Tristram of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* and others of similar nature, have virtually nothing in common with the worst-behaved louts of the Norse world. But this need not necessarily mean that people in the Nordic countries were so different from those living further south. Indeed, there are examples from Old French romances of men from lower levels of society behaving brutally towards women (Bagerius, "Romance and Violence" 90), and apart from that, continental European literature spans a greater variety than is found in the courtly romances alone, including for example the aforementioned *fabliaux*. There were also contemporary poets who appear not to have been influenced by courtly love when it came to their attitudes towards women, even in their love poems (Jaeger 84–86, 91–94 *et passim*).

And it must be remembered that the ideas behind courtly love, which so noticeably influenced chivalric literature, applied only to the upper ranks. Consequently, it had no place among ordinary people, and the language of emotion was an expressive mode that was restricted to the higher ranks (*e.g.* Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion* 196–99). In fact, common people were so far removed from the scope of courtly love that Capellanus, the author of the important treatise *De amore libri tres*, felt it necessary to state that his doctrines did not apply to the peasantry, who simply answered the calls of nature like animals, their conduct having nothing to do with the sublime sentiments of love that found expression amongst the gentle ranks in their

41. Comparable examples of preoccupation with social standing can be found in the Nordic ballads referred to above. In some cases, these texts reflect the tensions between social strata and show how the upper ranks were able to disparage the common people. Some of the texts include striking examples of gender discrimination and men's authority over women.

42. Georges Duby believes that we can use medieval literature in order to gain an insight into the society of the past, as it related to the real situations of the audience. He further points out how literary works could also influence the behavior of the people who listened to them (Duby 56). On the Templars' attitudes towards women, according to historical writings and documents, see Nicholson 74–80.

43. Icelandic sagas, such as *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, have been used by historians, and are generally believed to reflect social values (Ljungqvist 441). Only a few historians have, however, made use of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* as historical sources. See, *e.g.* Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom* 18, 73, 85 ff. *et passim*.

palaces. The message he gave to young nobles was that if they happened to be taken with a peasant's daughter, they should simply flatter her a bit and then take her to a secluded place where they could have their way with her (Andreas Capellanus 150), or, as the Norwegian literary scholar Toril Moi puts it: "peasants are natural creatures and must be treated as such. Intercourse with peasant women can neither refine nor ennoble the courtly lover" (18). Thus, it seems that the nobles and gentry could treat the daughters of serfs, and servingmaids, with a complete lack of respect, while venerating married women in the court as if they were divine beings. This indicates that literary texts fail to tell the whole story and therefore cannot be considered a mirror of society, even if they can, obviously, reflect values of certain social groups.

5 Concluding remarks

Icelanders were fond of French chivalric literature – so much so that they wrote *riddarasögur* of their own for a long time after first encountering it. Although it is likely that new cultural currents, as exemplified by courtly literature, gradually changed people's attitudes towards love and marriage, the popularity of these texts need not mean that people in Iceland took them literally.[44] This comparison between individual groups of sagas has revealed that the Icelandic *riddarasögur* differ from the translated *riddarasögur* – even when dealing with women from the higher levels of society – and also from the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur* when it comes to sexual attitudes. From this we can conclude that the popular literature that we have examined (the *fornaldarsögur*, the indigenous *riddarasögur* and the translated *riddarasögur*) need not reflect general societal values. It is coloured by a strong sense of social standing, and therefore reflects a narrower set of values. While we might conclude from Icelandic medieval literature that Norse and continental European saga heroes are of totally different types, Andreas Capellanus's treatise shows that this was not necessarily the case, since attitudes towards women depended – first and foremost – on their rank. The conclusion is that in literature, as in life, women are not just women, and from the perspective of gender studies, this might be a good starting point for a similar treatment of the attitudes towards men in Saga literature, for example regarding brutal behaviour against men of lower social status.

44. As Bandlien has pointed out, there are some Norwegian runic inscriptions from Bergen that indicate that some of the inhabitants of the town knew the ideology behind courtly love, and it is therefore likely that the literature had some social effect, especially in Bergen, where the translations were made. Gradually, it was no longer regarded as a weakness for a man to show his love, but rather seen as a sign that he was of good nature (*Å finne den rette* 188–89, 174–75 and 207; *Strategies of Passion* 217, 238). Bandlien also believes that Icelandic men began to behave differently in the fourteenth century, when they were able to "explore modes of behaviour that would previously have been taken for weaknesses" ("Arthurian Knights" 94).

The title of this article dealing with male attitudes towards women in medieval Icelandic literature asks the simple question: "How do you know if it is love or lust?" According to the above discussion, the conclusion must be that, when dealing with medieval literature, we might find the answer by recognising the literary tradition behind the text, and above all, its social context.[45]

45. I would like to thank Jeffrey Cosser for his assistance with the final English translation.

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