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Gender and Genre in Medieval Chivalric *Rímur*

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DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. No substantial part of this thesis has already been submitted, nor is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma, or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Reworked parts of Chapter Two have been published as ‘Poetic Men-talities: *Rímur* Poets vs. the Maiden King’ in *Quaestio Insularis* 20 (2019), pp. 116–139.

GENDER AND GENRE IN MEDIEVAL CHIVALRIC *RÍMUR*

LEE ELWYN COLWILL

ABSTRACT

The increasing influence of continental chivalric romances on medieval Icelandic and Norwegian literature had a profound effect on discourses of gender in Norse texts, reflected in the wave of romance translations and original romances created over the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. This thesis looks at how these questions of appropriate gendered behaviour continue to be negotiated in chivalric *rímur* (rhymed narrative poetry) of the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. There has been very little literary criticism of medieval *rímur* at all, and while aspects of gender in these texts are sometimes touched upon in studies of individual *rímur* cycles, there has yet to be a genre-wide study specifically of gender in *rímur*. The basis for this thesis is a corpus of twenty-three pre-Reformation chivalric *rímur* cycles, which has been used for both corpus-wide surveys of gendered kenning types and character introductions and as a source of case studies through which to examine recurring themes in these texts more closely.

The first part of this thesis examines the evidence for the performance context of medieval *rímur* and how this may have influenced the development of the form, downplaying the moral messages that underlie many of the romances in favour of ever more spectacular battle scenes in an effort to keep the audience entertained. As well as affecting the types of stories told by *rímur* poets, these conditions of performance also influenced the poets' conceptualisation of themselves as poets, an effect particularly visible in the introductory *mansöngur* verses that became an increasingly integral part of the *rímur* form. The next chapter looks at the construction of masculinity in chivalric *rímur*, using the portrayal of the stories' pro- and antagonists to argue that the idealised form of masculinity in these texts is inherently aristocratic, white, heterosexual and able-bodied. While the Norse adaptations of courtly romances were influential in shaping new modes of behaviour, I argue that, in these texts, there remain strong links to aristocratic behavioural models seen in earlier texts such as the kings' sagas. The third part explores the portrayal of women. As with the chapter on men, this section looks at women who are demonised and praised in their narratives to argue that idealised femininity in these texts is complementary to and interactive with hegemonic masculinity. Though there are fewer prominent female characters than male in *rímur*, the case studies examined in this chapter reveal the ways in which *rímur* poets used a conventional framework of femininity to construct characters with individuality and nuance.

Overall, this thesis argues that *rímur* poets build on the constructions of courtly gender seen in the prose romances, which, while differing from older models of gender in many ways, were not

the total break with the earlier tradition that they are sometimes imagined to be. However, as Iceland's position as a Norwegian dependency became more established, and with it the status of the new Icelandic aristocracy, so too did the courtly behavioural model. The *rímur* genre, arising perhaps as much as a century after Iceland's accession to the Norwegian crown, had less need than the early prose romances to introduce and reinforce this model, and *rímur* poets therefore felt freer to create exaggerated fantasies of it: fantasies of increasingly circumscribed roles, in which every male protagonist is the mightiest warrior and every female marriage-prospect is the most beautiful and skilled woman in the world. Yet the very existence of these formulaic patterns of behaviour gave poets scope to play with the limits of categorisation and, on occasion, subvert their audiences' expectations entirely.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
Note on Quotations	7
1. Introduction	8
Scope of the Thesis	9
The Rímur Genre.....	13
Rímur Manuscripts.....	15
Previous Rímur Scholarship	22
Approaching Gender in Medieval Icelandic Texts	27
2. <i>Rímur</i> in Performance	33
External Evidence for Rímur Performance.....	34
Mansöngvar and the Masculine Voice.....	38
The Rímur Audience.....	49
The Vanishing Maiden King.....	52
Conclusion.....	58
3. Male Characters in Chivalric <i>Rímur</i>	60
Modelling Hegemonic Masculinity in Chivalric Rímur	60
Kennings.....	74
Constructing the Enemy.....	77
Foster-brothers and Sworn Brothers in Chivalric Sagas and Rímur.....	96
Love at First S(word)fíght.....	97
By Their Powers Combined	109
Keeping it in the Family.....	111
Conclusion.....	114
4. Female Characters in Chivalric Rímur	116
Hegemonic Femininity in Chivalric <i>Rímur</i>	117
Kennings.....	121
Female Antagonists.....	122
The Monstrous Regiment	122
Cruel Queens.....	130
Women’s Wisdom.....	161

Female Masculinity in <i>Mábilar rímur</i>	169
Conclusion.....	175
5. Conclusion.....	177
Bibliography.....	181
Manuscripts.....	181
Primary Texts.....	181
Secondary Literature.....	184

NOTE ON QUOTATIONS

Where a published edition of a text is available, I have used that as the basis for my quotations. However, a number of *rímur* cycles remain unedited. Where this is the case, I have in general followed the practice of quoting from a single manuscript as far as possible. If variant readings are particularly relevant to my analysis, I have occasionally quoted these as well and noted the manuscript from which they are drawn. However, unless otherwise specified, unedited *rímur* cycles are quoted from the following manuscripts:

Sigurðar rímur þögla: AM 604 d 4to

Bærings rímur: Holm. perg. 22 4to (*rímur* I to VI) and AM 604 c 4to (*rímur* VII to XII)

Ektors rímur: Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to (*rímur* I to XI) and AM 610 b 4to (*rímur* XII to XVI)

Reinalds rímur: AM 604 a 4to (*rímur* I to II), AM 610 b 4to (*rímur* II to IX) and AM 604 b 4to (*rímur* IX to XII)

Mábilur rímur:¹ Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to

Jarlmanns rímur: AM 610 c 4to (*rímur* I to VI and XI to XII) and AM 604 f 4to (*rímur* VI to XI)

Quotations from *rímur* cycles are cited with the number of the individual *ríma* given in Roman numerals and the stanza number given in Arabic numerals, e.g. III.23 refers to the twenty-third stanza of the third *ríma*.

All quotations have been normalised to modern Icelandic orthography for ease of reading, except where this ruins the metre (e.g. *svá* has not been normalised to *svo* in cases where an *á* rhyme is needed; the one-syllable *ei* has not been changed to the two-syllable *ekki*). All translations are my own work unless otherwise specified.

¹ *Mábilur rímur* are edited in Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd. Rímurnar af Mábil sterku' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2004). However, as this is an unpublished MA thesis to which I only had limited access, most of my discussion of *Mábilur rímur* is instead based on a transcript of the *Kollsbók* version of the text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rímur poetry, a form of narrative, rhymed poetry, was one of the most popular literary forms in Iceland from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth. The poems range in content from cycles based on Norse mythology, to saints' lives, to chivalric romances, and number approximately a thousand cycles before the form's popularity started to decline in the nineteenth century.¹ The vast majority of *rímur* are based on pre-existing texts, most commonly prose sagas, yet despite the fact that *rímur* are direct evidence for the later life of these texts in Icelandic culture, and despite their incredible longevity and popularity as a form, they remain sadly understudied.

This thesis aims to begin to redress the balance, focusing on twenty-three *rímur* cycles from the medieval period,² all of which are based on *riddarasögur* (chivalric romances) or, in cases where no antecedent saga is known, cover chivalric subject matter. This corpus was chosen due to the prominence of chivalric *rímur* compared to other genres of medieval *rímur*; only the *fornaldarsögur* come close to matching the chivalric romances for popularity as *rímur* source texts. Chivalric *rímur* have therefore been chosen as the most representative sub-group to explore in detail. Concentrating on a subsection of the medieval *rímur* corpus in this way allows this study to look at broader, more general questions across the corpus, while also permitting closer examinations of particular texts and themes.

In this work, I look specifically at the construction of gender in chivalric *rímur*, though with the recognition that gender as a system of identity and social order cannot be disentangled from other such systems, including race, class, and sexuality.³ A detailed study of every individual cycle in the chosen corpus would require far more than one doctoral thesis to accomplish, and this project therefore looks first at the general picture produced by kennings and character introductions across the corpus, before turning to more detailed readings which either support these general impressions or offer variation from them. These case studies are read in conjunction with the prose sagas from which they are adapted in order to determine if the gender systems seen in the chivalric *rímur* owe more to content or form.

¹ Finnur Sigmundsson, *Rímnatal*, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Rímnafélagið, 1966), II, pp. 189–212; Shaun F.D. Hughes, 'Report on "Rímur" 1980', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 79.4 (1980), 477–98 (p. 480).

² Here defined as the period before the death of Bishop Jón Arason and his sons in 1550, commonly taken as the start of the Reformation in Iceland.

³ As the chapter section 'Gender in Medieval Icelandic Texts' discusses in more detail, this framing relies on Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on the concept of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 149 (1989), 139–67.

Although neither gender nor sex should be treated as strict binaries, this study does largely focus on the two gendered groups of male and female characters. Those characters who explicitly cross or transcend gendered boundaries are rarer in chivalric texts than in the mythological or legendary material, and rarer still in *rímur* than in the corpus of *riddarasögur*. The section on ‘Female Masculinity in *Máðilar rímur*’ in Chapter Four addresses some of the complexities of gender beyond the binary in these texts, and the sections on ‘Constructing the Enemy’ and ‘The Monstrous Regiment’ in Chapters Three and Four respectively consider the ways in which gender interacts with other boundaries, especially that of human and non-human, where questions of the supernatural frequently come into play.

Gender permeates so many aspects of human life and society that this thesis cannot possibly adequately address them all, but in it I aim to shed some light on a fascinating corpus of texts and hopefully lay the groundwork for future studies.

SCOPE OF THE THESIS

Given the continuation of manuscript culture in Iceland, as well as the ongoing interest in texts from the early medieval period, as demonstrated through their continual copying and reworking until well into the nineteenth century, it is difficult to put a precise end to the medieval period in Iceland in literary terms. This is especially difficult with regards to *rímur*, as the form persists, only slightly changed, across many centuries and is intrinsically tied to earlier texts through its use of source material. For the present study, I have chosen to define the ‘medieval’ period of *rímur* as ending in 1550. This is the date of the death of Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop of Hólar, who fervently opposed the adoption of Lutheranism in Iceland, to the extent of raising a small army and capturing the newly consecrated Lutheran bishop Marteinn Einarsson. The defeat and eventual execution of Jón and two of his sons in 1550 is generally seen as marking the end of strong Catholic opposition to the Reformation in Iceland.⁴ Even having defined an end-date, deciding which texts belong to this early period is also difficult, given the fact that most early *rímur* cycles are anonymous and collected together in manuscripts that postdate their composition, sometimes by a considerable margin. Björn K. Þórólfsson offers a relative chronology of cycles in *Rímur fyrir 1600*, grouped roughly by age, but does not offer any precise dates.⁵ Similarly, Haukur Þorgeirsson’s *Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi* looks at the linguistic evidence offered by the poems themselves, such as use of loanwords and sound changes

⁴ Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir, *Siðbreytingin á Íslandi 1537–1565: Byltingan að ofan* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997), pp. 251–63.

⁵ Björn K. Þórólfsson, *Rímur fyrir 1600*, Safn Fræðafjeldagsins (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska fræðafjelag, 1934), ix, pp. 294–516.

made evident through the metre, to offer a relative chronology grouped into periods of fifty years, starting in 1350.⁶ This dating has been refined in a more recent article to offer a full relative chronology of the medieval *rímur*.⁷

However, even with the above caveats, there is still a generally agreed group of texts thought to have been composed before 1600.⁸ Finnur Sigmundsson, in his *Rímnatal*, counts seventy-eight *rímur* cycles as having been composed before this date.⁹ Björn K. Þórolfsson, meanwhile, lists eighty cycles in *Rímur fyrir 1600*; in addition to Finnur's seventy-eight, he also includes *Halls rímur* (also known as *Sjálfdeilir*, an autobiographical *rímur* cycle by the poet Hallur Magnússon) and *Gunnars rímur Keldugnúpsfjfl* (which survives only as two stanzas copied onto an insert in AM 1029 4to by Árni Magnússon).¹⁰ Haukur Þorgeirsson's *Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi* counts fifty-eight cycles from before 1550 (fifty-seven if one follows Björn K. Þórolfsson and Finnur Jónsson in treating *Prændlur* as a single cycle, rather than separating out the first four *rímur* as an older *Sigmundar rímur*, as Haukur does).¹¹ Although Haukur's and Björn's chronologies differ in their precise order of texts, they largely agree on which texts belong to the pre-1550 group; Björn's four oldest groups contain only six cycles not listed in *Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi*, and all of these are from the youngest of the four groups.¹² More recently, Haukur's article 'Fyrstur rímnaskáldin' offers a revised chronology of *rímur* cycles from before 1550.¹³ While this new article makes considerable changes to the relative chronology of these texts, the pre-1550 group nonetheless consists of the same cycles listed in both *Rímur fyrir 1600* (with the caveats noted above) and *Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi*. 'Fyrstu rímnaskáldin' was only published while the present

⁶ Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi. Stoðhljóð, tónkvæði og önnur úrlausnarefni í íslenski bragsögu ásamt útgáfu á Rímum af Ormari Fraðmarssyni' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iceland, 2013), pp. 249–57.

⁷ Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'Fyrstu rímnaskáldin', *Són*, 19 (2021), 15–45 (p. 30).

⁸ 1600 is the date Björn K. Þórolfsson chooses as the cut-off point for his study, *Rímur fyrir 1600* (as the title suggests). He argues that *rímur* composed after 1600 differ significantly from this early group on metrical, stylistic and linguistic grounds. While I do not disagree that the *rímur* genre underwent significant changes during the seventeenth century, I would argue that some of these changes are already visible in the *rímur* Björn dates to the late sixteenth century, in particular the increasingly self-absorbed *mansöngur* stanzas and a tendency for cycles to be attributed to named poets, rather than left anonymous. I have therefore chosen the somewhat more concrete date of the Icelandic Reformation as my own end-point for the 'medieval' period, though I recognise that any such attempts at periodisation inevitably come down to individual judgment. Björn K. Þórolfsson, ix, pp. 31–34.

⁹ Finnur Sigmundsson, ii, pp. 189–90.

¹⁰ Björn K. Þórolfsson, ix, pp. 294–516.

¹¹ Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'Hljóðkerfi', pp. 249–57.

¹² The cycles in question: *Illuga rímur eldhússgoða*, *Sigurðar rímur Fornasonar*, *Þorsteins rímur á Stokkseyri*, the *Rollants rímur* which covers the Battle of Ferakut, *Egils rímur einhenda og Ásmundar* and *Hálfðans rímur Eysteinsonar*.

¹³ Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'Fyrstu rímnaskáldin', p. 30.

work was undergoing final revisions, so in this study, I have followed the chronology given in *Hljóðkerfi og bragkerfi*, which in many cases does not differ significantly from that in *Rímur fyrir 1600*.

The types of narrative covered by medieval *rímur*-poets are a disparate group, ranging from the eddic material of *Lokrur* and *Brymlur*, through the *Íslendingasögur* (e.g. *Grettis rímur*), to the *matière de France* by way of *Karlamagnús saga*. Genre boundaries are never perfectly clear-cut and some *rímur* can easily be labelled as belonging to multiple genres: for example, *Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar*, like its antecedent saga, uses elements common to both legendary and chivalric narratives. With this caveat aside, however, it is clear that medieval *rímur*-poets and their audiences did have preferred styles of text on which they drew. The table below gives the fifty-eight pre-1550 cycles in the order of composition suggested by Haukur Þorgeirsson, as well as the genres to which they most plausibly belong. As *rímur* titles vary in format between *[Name's] rímur* and *Rímur af [Name]*, in the table below, these have been standardised to the *[Name's] rímur* format in order to make it easier to locate a particular cycle. Where the text has an alternative name, this has also been included, with the most commonly used name given first. In cases where a genre has been given as 'Other', this refers to *rímur* based on, for example, folk tales and religious exempla; as none of these are particularly popular sources for medieval *rímur*, it seemed simplest to group them together in the 'Other' category.

Title	Genre(s)
1350–1400	
<i>Sörla rímur</i>	Mythological / Kings'
<i>Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar (by Einar Gilsson)</i>	Kings'
<i>Sigmundar rímur (Þrændlur I–IV)</i>	Family
<i>Völsungs rímur</i>	Mythological / Legendary
<i>Friðþjófs rímur</i>	Family
<i>Brymlur</i>	Mythological
<i>Geðraunir / Hrólfs rímur og Tryggva</i>	Chivalric
<i>Griplur / Hrómundar rímur Gripssonar</i>	Legendary
<i>Áns rímur bogsveigis</i>	Legendary
1400–1450	
<i>Þrændlur (Þrændlur V–X)</i>	Family
<i>Dámusta rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Úlfhams rímur / Vargstokkar</i>	Legendary
<i>Ólafs rímur Tryggvasonar (Indriða þáttur)</i>	Kings'
<i>Virgiless rímur / Glettudiktur</i>	Other (<i>fabliau</i>)
<i>Sálus rímur og Níkanórs</i>	Chivalric
<i>Filippó rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Klerka rímur / Klerkaspil</i>	Other (<i>exemplum</i>)
<i>Dínus rímur drambláta</i>	Chivalric
<i>Blávuss rímur og Viktors</i>	Chivalric
<i>Haralds rímur Hringsbana</i>	Legendary
<i>Skáld-Helga rímur</i>	Family

<i>Sigurðar rímur fótis</i>	Chivalric
<i>Geiplur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Geirarðs rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Hjálmþés rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Grettis rímur</i>	Family
1450–1500	
<i>Herburts rímur</i>	Legendary / Chivalric
<i>Gríms rímur og Hjálmars</i>	Legendary
<i>Skíða ríma</i>	Mythological / Legendary / Other (parodic)
<i>Bjarka rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Landrés rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Skikkju rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Konráðs rímur keisarasonar</i>	Chivalric
<i>Sturlaug's rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Mágus rímur jarls</i>	Chivalric
<i>Ólafs rímur Tryggvasonar (Battle of Svöldur)</i>	Kings'
<i>Jóns rímur leiksveins</i>	Chivalric
<i>Sigurðar rímur þögla</i>	Chivalric
<i>Lokrur</i>	Mythological
<i>Hemings rímur</i>	Kings'
<i>Bærings rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Ormars rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Ölvis rímur sterka</i>	Family
<i>Ektors rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Andra rímur jarls¹⁴</i>	Legendary
<i>Reinalds rímur</i>	Chivalric
<i>Máðilar rímur sterku</i>	Chivalric
1500–1550	
<i>Bósa rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar</i>	Legendary / Chivalric
<i>Króka-Refs rímur</i>	Family
<i>Vilmundar rímur viðutans (attr. Ormur Loftsson)</i>	Chivalric
<i>Þóris rímur háleggs</i>	Legendary
<i>Jarlmanns rímur og Hermanns</i>	Chivalric
<i>Þjófa rímur / Rímur af Ill, Verra og Verst</i>	Other
<i>Hálfðans rímur Brönufóstra / Brönu rímur</i>	Legendary
<i>Skógar-Krists rímur</i>	Other
<i>Ólafs rímur Haraldssonar (Rauðúlfs þáttur)</i>	Kings'
<i>Jónatás rímur</i>	Other (<i>ævintýri</i>)

Ignoring, for the time being, the texts which cannot easily be sorted into a single category, the above list gives: twenty-one chivalric *rímur*, thirteen legendary ones, seven based on the *Íslendingasögur*, five based on *konungasögur*, and two based on eddic material. There are also five which are not based on any of the more common categories of early Icelandic literature, including several based on folk

¹⁴ *Rímur* X–XIII of *Andra rímur* are somewhat younger than the first nine *rímur*, but for the purposes of this table, *Andra rímur* is only listed once at the position of its older parts.

tales and one adapted from a *fabliau*, as well as five that show an affinity for multiple genres. It is clear from this that *rímur* adapted from chivalric material were by far the most popular kind in the medieval period, followed closely by legendary *rímur*. For this reason, the present study focuses on this corpus of twenty-three chivalric *rímur* (including the two texts that span the border between chivalric and legendary material), as this is the sub-group most representative of a medieval audience's taste. Focusing specifically on chivalric texts also allows me to examine what is unique to the *rímur*, as opposed to the *riddarasögur*, rather than attempting to compare chivalric gender systems with, for example, heroic or pseudo-historical ones.

THE RÍMUR GENRE

As mentioned above, *rímur* (sg. *ríma*, lit. 'rhymes') are a form of narrative poetry that was popular in Iceland from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth.¹⁵ They predominantly retell stories that already exist, reworking prose sagas, folk tales, and other kinds of poetry into this new form. Although *rímur* do use alliteration in their metres, as all medieval Icelandic poetry does, they are distinguished from earlier skaldic and eddic poetry by their use of end-rhyme as an integral part of these metres.¹⁶ Moreover, while they also retain the use of kennings and *heiti* (poetic vocabulary) seen particularly in skaldic poetry, the way in which they use kennings differs considerably: while skaldic kennings are often intricate and elaborate, to the extent that they can become the focal point of a stanza, *rímur* kennings are more standardised and functional. In general, *rímur* word-order is far closer to prose word-order than that of skaldic poetry, and *rímur* kennings also take a more straightforward form, most commonly using only a single headword and determinant (e.g. *menja grund* [ground of necklaces [WOMAN]]). Another innovative feature of *rímur*, compared to the poetry that had come before, is the form's focus on narrative. While skaldic verse and eddic poems may recount a single episode or perhaps allude to several through dialogue, *rímur* offer extended third-person narration of multiple sequential events. The earliest *rímur* do not always cover the complete story of the saga or other text on which they are based,¹⁷ but they do follow the order of events in their source text closely, moving from episode to episode in a way that eddic and skaldic poetry does not.

¹⁵ Although *rímur* are still composed and performed today, this is more by way of preserving the art form, and the tradition is no longer widespread among the population of Iceland as it once was.

¹⁶ There are of course a number of skaldic metres that use end-rhyme, such as the *runhent* seen in Egill Skallagrímsson's *Höfuðlausn*, but these are far less widely used than metres which do not use it; conversely, all *rímur* metres make use of end-rhyme in some fashion.

¹⁷ For example, the fifteenth-century *Grettis rímur* only cover the events of chs. 14–24 of the saga, although the seventeenth- and nineteenth-century *rímur* cover the entire narrative.

There has been some debate over the precise origins of the *rímur* form in Iceland. Guðbrandur Vigfússon argues that the most common *rímur* metre *ferskeytt* derives from a metre used for Latin hymns, which we know to have been in use in Iceland in the medieval period, in which he is followed by Finnur Jónsson.¹⁸ Björn K. Þórólfsson argues that their development is due to the influence of foreign ballad metres, reshaped by Icelandic poets into the most popular *rímur* metre *ferskeytt*.¹⁹ However, as Vésteinn Ólason points out, the sophisticated style of the earliest extant *ríma*, *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar*, suggests the form was well-developed before ballads had become established in Iceland. Both he and Davíð Erlingsson have argued for influence from other Germanic poetic traditions, most notably the Middle English metrical romances like *Sir Orfeo*, which, like *rímur*, combine end-rhymed poetry and narrative, as well as the Middle High German *Minnesang* tradition, which is generally agreed to be the inspiration for the more lyrical opening stanzas of later *rímur* cycles, known as *mansöngvar* ('love poetry').²⁰ Vésteinn, Davíð, and Björn all agree that the Hanseatic port of Bergen, where English, German, and Icelandic merchants would all have been frequent visitors during this period, was a likely location for this cultural exchange to have taken place.²¹

Despite claims that *rímur* are an inherently conservative genre,²² the form does change and develop over time. The changes are most apparent when comparing the medieval *rímur* to ones from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the younger *rímur* have far more developed *mansöngur* passages, which some of the oldest *rímur* lack entirely (e.g. *Þrymlur* and *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar*), and are in general far longer, with stanzas numbering easily into the thousands. Though *rímur* poets, even in the nineteenth century, remain interested in the same sorts of stories they have always been, the elements on which they focus shift. One example of this is the treatment of *Grettis saga* in *rímur* form over time: the oldest, fifteenth-century *Grettis rímur* focus on the adventures of Grettir himself and

¹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, 3 vols (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1924), III, p. 26; *Corpus Poeticum Boreale. The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), II, p. 393.

¹⁹ Björn K. Þórólfsson, 'Dróttkvæði og rímur', *Skírnir*, 124 (1950), 175–209 (p. 178).

²⁰ Davíð Erlingsson, *Blómað mál í rímu*, *Studia Islandica*, 33 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1974), p. 10; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nýmæli í íslenskum bókmenntum á miðöld', *Skírnir*, 150 (1976), 68–87 (p. 74); Vésteinn Ólason, 'Ballad and Romance in Medieval Iceland', in *Ballads and Ballad Research: Selected Papers of the International Conference on Nordic and Anglo-American Ballad Research, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2–6, 1977*, ed. by Patricia L. Conroy (Seattle: University of Washington, 1978), pp. 26–36 (pp. 31–32); Vésteinn Ólason, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland: Historical Studies* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1982), pp. 64–78.

²¹ Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, p. 275; Davíð Erlingsson, p. 85; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Ballad and Romance in Medieval Iceland', p. 32; Vésteinn Ólason, *Traditional Ballads*, p. 78.

²² E.g. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk lestrarbók 1400–1900* (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Sigfúsar Eymundssonar, 1924), p. xix.

end with Grettir's triumphant return to Iceland after his first exile. The various seventeenth- and nineteenth-century *Grettis rímur* expand their focus to the whole saga, retelling Grettir's inevitable doom at great length.²³ The nineteenth century also sees the production of *Ríma um síðasta fund Grettis Ásmundarsonar og móður hans, Ásdísar á Bjargi*,²⁴ a rather maudlin creation in which the traditionally stoic saga-characters spend a great deal of time weeping in accordance with the emotional fashions of the nineteenth century, while the twentieth century sees Sigfús Sigfússon's self-consciously scholarly *Gláms rímur*,²⁵ which functions both as an account of Grettir's fight against Glámur and as a sort of spotter's guide to the various trolls and ghosts of Icelandic folklore. Some of these developments, in particular the length and complexity of the *mansöngur* sections, as well as the *rímur* themselves, are also apparent over the course of the medieval period; for example, a single *ríma* of *Jarlmanns rímur og Hermanns*, a poem from the youngest medieval group, is longer than the entirety of *Þrymlur*, a poem from the oldest group.

The ways in which *rímur* were disseminated will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, which looks at the specific contexts in which these texts were created and received by their audiences, but for the medieval *rímur*, at least, it is fairly certain that these were narratives designed primarily for oral performance. Sometimes, this performance seems to have been based on memorisation, while in other cases, the poetry was most likely read aloud from a manuscript,²⁶ but in either case, the poets' goal was to create a narrative 'í formi sem lét vel í eyrum' [in a form that was pleasing to the ears], as Sigurður Nordal, in a rare complimentary moment, puts it.²⁷ Though the medieval *rímur* are today almost solely accessible in written form, their origin as oral poetry needs to be taken into account when analysing them.

RÍMUR MANUSCRIPTS

The medieval *rímur* corpus is found in a number of manuscripts, both medieval and post-medieval. The earliest extant *ríma*, *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar*, appears in the late-fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.), though this manuscript contains no other examples of *rímur* and the work was likely

²³ For a comparison of the earliest three *Grettis rímur*, see Eva María Jónsdóttir, "'Óðar smiður þó annar fyrr, undan hafi hér gengið.'" *Grettisrímur frá 15., 17. og 19. öld'* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2015).

²⁴ Oddur Jónsson, *Ríma um síðasta fund Grettis Ásmundarsonar og móður hans, Ásdísar á Bjargi* (Ísafjörður: J. Kr. Árnrímsson, 1889).

²⁵ Sigfús Sigfússon, *Gláms-rímur* (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðja Jóns Helgasonar, 1930).

²⁶ Jón Helgason, 'Noter til Þrymlur', *Opuscula*, Biblioteca Arnarnagæna 31, 5 (1975), 241–49 (p. 246); Pétur Húni Björnsson, 'Rímur um rímur. Hvað má lesa úr elstu rímum um rímahefðina?' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2020), pp. 58–59.

²⁷ Sigurður Nordal, p. xix.

included more for its subject matter than its form – or perhaps for the personal connection between its poet Einar Gilsson and the manuscript’s patron Jón Hákonarson.²⁸ Other medieval *rímur* manuscripts seem to have served as compendia specifically of *rímur*. These include *Kollsbók* (Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to, c. 1480–90), which contains eleven (formerly twelve, before *Reinalds rímur* were lost to a lacuna) chivalric *rímur* in addition to seven other cycles, mostly legendary.²⁹ *Hólsbók* (AM 603 4to, sixteenth century), contains seventeen *rímur* cycles, of which seven are based on chivalric material, as well as three non-*rímur* poems, though according to Jón Ólafsson’s eighteenth-century catalogue of Árni Magnússon’s collection (AM 477 fol.), it also once contained a number of other poems now lost to a lacuna.³⁰ Perhaps the most important manuscript for the study of medieval *rímur* is *Staðarhólsbók* (AM 604 a–h 4to, early to mid-sixteenth century).³¹ This monumental work, later rebound into eight parts by Árni Magnússon due to its size, contains thirty-three *rímur* cycles, of which sixteen are based on chivalric material. Other manuscripts do not contain such a wealth of *rímur*, but are nonetheless important witnesses for many texts. *Selskinna* (AM 605 4to, late-sixteenth century) and *Krossnessbók* (Holm. perg. 22 4to, late-sixteenth century), both contain a handful of *rímur* cycles, with *Krossnessbók* being the only complete witness to *Mágus rímur*, elsewhere found only fragmentarily.³² Holm. perg. 23 4to (c. 1600) also contains several *rímur* cycles, and from the seventeenth century, both AM 610 a–f 4to and *Kálfavíkurbók* (AM Acc. 22, c. 1690–1700) preserve a number of medieval *rímur*.³³ The table on the following pages gives an overview of the manuscript preservation of medieval chivalric *rímur*. The information in it is compiled from Björn K. Þórólfsson’s *Rímur fyrir 1600*, which gives more detailed information on the relationship between the various manuscripts.

The majority of the texts I will be working with in this thesis (those indicated in bold on the table below) have been edited either as part of Finnur Jónsson’s *Rímnasafn*,³⁴ or in Theodor Wisén’s

²⁸ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389*, Viking Collection, 15 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 300, 347.

²⁹ Ólafur Halldórsson, ‘Inngangur’, in *Kollsbók. Codex Guelferbytanus 42. 7 Augusteus Quarto*, Íslensk Handrit. Icelandic Manuscripts. Series in Quarto, 5 (Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands, 1968), pp. ix–xlvi (pp. xv–xvi, xxxvi).

³⁰ Kristian Kålund, *Katalog over den Arnemagnæanske håndskriftsamling*, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Kommissionen for det Arnemagnæanske legat, 1894), II, pp. 3–4. The lost *rímur* cycles, as given in Kålund’s catalogue following Jón Ólafsson: *Geðraunir*, *Geirarðs rímur*, *Skikkju rímur*, *Virgiless rímur*, *Hrómundar rímur Gripssonar*, *Mábilur rímur* and two *rímur* from *Þorsteins rímur á Stokkseyri*, as well as two non-*rímur* poems.

³¹ *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: Registre*, ed. by Den arnamagnæanske kommission (Copenhagen, 1989), p. 457; Kålund, II, p. 5.

³² Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, p. 7; Kålund, II, p. 10.

³³ Kålund, II, p. 14. Parts of AM Acc. 22 can be dated to 1695 on the basis of its colophons, though the date of parts in other hands is less certain.

³⁴ *Rímnasafn: Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2 vols (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller og J. Jørgensen, 1905–22).

Riddara-rímur.³⁵ In addition to this, the version of *Vilmundar rímur viðutans* most commonly attributed to Ormur Loftsson has been edited by Ólafur Halldórsson³⁶ and *Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar* by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir and Haukur Þorgeirsson.³⁷ The remaining texts are as yet unedited; I am grateful to Einar Sigurðsson and unnamed others who transcribed the main medieval witnesses of these texts for Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, as well as to Haukur Þorgeirsson, who kindly gave me access to his searchable electronic corpus of *rímur* based on these transcriptions.³⁸ Where a scholarly edition of a text is available, I have used this as the basis for my discussion; in other cases, I cite the manuscript witness following Einar Sigurðsson's transcriptions.

The manuscript dates in the table on the next page come from the following sources:

Kollsbók (Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to) (1480–90)³⁹

Hólsbók (AM 603 4to) (16th cen)⁴⁰

Staðarhólsbók (AM 604 4to) (c. 1550)⁴¹

Selskinna (AM 605 4to) (1550–1600)⁴²

Krossnessbók (Holm. perg. 22 4to) (1550–1600)⁴³

Holm. perg. 23 4to (c. 1600)⁴⁴

AM 610 4to (17th cen)⁴⁵

Kálfarvíkurbók (AM Acc. 22) (1690–1700)⁴⁶

AM 145 8vo (pre-1633)⁴⁷

³⁵ *Riddara-rímur efter handskifternar*, ed. by Theodor Wisén (Copenhagen: F. Berlings boktryckeri, 1881).

³⁶ *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslenzkar miðaldarímur, 4 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1975).

³⁷ 'Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar', ed. by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir and Haukur Þorgeirsson, *Gripla*, 26 (2015), 81–137.

³⁸ This corpus has since been made publicly available: Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'Rímur fyrir siðaskipti', *Rímur fyrir siðaskipti*, 2021 <<https://tinyurl.com/ynemn4x5>> [accessed 12 January 2022].

³⁹ Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Inngangur', p. xxxvi.

⁴⁰ Kålund, II, p. 3.

⁴¹ Den arnamagnæanske kommission, p. 457; Stefán Karlsson, 'Ritun Reykjarfjarðarbókar: Excursus: Bókagerð bænda', *Opuscula*, 4 (1970), 120–40 (p. 139).

⁴² Kålund, II, p. 10.

⁴³ Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁴ Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Kålund, II, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Substantial parts dated to 1695 by a number of colophons within. See: 'Manuscript Detail: Acc. 22', *handrit.is* <<https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/Acc-0022>> [accessed 7 November 2021].

⁴⁷ Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, p. 9; Kålund, II, p. 410.

Lbs. 861 4to (late 17th cen)⁴⁸

AM 146 a 8vo (post-1656)⁴⁹

Svalbarðsbók (Holm. papp. 1 4to) (pre-1644)⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Páll Eggert Ólason, *Skrá um handritasöfn Landsbókasafnsins*, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1918), I, p. 377.

⁴⁹ Kålund dates the manuscript to the first half of the seventeenth century, but the final text, *Rímur af barndómi Jésu Kristis* by Guðmundur Erlendsson, contains a statement that it was composed in 1656. Kålund, II, p. 411.

⁵⁰ Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, pp. 10–11.

	Geðraunir	Dámusta rímur	Sálus rímur	Filippó rímur	Dínus rímur	Blávuss rímur ⁵¹	Sigurðar rímur fóts	Geiplur
Kollsbók Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to (1480–90)	X		X	X			X	X
Hólsbók AM 603 4to (16 th cen)	lost		X	frag.	frag.	frag.		X
Staðarhólsbók AM 604 4to (1540–60)	X	X	I–VI	X	I–III	X		
Selskinna AM 605 4to (1550–1600)	X							
Krossnessbók Holm. perg. 22 44to (1550–1600)								
Holm. perg. 23 4to (c. 1600)	X				I.14–end			
AM 610 4to (17 th cen)							X	
Kálfavíkurbók AM Acc. 22 (1690–1700)					X	X		
AM 145 8vo (pre-1633)								X
NKS 1903 4to (18 th cen)								
Lbs. 861 4to (late 17 th cen)								
AM 146 a 8vo (1656)								
Svalbarðsbók Holm. papp. 1 4to (c. 1650)			X					

⁵¹ *Kálfavíkurbók* has four younger *rímur* not found in *Staðarhólsbók*, which tell the later maiden king part of the saga. Of these four additional *rímur*, Björn K. Þórólfsson notes that ‘mun mega telja þær til yngstu rímna, sem þessi bók fjallar um’ [they can be counted among the younger *rímur* that this book discusses]. Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 328. This places them after 1550, and my discussion of *Blávuss rímur og Viktors* therefore covers only the eight *rímur* in *Staðarhólsbók*.

	Geirarðs rímur	Herburts rímur	Landrés rímur	Skikkju rímur	Konráðs rímur	Mágus rímur	Jóns rímur	Sigurðar rímur þögla
Kollsbók Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to (1480–90)	X	X		X	X			
Hólsbók AM 603 4to (16 th cen)								IX.10– X.34; XIV.36– XIV
Staðarhólsbók AM 604 4to (1540–60)		X	X		X			I–XIV ⁵²
Selskinna AM 605 4to (1550–1600)					X			
Krossnessbók Holm. perg. 22 44to (1550–1600)						X	frag.	
Holm. perg. 23 4to (c. 1600)								X
AM 610 4to (17 th cen)						I–IV		
Kálfavíkurbók AM Acc. 22 (1690–1700)			X	X			see note ⁵³	
AM 145 8vo (pre-1633)	X					frag.		
NKS 1903 4to (18 th cen)								
Lbs. 861 4to (late 17 th cen)							X	
AM 146 a 8vo (1656)								
Svalbarðsbók Holm. papp. 1 4to (c. 1650)								

⁵² While the text in Holm. perg. 23 4to does go from the start of the first *ríma* to the end of the sixteenth, it is missing the thirteenth *ríma*, which is also largely fragmentary in *Staðarhólsbók*.

⁵³ Lbs. 861 4to is actually a quire taken from *Kálfavíkurbók* and given its own shelfmark. See Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 329.

	Bærings rímur	Ektors rímur	Reinalds rímur	Mábilur rímur ⁵⁴	Vilmundar rímur	Hrólfis rímur	Jarlmanns rímur
Kollsþók Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to (1480–90)		I–XI	lost	X			
Hólsþók AM 603 4to (16 th cen)			I–II.3	frag.			
Staðarhólsþók AM 604 4to (1540–60)	VII–XII	IV.6– XII	1.10– II.16; IX.44– end		I.46–IX.3		VI.52–XI.43
Selskinna AM 605 4to (1550–1600)							
Krossnessþók Holm. perg. 22 4to (1550–1600)	I–VII	I–XII					
Holm. perg. 23 4to (c. 1600)							
AM 610 4to (17 th cen)		X	X				X
Kálfarvíkurbók AM Acc. 22 (1690–1700)							
AM 145 8vo (pre-1633)							
NKS 1903 4to (18 th cen)							
Lbs. 861 4to (late 17 th cen)							
AM 146 a 8vo (1656)	I–VII				X	X	
Svalbarðsþók Holm. papp. 1 4to (c. 1650)							I–X

⁵⁴ There is a tenth, younger *ríma* that has been added onto the end of *Mábilur rímur*, which tells of how she eventually succeeds in freeing her sister from her husband's tomb. Versions of this text are found only in post-medieval paper manuscripts and have not been included in the table, nor do they play a major role in the discussion of *Mábilur rímur* throughout this thesis.

PREVIOUS RÍMUR SCHOLARSHIP

As a corpus, *rímur* have received relatively little scholarly attention when compared to other kinds of Icelandic literature. Even the medieval *rímur* have been the subject of very little academic interest; post-medieval *rímur* have received almost none.⁵⁵ There are several probable reasons for the lack of *rímur* scholarship. In the first place, we can perhaps blame the form's own incredible longevity: in the nineteenth century, when Old Norse scholarship was becoming more established as a discipline, *rímur* were still a current and thriving form of storytelling, lacking the antiquarian glamour of the earlier sagas and eddic poetry. At the same time, 'popular' did not equate to fashionable among literary circles of the period, which favoured romanticism and viewed *rímur* as old-fashioned and inartistic. The trend-setting literary journal *Fjölnir* published scathing reviews of the work of contemporary *rímur* poets, notably Jónas Hallgrímsson's 1837 review of Sigurður Breiðfjörð's *Rímur af Tistrani og Indiönu*, in which he says of *rímur* in general that 'eru þær flestallar þjóðinni til minnkunar' [most of them are to the detriment of the people], and of Sigurður's composition specifically: 'af Tistransrímum er það sannast að segja, að þær eru í mesta máta vesælar' [of *Tistrans rímur* it is most truthful to say that they are for the most part wretched].⁵⁶ Over the course of the nineteenth century, the form's popularity sharply declined.

In addition to the *Fjölnismenn*'s disapproval, *rímur*, by virtue of almost always being based on a pre-existing work, have a hard time claiming great originality. This does not seem to have been a problem for medieval and early modern audiences, but was another mark against the form by the standards of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship.⁵⁷ Moreover, even the source texts adapted by *rímur*-poets have only recently become the subject of sustained scholarly interest; by far the most popular genres of medieval *rímur* were those based on legendary or chivalric sagas, and these were precisely the types of saga dismissed as inartistic, 'a sort of intellectual narcotic', as Margaret Schlauch phrases it,⁵⁸ designed to help the Icelandic populace cope with the miserable plague- and famine-ravaged years of the fourteenth century. It is only in the past few decades that

⁵⁵ For this reason, unless I specifically note otherwise, all discussion of patterns of scholarship in this section refers only to the medieval *rímur*.

⁵⁶ Jónas Hallgrímsson, 'Um Rímur af Tistrani og Indiönu, "orktar af Sigurði Breiðfjörð," (prentaðar í Kaupmannahöfn, 1831)', *Fjölnir*, 3 (1837), 18–29 (pp. 18–19).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Sigurður Nordal's statement that *rímur* are 'líklega hið fáránlegasta dæmi bókmentalegs íhalds' [probably the most ridiculous example of literary conservatism]; that they 'haf[a] einatt lítið skáldlegt gildi og horf[a] jafnvel stundum til beinna smekkspjalla' [frequently have little poetic value and sometimes even take a turn for the outright tasteless], and that they were 'fremur iðnaður en list. Hinn heilagi eldur blossaði ekki upp í þeim' [more of a business than an art. The holy fire [of inspiration] did not burn in them]. Sigurður Nordal, p. xix.

⁵⁸ Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), p. 11.

there has been much in the way of academic enquiry applied to the *riddarasögur*, while the chivalric *rímur* remain almost entirely unexamined. Indeed, the trajectory of scholarly investigation into both sets of texts has been very similar. As discussed below, interest in *rímur* began on purely philological grounds, with the surviving poems often treated as more valuable for the insight they could offer into lost prose sagas than for any intrinsic merit they might possess. Likewise, the *riddarasögur*, particularly the translated romances, were initially used to reconstruct their lost Old French and Anglo-Norman ‘originals’; when attention was paid to their literary qualities, it was usually for the sake of deeming them inferior copies of the earlier narratives.⁵⁹ As recently as 1986, Gerd Wolfgang Weber argued that the *riddarasögur* were the natural low point of the romance genre’s decline into mere decadence, a sentiment not out of place in a *Fjölhniðmaður*’s opinion on *rímur*.⁶⁰ However, in the years since, studies of the *riddarasögur* for their own sake have flourished, from Jonna Kjær pointing out the skilful way translators adapt the courtly setting for their audience,⁶¹ to Marianne Kalinke’s exploration of the ways continental and older Icelandic motifs are innovatively combined in the popular bridal-quest sub-genre,⁶² to Geraldine Barnes’ demonstration of the way the *riddarasögur* are in dialogue with both vernacular and Latin learned traditions.⁶³ *Rímur*, the next link in the chain of romance adaptations, are surely due for their own scholarly renaissance.

Given the weighting of scholarly interest across Old Norse genres more generally, it is unsurprising that the mythological *rímur* (*Brymlur*, *Lokrur*, *Völsungs rímur*, and arguably *Skíða ríma*) have received the most attention. These four cycles are among the very small number of *rímur* to be translated into any language other than Icelandic, with all four having been translated into English and *Skíða ríma* having also been translated into Latin in the seventeenth or eighteenth century by the

⁵⁹ For an overview of early *riddarasaga* scholarship, see Jürg Glauser, ‘Romance (Translated Riddarasögur)’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 372–87 (pp. 378–85). Glauser’s work on the inherent variability of medieval texts, specifically in relation to the *riddarasögur*, has been vital in moving work in this area beyond what might be termed the ‘imperfect photocopier’ theory of textual transmission. Jürg Glauser, ‘Textüberlieferung und Textbegriff im spätmittelalterlichen Norden: Das Beispiel der Riddarasögur’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 113 (1998), 7–27.

⁶⁰ Gerd Wolfgang Weber, ‘The Decadence of Feudal Myth: Towards a Theory of *Riddarasaga* and Romance’, in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 427–54.

⁶¹ Jonna Kjær, ‘La réception scandinave de la littérature courtoise et l’exemple de la *Chanson de Roland*/Af *Rúnzivals bardaga*: Une épopée féodale transformée en roman courtois?’, *Romania*, 114 (1996), 50–69.

⁶² Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica*, XLVI (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶³ Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014). The texts listed here are of course far from the entirety of recent *riddarasaga* scholarship, a full survey of which is beyond the scope of the present work, but they have all been hugely influential on the contents of this thesis, hence their inclusion here.

bishop Jón Vídalín.⁶⁴ While a good number of the later medieval chivalric and legendary *rímur* remain entirely unedited, the mythological *rímur* have all received multiple editions, with *Skíða ríma* itself having no fewer than seven, starting with Konrad Maurer’s 1869 edition and ending with the most recent by Theo Homan in 1975.⁶⁵ By the standards of other medieval Icelandic texts, this may not seem like much in the way of editorial interest, but given that nearly a third of the pre-1550 *rímur* corpus has never been edited in any fashion and the overwhelming majority of the far larger corpus of post-medieval *rímur* can still only be read in manuscript form, to be the subject of even one edition is something of a triumph for a *rímur* cycle.

A large part of *rímur* scholarship thus far has understandably been philological in nature: it is difficult to write about a text without some sort of edition of that text to work from, and much work has been done on tracing out the relationships between *rímur* and sagas, as well as between *rímur* manuscripts. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of *rímur* were edited and discussed alongside their source-sagas in studies that sought to lay out the entire literary tradition surrounding a particular narrative,⁶⁶ though again the points of discussion in these studies tend more towards the philological than any examination of artistry on the part of the poets. Subsequently, Björn K. Þórólfsson’s 1934 publication of *Rímur fyrir 1600* drew together information on manuscript witnesses and the relationships between *rímur* and the saga redactions on which they were most probably based to form a useful overview of the pre-1600 *rímur*.

⁶⁴ *Skíðaríma: An Inquiry into Written and Printed Texts, References and Commentaries*, ed. & trans. by Theo Homan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975), p. 360. The short list of *rímur* with English translations or partial translations (I am unaware of translations into any other language, apart from the aforementioned Latin *Skíða ríma*) is as follows: ‘Grettis rímur’, ed. & trans. by Lee Colwill, *Apardjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies*, 2 (2021), ii–138; *The Bearded Bride. A Critical Edition of Þrymlur*, ed. & trans. by Lee Colwill and Haukur Þorgeirsson (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2020); Matthew James Driscoll, ‘Skikkjurímur’, in *Norse Romance II: The Knights of the Round Table*, ed. by Marianne E. Kalinke, trans. by Matthew James Driscoll, *Arthurian Archives*, 4 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 267–329; Hannah R.F. Hethmon, ‘Völsungsrímur: A New English Translation with Commentary and Analysis’ (unpublished MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2015); Homan; ‘A Little Bit of Lokkur: A Portion of an Old Icelandic Mythological Poem and a New English Translation’, trans. by Ellis Wylie, *Minnesota Undergraduate Research and Academic Journal*, 1.1 (2018), 1–33.

⁶⁵ Homan; *Die Skíða-Ríma*, ed. by Konrad Maurer (Munich: Verlag der k. Akademie, 1869).

⁶⁶ Examples include: *Hemings rímur*, ed. by Petronella M. den Hoed (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1928); *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, *STUAGNL*, 32 (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1904); *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen nebst proben aus den Bósa-Rímur*, ed. by Otto L. Jiriczek (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1893); *Die Bósa-Rímur*, ed. by Otto L. Jiriczek, *Germanistische Abhandlungen*, 10 (Breslau: W. Koebner, 1894); *Sagan och rimorna om Friðþjófr hinn frækni*, ed. by Ludvig Larsson, *STUAGNL*, 22 (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1893); *Króka-Refs saga og Króka-Refs rímur*, ed. by Pálmi Pálsson, *STUAGNL*, 10 (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1883).

The other main area of enquiry for *rímur* studies has been the question of performance, and especially whether *rímur* were performed at dances (as a stanza in *Sörla rímur* and an account in Oddur Einarsson's *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae* suggest) or were a more sedate affair. Connections have often been drawn between *rímur* and the Scandinavian ballads, in particular the *kæmpeviser* ('heroic ballads') popular in the Faroe Islands, which often draw on legendary and chivalric sagas for their source material.⁶⁷ In the modern era, these *viser* are certainly danced to. However, they have significant structural differences to *rímur* in their use of refrains and 'ballad-like' repetition, which serve to condense the story and make it easier to follow while dancing.⁶⁸ Björn K. Þórólfsson, who argues that *rímur* metres ultimately derived from dance metres, suggests that the older, shorter *rímur* could have been suitable for dancing, but concedes that as soon as the *rímur* become longer and more complex, it is likely that they were predominantly performed for an audience of seated listeners.⁶⁹ Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson, who carried out several ethnographic studies of *rímur* performance in twentieth-century Iceland, as well as collecting recordings from a number of performers, is also confident that *rímur* were danced to, based on the evidence of *Sörla rímur*.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Shaun Hughes contends that *rímur* — at least, the main narrative sections — were never danced to, given their structural dissimilarity to the kinds of poetry we know were used for dancing. He accounts for the unambiguous statement in *Sörla rímur* that 'höldar dansa hralla snart | ef heyríst vísan mín' [men dance hard and fast if my verse is heard] (l.8)⁷¹ by arguing that the introductory *mansöngvar* sections (where the *Sörla rímur* stanza appears) were perhaps danced to separately from the main body of the poetry, pointing to the bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson's imprecations against 'trölla og fornmanna rímur, mansöngvar, afmórs vísur' [*rímur* about trolls and men of old, love-poetry, amorous verses] where the wording suggests a distinction between *rímur* and *mansöngvar*.⁷² *Sörla rímur* is the only *rímur* reference to dancing, while other *mansöngvar* make equally unambiguous reference to

⁶⁷ Vésteinn Ólason, *Traditional Ballads*, pp. 79–80.

⁶⁸ Vésteinn Ólason, *Traditional Ballads*, p. 79. For a comparison of the use of repetition in the set of ballads and *rímur* related to *Þrymskviða*, see Colwill and Haukur Þorgeirsson, pp. xxx–xxxii.

⁶⁹ Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 47.

⁷⁰ Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson, 'On Icelandic Rímur: An Orientation', *Arv*, 31 (1975), 139–50 (p. 140).

⁷¹ *Rímnasafn: Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2 vols (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller og J. Jørgensen, 1905–22), II, p. 86.

⁷² Shaun F.D. Hughes, "'Völsunga Rímur" and "Sjúrdar Kvæði": Romance and Ballad, Ballad and Dance', in *Ballads and Ballad Research: Selected Papers of the International Conference on Nordic and Anglo-American Ballad Research, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2–6, 1977*, ed. by Patricia L. Conroy (Seattle: University of Washington, 1978), pp. 37–45; Guðbrandur Þorláksson, *Ein nij Psalma Bok* (Hólar, 1589), p. [17].

performance for a seated audience; for example, the poet of *Bjarka rímur* imagines being summoned by a lady to recite ‘framan á rekkju mína’ [in front on my bench]⁷³ (VI.11).⁷⁴

Implicit in some of these discussions of *rímur* performance is the question, ‘What is the point of *rímur*, when their source texts already exist?’ Did the new, poetic mode of delivery make *rímur* more suitable for performance in certain contexts? Sverrir Tómasson has even argued that early *rímur* could have been used for carnivalesque performances with multiple speakers, pointing to the raucous cavalcade that accompanies the gods to Jötunheimar in *Brymlur* as an example of the kind of scene that would lend itself well to such a performance.⁷⁵ As the second chapter of this thesis discusses in more detail, we know very little about the early performance venues of *rímur*, so it is not impossible they were used in the sort of theatrical contexts Sverrir describes, although certainly by the time of the later *rímur*, with their self-reflective *mansöngvar* in which the poet discusses their own work, *rímur* seem to have been conceived more as the product of a single poet-performer, rather than a group activity.

An important development in this discussion of *rímur* performance is Pétur Húni Björnsson’s recent MA thesis *Rímur um rímur*, looking at the performance details mentioned in the text of the *rímur* themselves. Pétur’s work encourages an understanding of *rímur* specifically as oral poetry, drawing on sociological studies of oral literature to argue that many of the features for which *rímur* have hitherto been disparaged (for example, their reliance on formulaic kennings as line-fillers) are in fact strong indicators of these poems’ lives as orally performed works, rather than static written texts.⁷⁶

It is only in relatively recent years that the question of artistry among *rímur* poets has begun to be addressed in any real detail; the implicit view of early scholarship tends to be that *rímur* are more akin to badly made copies of their source texts than independent artistic creations of any kind. Haukur Þorgeirsson’s ‘List í Lokrum’, as its title suggests, explores changes made by the poet of *Lokrum* to their source material (the account in the *Prose Edda* of Þór and Loki’s journey to Útgarða-Loki). He concludes that the poet’s alterations make the *rímur* account more exciting and more in line with contemporary tastes, as well as ensuring that the story was remembered by a new generation who may not have been familiar with the original.⁷⁷ Though concerning the post-medieval *Snækóngrs rímur* and therefore not strictly relevant to the subject of this thesis, Shaun Hughes’ article ‘Steinunn

⁷³ *Rekkja* more usually refers to a bed, but in this context presumably refers to the sleeping areas that lined the walls of a *baðstofa*, which were used as seating during the day.

⁷⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, p. 149.

⁷⁵ Sverrir Tómasson, ‘Hlutverk rímna í íslensku samfélagi á síðari hluta miðalda’, *Ritið*, 3 (2005), 77–94.

⁷⁶ Pétur Húni Björnsson, p. ii.

⁷⁷ Haukur Þorgeirsson, ‘List í Lokrum’, *Són*, 6 (2008), 25–47.

Finnsdóttir and *Snækóns rímur* is another rare example of an article that looks in-depth at a particular *rímur* cycle and treats its poet as a creative agent in its making.⁷⁸

Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir's MA thesis on *Mábilur rímur, Meyjar og völd*,⁷⁹ comes closest to what I am attempting to do with my own work. As there is no antecedent saga for *Mábilur rímur* extant, *Meyjar og völd* is an in-depth examination of the way the *rímur* poet fashions the story of Mábil without the pressure to assign a value-judgment to the text. Valgerður instead examines the ways in which the poet frames female power and its relationship to virginity. While I do not agree with all her conclusions, *Meyjar og völd* opens the door for the kind of detailed explorations of gender the case studies in this thesis also offer.

APPROACHING GENDER IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC TEXTS

Although there are a number of works examining the treatment of gender in individual *rímur* cycles,⁸⁰ there has yet to be anything approaching the more wide-ranging surveys that exist for other kinds of medieval Icelandic literature.⁸¹ However, due to the fact that *rímur* are almost always based on a source text, gender-focused readings of these source texts can also be useful for approaching the *rímur* themselves in many cases. Though the *riddarasögur* remain relatively understudied when compared to the *Íslendingasögur* and the two Eddas, in recent years there have been a number of studies looking either implicitly or explicitly at gender in these texts. Some of these, for example the works of Henric Bagerius and Bjørn Bandlien, have looked to the chivalric sagas for evidence of changing cultural norms surrounding the institution of marriage in Icelandic and Norwegian society in

⁷⁸ Shaun F.D. Hughes, 'Steinunn Finnsdóttir and *Snækóns Rímur*', in *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond*, ed. by Martin Chase (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 162–90.

⁷⁹ Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd'.

⁸⁰ For example, Hughes, 'Steinunn Finnsdóttir and *Snækóns Rímur*'; Jonna Louis-Jensen, 'Om Ólíf og Landrés, vers og prosa samt kvinder og poeter', in *Eyvindarbók: Festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen*, ed. by Finn Hødnebo and others (Oslo: Institutt for nordistikk og litteraturvitenskap, Universitetet i Oslo, 1992), pp. 217–30; Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd'.

⁸¹ For example, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "'How Do You Know If It Is Love or Lust?' On Gender, Status, and Violence in Old Norse Literature', *Interfaces*, 2 (2016), 189–209; David Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'The Representation of Gender in Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, ed. by Carlyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 331–48; Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Boydell & Brewer, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787448193>>; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

the later Middle Ages.⁸² Others have focused on the figure of the maiden king, a misogynous female ruler who appears in a significant number of the Icelandic *riddarasögur*.⁸³ As Chapter Two discusses in more detail, maiden kings are comparatively unpopular in the medieval *rímur* corpus, but they are prominent in the prose sagas and their subversion of expected female roles and opposition (often violent) to heterosexual marriage has made them a popular focal point for discussions of gender in these texts. Though there have been several detailed studies of the new models of behaviour presented in the *riddarasögur*, models which are undeniably shaped by gender as well as class and race, these have seldom taken gender as their explicit focus.⁸⁴

Looking more broadly at studies of gender in medieval Icelandic literature, there is a general tendency to view these texts in very binary terms, a tendency that has only really been challenged in very recent years. Even when looking at characters whose entire existence destabilises the idea of a discrete gender binary (notable examples of whom include Hervör in *Hervarar saga* and Þornbjörg/Þórbergur in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*), critics have tended to view these characters as ‘moving between’ binary genders, or else as adopting a falsely gendered ‘persona’ with which to overlay a ‘true’ gender, rather than allowing space for the idea of genders outside the binary, or genders which can be performed for a limited amount of time without necessarily being false.⁸⁵ One notable exception to this is Miriam Mayburd’s article on Hervör, which, though it ultimately rejects a transgender reading of Hervör, does engage with the possibility with a great deal of nuance.⁸⁶

⁸² Henric Bagerius, ‘Mandom och mödom: sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratik identitet på det senmedeltida Island’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Göteborgs Universitet, 2009); Henric Bagerius, ‘Romance and Violence : Aristocratic Sexuality in Late Medieval Iceland’, *Mirator*, 14.2 (2013), 79–96; Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Norway and Iceland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

⁸³ For example, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘From Heroic Legend to “Medieval Screwball Comedy”? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative’, in *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, ed. by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 229–49; Sif Rikharðsdóttir, ‘Meykóngahefðin í riddarasögum. Hugmyndafræðileg átök um kynhlutverk og þjóðfélagsstöðu’, *Skírnir*, 184 (2010), 410–33.

⁸⁴ For example, Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*; Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’, *The Modern Language Review*, 78.4 (1983), 850–61; Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*; Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘Clári saga, Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, and the Evolution of Icelandic Romance’, in *Riddarasögur: The Translation of European Court Culture in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Karl G. Johansson and Else Mundal, Bibliotheca Nordica, 7 (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2014), pp. 273–92.

⁸⁵ Carol J. Clover, ‘Maiden Warriors and Other Sons’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 85.1 (1986), 35–49; William Layher, ‘Caught between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse’, in *Women and Medieval Epic. Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. by Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 183–208.

⁸⁶ Miriam Mayburd, ‘“Helzt þóttumk nú heima í millim...” A reassessment of Hervör in light of seiðr’s supernatural gender dynamics’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 129 (2014), 121–64.

Medieval Icelandic texts occupy an ambiguous position as both literature and historical sources. This is especially the case for the texts of the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas*, which, aside from a handful of runic inscriptions, are the only possible written evidence for the beliefs of people in Scandinavia before the conversion to Christianity. Debate surrounding the precise age of the eddic material and how accurately it may or may not depict such beliefs is extensive, but not particularly germane to the discussion here. However, because these texts are treated as sources for semi-anthropological accounts of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, they are often compared with sociological studies of other non-hierarchical religions, especially shamanistic religions from the circumpolar region, some of whose cultures have a radically different gender system to that understood as ‘natural’ in modern Western society. Through these comparisons — and also through reference to the eddic poems themselves, many of which present challenging images of gender — scholarship in this area has been far readier to read these texts in ways which explicitly acknowledge their gender- and sexuality-related queerness and leave space for genders outside the binary in ways that a lot of Old Norse scholarship focused on unambiguously post-Conversion texts does not.⁸⁷

For most of its history, gender scholarship in Old Norse literature (and indeed more broadly) has been focused on the binary genders of male and female. In particular, and unsurprisingly, given the discipline’s roots in feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 80s, there has been a focus on the role of women in these texts. A particularly influential example of this is Jenny Jochens’s 1996 book, *Old Norse Images of Women*, which divides the women of Old Norse literature into four main categories: warrior, wise woman, whetter, and avenger. Jochens argues that these portrayals say more about the concerns of men in the period than those of women, an oppositional framing that inherently supposes a binary system of gender in which to operate.⁸⁸ Though this oppositional framing is an important tool for analysing power dynamics in these texts and in the circumstances that produced them, it can, as a result, ignore ways in which characters do *not* fall into discrete gender categories, but instead move between and beyond them, demonstrating the porous boundaries between groups.

One work which does attempt to discuss gender through a less polarising lens is Carol Clover’s 1993 article ‘Regardless of Sex’, which adopts Thomas Laqueur’s ‘one-sex model’ to discuss gender in

⁸⁷ For example, Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Óðinn as Mother: The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch’, *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi*, 126 (2011), 5–16; Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019); Kathleen M. Self, ‘The Valkyrie’s Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender’, *Feminist Formations*, 26.1 (2014), 143–72; Brit Solli, *Seid. Myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2002).

⁸⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*.

Norse society.⁸⁹ In the years since its publication, many justifiable critiques have been made of both Laqueur's approach and Clover's article: Laqueur's model conflates the sexed body and socially perceived gender, and his interpretation of medieval medical texts elides the many ways in which medieval authors *did* conceive of sex as a binary system;⁹⁰ likewise, Clover's conceptualisation of Norse gender as a scale from *hvatúr* [vigorous, active] to *blauður* [soft, passive] ignores the many ways men and women are treated as distinct groups even when displaying qualities associated with the other group. However, Clover's article has been crucial for moving Old Norse gender studies beyond the necessary but limited efforts to point out the importance of women in these texts, towards talking about gender as a pervasive system, not just a facet of individual identity.

Another important step in Old Norse gender studies has been the adoption from sociology of the concepts of hegemonic and inclusive masculinities.⁹¹ Both of these models acknowledge a multiplicity of modes of gender performance, as well as addressing intra-gender hierarchies. A hegemonic model of masculinity (as developed by T. Carrigan, R.W. Connell, and J. Lee in 1985,⁹² specifically in reference to an Australian school environment, but subsequently extrapolated more broadly) posits not only that there are multiple ways of performing masculinity,⁹³ but that certain ways are more valued in a given cultural context, leading men who 'do' masculinity in the most approved fashion to occupy a position at the top of the social hierarchy. In a later article refining the concept, R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt underline the inherent precarity of such a position, noting that many of the requirements of this form of masculinity are self-contradictory and impossible to

⁸⁹ Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations*, 44 (1993), 1–28; Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁹⁰ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, Cambridge History of Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹¹ As far as I am aware, there has not yet been any work done on hegemonic or inclusive *femininities* in a medieval Icelandic context, presumably because so many detailed studies of women in these texts have already been written (albeit with different methodological framings), whereas treating men and masculinities as topics for study, rather than an unexamined default, is a relatively recent development and therefore has more scope for novel research. For examples of these approaches being used in relation to medieval Icelandic literature, see: Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in Egils Saga', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 147–64; Evans; Thomas Morcom, 'Inclusive Masculinity in Morkinskinna and the Defusal of Kingly Aggression', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 127–46.

⁹² T. Carrigan, R.W. Connell, and J. Lee, 'Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society*, 14.5 (1985), 551–604.

⁹³ Carrigan et al.'s article predates the Butlerian coining of gender as performance, but in its discussion of masculinity as something reified through actions (or lack of actions), it draws on a similar understanding.

reconcile — the example they give is the dual requirement to both excel at sports and drink heavily — resulting in an idealised form of masculinity that no individual can truly embody.⁹⁴

Though there has thus far been no work on hegemonic femininities in Old Norse literature, the concept has proved useful in this thesis as a means by which to explore the ways in which models of masculinity and femininity are intrinsically connected. As Laura Hamilton et al. have argued, women's efforts to perform culturally preferred forms of femininity (which are, in many cases, specifically *white* femininities) render them 'actively complicit in reproducing a matrix of domination'.⁹⁵ This is frequently evidenced in the *rímur*, both in the respective acclamation and dehumanisation of women who do or do not act in accordance with the prescribed model, and also in those scenes which depict interactions between white women, white men, and men of colour. The intersections of gender, race, and class are discussed more fully in the sections on *rímur* antagonists and monstrous femininities in Chapters Three and Four respectively.

The methodologies discussed above offer a plurality of models of gender through which to view characters in these texts, but discussions surrounding these models are often implicitly binary, and largely fail to consider the possibility of, for example, people who are not men performing masculinity. For this, I turn to Jack Halberstam's work on female masculinity.⁹⁶ Halberstam writes that '[m]asculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body';⁹⁷ when it ceases to be an unremarked side-effect of being a man and instead becomes a performance by unexpected actors, something to be interrogated. I would argue that white, male, middle-class masculinity has become increasingly legible in the years since *Female Masculinity* was published, as part of efforts to decentre it as an uninterrogated default, but Halberstam's underlying principle that men are not the only people who can perform masculinity, and that we can understand an unexamined centre perhaps better by looking at its peripheries than at the centre itself, remain important influences on my approach in this thesis.

As is no doubt also apparent from my repeated use of the term 'performance' to describe the process of creating and embodying gender, my approach is also influenced by the performative model of gender articulated in Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble*.⁹⁸ Butler's tenet that there is no 'core' to gender beyond the gestures and costumes that we as a society have imbued with meaning has been

⁹⁴ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society*, 19.6 (2005), 829–59 (p. 838) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>>.

⁹⁵ Laura T. Hamilton and others, 'Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination', *Sociological Theory*, 37.4 (2019), 315–41 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275119888248>>.

⁹⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 20th anniversary (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁹⁷ Halberstam, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990).

critiqued from a number of angles, most notably for its disregard of the role played by the physical body in creating gender, a criticism Butler herself addresses in their follow-up work *Bodies that Matter*.⁹⁹ However, it is precisely this lack of focus on the physical body that makes Butlerian performativity particularly applicable to the interpretation of fictional narrative — especially anonymous fictional narratives, in which we cannot point to any of the things sometimes claimed to be integral to gender, only an outward performance. Fictional characters have only the physical body described for us; their entire existence is a puppet show on the author's behalf, and in anonymous texts, even the author themselves comes through only in what is on the page.

The idea that gender can be created and reinscribed through behaviour, dress, and speech is central to my analysis throughout the rest of this thesis, but equally important is Julia Serano's argument that gender is frequently most keenly felt as a category in social situations.¹⁰⁰ In the main body of this thesis, I look at intra- and inter-gender interactions within the diegetic worlds of chivalric *rímur*, through the lens of performativity, to argue that it is through social interaction that the nuances of gender are most clearly delineated.

⁹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. ix–xii; Susan Hekman, 'Material Bodies', in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 61–70. At the time of writing, Butler uses the pronouns 'she' and 'they'. Throughout this thesis I use the singular 'they' pronoun to refer both to individuals who specifically use singular 'they' as their pronoun, and to those whose gender is unknown (i.e. the vast majority of the anonymous *rímur* poets). Although the plural reflexive 'themselves' is still more common in English, even when referring to one person, I find it clearer to use the singular 'themselves' in these situations, by analogy with 'yourselves'/'yourself'.

¹⁰⁰ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd edn (New York: Seal Press, 2016), pp. 215–27.

2. RÍMUR IN PERFORMANCE

Though the medieval *rímur* come to us in static form, as written words on a page, there is little doubt that these poems were originally intended for oral performance. This chapter examines the evidence for the performance context of *rímur*, both as it is revealed in the poems themselves, and what can be gleaned from external accounts, before considering the impact these modes of performance may have had on the form and content of the poetry. In particular, this chapter looks closely at the introductory *mansöngur* (pl. *mansöngvar*, ‘love-poetry’) stanzas which rapidly became an integral part of the genre. In these stanzas, poets address their audience and create a space for themselves as poets; the *mansöngvar* therefore have a lot to tell us about the circumstances in which these poems were performed — or at least, the circumstances in which their poets thought they *should* be performed.

Rímur stand on the border between orality and literature: undeniably conceived of for oral performance yet equally steeped in a written culture. Their poets make reference to weary tongues and voices, but also on occasion to their own writing (e.g. *Ólafs rímur A (Indriða þáttur)*: ‘Skrifa ég hvorki skjal né ginns | í skemmtan góðra manna’ [I write neither empty gossip nor deceit for the entertainment of good people] (I.2),¹ as well as, more frequently, to the written texts from which their stories are drawn (e.g. *Skáld-Helga rímur*: ‘Skrifað var næst í skemmtan svo’ [thus it was next written in this piece of entertainment] (III.7)).² Though modern scholarship often assesses the literary qualities of *rímur* based on their preserved forms in manuscripts, this was not the form in which medieval *rímur* lived and breathed. Instead, as Pétur Húni Björnsson argues, the qualities for which *rímur* are often derided — their tendency to repetition, their simplification of characters and plots down to a single strand, their emphasis on extended battle sequences — are all features typical of oral poetry, and if we ignore the orality of *rímur* as a form, we cannot hope to understand these poems as their audiences did.³

The performance context of *rímur* may also go some way to explaining their choice of subject material, which, among the medieval corpus at least, favours the more lurid tales available in the Icelandic prose corpus. As discussed in the previous chapter, the largest subgroup of medieval *rímur* is that of the chivalric *rímur*, closely followed by those based on *fornaldarsögur*. There are a handful based on *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, and a further handful based on eddic material, as well as a scattering of other, even less popular genres. A single narrative strand is the common theme

¹ *Rímnasafn: Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2 vols (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller og J. Jørgensen, 1905–22), I, p. 166.

² Finnur Jónsson, I, p. 124.

³ Pétur Húni Björnsson, p. 58.

across these *rímur* adaptations, with many narrating only one short episode (e.g. Þór and Loki's visit to Útgarða-Loki, as told in *Lokrur*). In the rare examples of *rímur* poets adapting *Íslendingasögur*, they show almost no interest in the complicated web of family and neighbourly connections so vital to these stories: in the medieval *Grettis rímur*, for example, the poet does not relate any of the activities of Grettir's ancestors which form the first twenty-five chapters of the saga, but instead opens directly with Grettir's childhood. *Riddarasögur* rarely extended their family connections beyond the nuclear family to begin with and are usually quick to introduce their protagonist and his adventures, a form of narrative very much in accordance with what *rímur* poets were producing. As the rest of this chapter will discuss in greater depth, the known performance contexts of *rímur* from the post-medieval period both involved audiences whose attention was at least partially elsewhere — either on remembering the steps of the dance which the *rímur* accompanied, or else on the work tasks they were also engaged in. The *rímur* genre's preference for stories with straightforward plotlines and relatively small casts of characters, not to mention the fact that these stories were likely already at least somewhat familiar to the audience, would have suited these situations well.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR RÍMUR PERFORMANCE

Outside of the poems themselves, there is little direct evidence for the performance of *rímur* in the medieval period. Given the genre's longevity, however, discussions of early performances tend to draw on later accounts, especially Oddur Einarsson's *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae* ('Description of Iceland', late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century) and Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson's *Reise igjennem Island* ('Journey through Iceland', published in 1772). The account in the *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae*, in particular, has frequently been taken as evidence that *rímur* were danced to in the period when the description was written. The *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae* describes poetry being performed in a drone by a single reciter, with occasional support from two other voices, while an audience dances in silence to the rhythmic chanting:

Er þá fyrst valinn einhver einn meðal hjúa eða annarra viðstaddra, sem gjörla hefur numið kveðskaparlistina og þykir betri raddmaður en hinir. Í upphafi kveður hann um hríð svo sem í inngangs stað með skjálfandi og á nokkurn hát hikandi röddu eitthvað, sem litla eða enga merkingu hefur, því yfirleitt heyrast aðeins eftirfarandi atkvæði: ha ha ha, ho ho ho, he he, ho ha he o. s. frv. Og eru þau við og við endurtekin í sjálfu kvæðinu. En til að þessi kveðandi falli áheyrendum betur í geð, eru kvaddir til tveir, sem kveða undir, og þeir taka sér stöðu sinn við hvora hlið forsöngvarans og beita lítið eitt

lægri og stöðugri röddu, dálítið í átt við bassa. Úr þessu verður ekki slæm samhljóman og nokkuð hugþekk samkveðandi. Og meðan þremmeningarnir fara þannig með innganginn og eru að hugsa upp kvæði með einhverri merkingu til að hnýta við hann, takast hinir í hendur og skipa sér í hring eða velja sér ákveðinn stað tveir og tveir saman, þar sem þeir eru, meðan þessi dans stendur.⁴

[First, one is chosen amongst the workers and other bystanders who knows the art of poetry very well and is thought to be a better declaimer than the others. At the start, he recites a while, initially something with a shaking and in some ways hesitant voice which has little or no meaning; thus in general one hears only the following syllables: *ha ha ha, ho ho ho, he he, ho ha he* and so on. And these are by and by repeated in the poetry itself. And in order that this recitation may better reach the listeners in their minds, there are two who recite under [the first one], and they take their places on either side of the lead singer and occasionally use a lower, steadier voice, somewhat akin to a bass. This results in a not-bad harmony and a rather likeable chorus. And while the three of them carry on like this with the introduction and are thinking of verses with some meaning to bind together with it, the others take one another's hands and arrange themselves in a ring or choose a certain place for themselves, two and two together, those who are there, while this dance takes place.]

The poetry in question is never explicitly identified as *rímur*, but of the types of poetry known to have existed in this period, *rímur* seem a plausible candidate. The description of the main performer's voice bears some similarity to Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson's ethnographic studies of *rímur* performers of the twentieth century, which note that the tunes used by these singers are for the most part very monotonous, with only minor variation in the notes, a singing style that could well be described as 'skjálíandi' [shaking].⁵

As mentioned in the 'Previous *Rímur* Scholarship' section of Chapter One, the question of whether or not *rímur* were danced to has been a subject of some debate. The *Qualiscunque Descriptio* is the only early description of a possible scene of such a performance, but *rímur* poets do semi-frequently refer to their works as 'dansar' [dances]. Shaun Hughes has argued that the term *dans* is in this period used interchangeably as one of a number of synonyms for poetry in general, and does not inherently mean that the poem in question was intended for dancing,⁶ and it is true that *rímur* poets are not always semantically precise when it comes to referring to their works; for example, although *rímur* are seldom praise-poems in the conventional sense of extolling the great deeds of a patron, the term 'mærd' [praise[-poetry]] is frequently used to refer to any given *rímur* cycle. It is therefore

⁴ Oddur Einarsson, *Íslandslýsing. Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae*, trans. by Sveinn Pálsson (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1971), pp. 129–30.

⁵ Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson.

⁶ Hughes, 'Romance and Ballad', p. 39.

entirely plausible that a poet could call their work a *dans* without expecting it to be accompanied by dancing. Less ambiguously, however, the introductory stanzas of *Sörla rímur* explicitly describe the audience dancing to the poet's words — to the poet's mingled annoyance and pride:

I.7

<i>Því má eg varla vísu slá</i>	Thus I may scarcely strike up a verse,
<i>veit eg það til sanns:</i>	I know this for sure:
<i>þegar að rekkar rímu fá</i>	as soon as the men get the rhyme (or <i>ríma</i>)
<i>reyst er hún upp við dans.</i>	it will be shouted out for a dance.

I.8

<i>Gapa þeir upp og gumsa hart</i>	They gape upwards and scoff hard
<i>og geyma varla sín;</i>	and hardly control themselves;
<i>höldar dansa hralla snart</i>	men dance hard and fast
<i>ef heyrir vísan mín.⁷</i>	if my verse is heard.

While the term *ríma* in I.7 may not specifically refer to *rímur* as a genre, but simply to 'rhymes' in general, there is also no reason to assume it does not, in which case *Sörla rímur* offers a clear statement from a *rímur* poet that *rímur* were danced to. While the longer cycles were most likely too long to be danced to in their entirety, shorter cycles and individual *rímur* within a cycle are of a more appropriate length, and it would lend additional weight to the poets' repeated statements that their voices are failing them at the end of a *ríma* if they had been forced to declaim over the sound of shuffling feet.

However, the evidence for dancing remains inconclusive, and by the eighteenth century there was a more certain venue for *rímur* performance: the *kvöldvaka*, a time during the evening, particularly in the winter months, when the household was confined to indoor tasks, during which they were entertained by listening to sagas being read aloud or by *rímur* being chanted. There is an account of this practice in the eighteenth-century *Reise igjennem Island* [Journey through Iceland], a report on Iceland compiled for the Danish king by two of his officials, Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson. After describing the reading of sagas aloud for workers in the evening, Eggert and Bjarni mention *rímur* being performed by someone 'med høi Røst' [with a loud voice] on these winter nights

⁷ *Rímnasafn: Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2 vols (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller og J. Jørgensen, 1905–22), II, p. 86.

‘for at giora denne Tidsfordriv endnu behageligere’ [to make the passage of time even more pleasant].⁸

Performance at the *kvöldvaka* is the most likely explanation for *rímur* poets’ occasional mention of their audience being seated on benches and beds. For example, the *Bjarka rímur* poet imagines a lady instructing him on the correct way to deliver his poetry by standing in front of her *rekkja* [bench or bed]:

VI.II

“Kom þú á lengur, kíminn drengur,
og kveð mér rímu þína.
Far þú og stadd þá fólk er glatt,
framan við rekkju mína.”⁹

“Come further forward, funny man,
and recite your *ríma* for me.
Come on and stand where folk are merry,
in front of my bench.”

An Icelandic farmhouse of this period would have had a single main room, the *baðstofa*, whose walls were lined with beds that were used as seating during the day and for sleeping at night. It was in this room that the household would gather for the *kvöldvaka*, to make the most of the light and warmth, and in this context that many *rímur* and sagas would have been performed.

By the time of the *Qualiscunque Descriptio*, dancing had been largely abandoned in much of the country,¹⁰ and by the eighteenth century, when Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson’s report was written, dances seem to have been entirely abolished throughout Iceland.¹¹ It is therefore possible that *rímur* started out being performed at dances and festivals before becoming part of the more sedate performance venue of the *kvöldvaka* — or, as I think most likely, that the poems were performed in a variety of different contexts depending on the mood of the performer and the audience, a variety which has been erased by the fact that these poems now only survive in compilatory manuscripts which emphasise the similarities between poems rather than their variance.

Ultimately, regardless of whether *rímur* were danced to or only listened to at a *kvöldvaka*, in the medieval period, they were poems designed for oral delivery. While the prohibition on dancing may have had some effect on the style of *rímur* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the

⁸ Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, *Vice-Lavmand Eggert Olassens og Land-Physici Bjarne Povelsens Reise igiennem Island*, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Videnskaberne Selskæb, 1772), I, pp. 47–48.

⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, p. 149.

¹⁰ Oddur Einarsson, p. 131.

¹¹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘How Icelandic Legends Reflect the Prohibition on Dancing’, *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, 61 (2005), 25–52 (pp. 25–29).

increasing availability of paper at this time as a cheaper substance for writing than parchment also did much to shift the oral-literary balance of *rímur* towards the literary.¹²

MANSÖNGVAR AND THE MASCULINE VOICE

The idea of a certain ‘voice’ for the *rímur* genre is closely connected to the questions of orality and transmission discussed in the earlier part of this chapter. *Rímur* have, on the whole, been treated as the product of an almost entirely masculine social milieu since the earliest days of *rímur* scholarship,¹³ though in recent years this assumption has begun to be challenged. Jonna Louis-Jensen, for example, points out that at least one pre-Reformation *rímur* poet was female — the poet responsible for *Landrés rímur* — and Vésteinn Ólason notes the important role played by women in the transmission of *rímur* and other poetic genres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when collectors gathered their material from female informants.¹⁴ However, while there are certainly exceptions to the rule, and though the *rímur* genre is more varied and diverse than its critics often give it credit for, it is fair to say that medieval *rímur* poetry does tend to speak in a masculine voice.

This is evident in several aspects of the corpus, most directly in the *mansöngur* (pl. *mansöngvar*) stanzas, the introductory stanzas which precede individual *rímur* within a larger *rímur* cycle. In the *mansöngvar*, the poet addresses the audience directly, sometimes commenting on the poetry that is to follow, sometimes offering autobiographical (or pseudo-autobiographical) details,¹⁵ sometimes simply using them to frame the main narrative. Though the term *mansöngur* is familiar from earlier Icelandic texts, where it seems to mean ‘love-poetry’ of an indecent kind,¹⁶ the *mansöngvar* of early *rímur* are frequently not at all romantic. When love does appear, it is almost invariably the unrequited kind, and the most indecent a *rímur* poet’s proposals get is suggesting that it might be pleasant to share a bench or a bed with a woman. As the tradition develops, *mansöngvar*

¹² Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir, ‘Um upptöku pappírs á Íslandi á sextánda og sautjándu öld’, *Sagnir*, 30 (2013), 226–36 (pp. 230–32).

¹³ This assumption pervades, for example, Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix; Hans Kuhn, ‘The *Rímur* Poet and His Audience’, *Saga-Book*, 23 (1990–92), 454–68.

¹⁴ Louis-Jensen; Vésteinn Ólason, *Traditional Ballads*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁵ As this chapter will discuss in more detail later, the often-formulaic nature of these details suggests that they should not be treated as uncomplicated portraits of the poet themselves, but rather as part of the poet’s efforts to craft a poetic persona for the purposes of performance. See Kuhn, p. 467.

¹⁶ See, for example, the scene in the younger redaction of *Jóns saga helga* in which *mansöngs vísur* are offered by women to men at a dance in exchange for verses that the text explicitly terms *blautlig* (‘voluptuous’) and *regilig* (‘obscene’). ‘Jóns biskups saga, eptir Gunnlaug múnk’, in *Biskupa sögur*, ed. by Jón Sigurðsson and others, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1858), I, 213–60 (p. 237).

do evolve into more lyrical reflections on love,¹⁷ but they also continue to function as a kind of meta-poetry: poetry that is largely concerned with the craft of poetry itself.

Shaun Hughes has argued that *mansöngvar* were a later accretion to the genre of *rímur* and that instead they originated as texts that were composed and circulated separately, only becoming an intrinsic part of *rímur* once the tradition of composing the main narratives was well established.¹⁸ In support of this theory is the fact that two of the earliest *rímur* cycles, *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar* and *Brymlur*, have no *mansöngvar* at all, and many others belonging to the early period have extremely short paratextual stanzas or half-stanzas that say little more than ‘the poetry begins/ends here’. In addition, there is one example in a *rímur* manuscript of a *mansöngur* that seems to have either become detached from its *ríma* or else never been attached to begin with. This *mansöngur* forms the first 35 stanzas of *Hjálmþérs rímur* as it appears in AM 604 c 4to. It is clear that we are dealing with two separate texts rather than one extra-long *mansöngur* for several reasons, most obviously the fact that stanzas 1–35 are in *afhent* metre and the rest of the first *ríma* is in *úrkast*.¹⁹ Moreover, l.35 contains a clear statement that the poetry will cease without ever having started a full *rímur* narrative, whereas l.36 is equally clear that the poetry will begin here:

l.35

*Nú mun ég öllum Bölverks bjór
í burtu hrinda,
askinn gims vil ég ekki binda.*

Now I will push away all Bölverkur’s
beer [POETRY]
I do not want to bind the ash of fire [WOMAN]
(i.e. conceal her name in this stanza).

l.36

*þar skal fríðust Frosta skeiðin
fljóta enn,
ýta fram á orða leið
um afreksmenn.*²⁰

There the fairest ship of Frosti [POETRY] shall
float once more,
set forth upon the path of words [TONGUE]
about bold men.

¹⁷ *Rímur* from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards begin to incorporate philosophical musings on love (or, more often, the faithlessness of lovers), with these becoming a regular part of the *mansöngur* repertoire by the end of this century.

¹⁸ Hughes, ‘Romance and Ballad’, p. 40.

¹⁹ Björn K. Þórolfsson, ix, pp. 323, 326–27; Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 1.

²⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 4–5.

Here we have a clear example of a *mansöngur* that closely resembles other, *rímur*-attached *mansöngvar* circulating independently. Whether this was the case for *mansöngvar* more broadly remains impossible to prove, but as the genre develops, so too do thematic links between *rímur* and their *mansöngvar*, enough to be confident that by the later fifteenth/early sixteenth century, these were seen as a single, complete unit.

As the vast majority of early *rímur* are anonymous — all but three of those dated prior to 1600 — much of the previous scholarship looking at *mansöngvar* has been concerned with teasing out autobiographical details from these stanzas, with the aim of attributing the poem to a known poet from the period. Examples of this approach can be seen in the ‘Höfundur’ sections of Ólafur Halldórsson’s introductions to the *rímur* he has edited as part of the *Íslenskar miðaldarímur* series,²¹ and in Björn K. Þórólfsson’s efforts to determine whether Rögnvaldur *blindi* or Sigurður *blindi* was the poet of *Mábilur rímur sterku* and *Hálfðans rímur Brönuþóstra*, both of whose *mansöngvar* refer to their poets as blind.²² Given the enjoyment later *rímur* poets seem to have derived from concealing information about both themselves and their dedicatees in these stanzas, the temptation to solve the riddle and identify the anonymous author is understandable.²³ However, as scholarship (regarding both *rímur* and medieval texts more generally) has shifted away from efforts to identify authors, so too has the approach to *mansöngvar* changed. Ármann Jakobsson has demonstrated the perils of too readily accepting the attributions of early modern *fræðimenn* like Jón *lærði* Guðmundsson and points out that the number of *rímur* poets whose names we will never know vastly exceeds that of those we can name.²⁴ Meanwhile, Hans Kuhn’s study of *mansöngur* stanzas from *rímur* spanning three centuries argues that, despite the confessional appearance of these stanzas, it is only in the nineteenth century that we begin to see real individuality expressed in them and that, prior to this, most poets simply adopt an expected role, despite the use of ‘I’ statements.²⁵

Although I agree with Kuhn that *mansöngur* stanzas mostly served to create a poetic persona for the purposes of performance, his study only looks at comparatively late *rímur* stanzas. His earliest example, *Vilmundar rímur viðutans*, is one of the latest discussed in this thesis, and I have therefore made a close reading of the *mansöngvar* found in the earliest *rímur* in order to determine how

²¹ Ólafur Halldórsson, ‘Inngangur’, in *Bósa rímur*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenskar miðaldarímur*, 3 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1974), p. 20; Ólafur Halldórsson, ‘Inngangur’, in *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenskar miðaldarímur*, 4 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1975), pp. 7–30 (pp. 20–21).

²² Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, pp. 431, 457.

²³ Páll Eggert Ólason, ‘Fólginn nöfn í rímum’, *Skírnir*, 89 (1915), 118–32.

²⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Homer of the North or: Who Was Sigurður the Blind?’, *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 44.1 (2014), 4–19.

²⁵ Kuhn, pp. 455, 462.

accurately Kuhn’s assessment can be applied to the medieval material. Unlike the rest of this thesis, my *mansöngur* analysis uses the full corpus of medieval *rímur*, not just the chivalric *rímur*, although it should be noted that several of these cycles do not contain any *mansöngur* stanzas, or else the very curtest of notes to the effect that ‘the poetry begins/ends here’. From this analysis, it is apparent that certain themes occur again and again. Particularly popular motifs include that of the poet’s advanced age (seen in sixteen cycles), deprecation of the poet’s skills (twenty-two cycles) and the poet’s lack of romantic success (thirty-one cycles), which is often attributed to one or other of the two former reasons. The most popular motif of all is that of the myth of the mead of poetry: there is not a single *rímur* cycle whose *mansöngvar* do not refer to the story at least once. The precise terms of the reference vary, with poetry as a liquid (commonly beer or wine, rather than mead specifically), or poetry as the ship of the dwarves being two of the most common modes of reference used.

All of these motifs become more pronounced and consistent as the genre develops, though it is difficult to say whether this is because a trend towards longer *mansöngvar* allowed the poets more space to expand on these themes, or whether an increasing wish to discuss these subjects required longer *mansöngvar* in the first place. With the myth of the mead of poetry, once the convention is established, skilled poets quickly begin to play with it. For example, in *Áns rímur bogsveigis*, the *mansöngur* of the sixth *ríma* opens with an extended description of how the mead of poetry has been stored in barrels in a cellar, but so many eloquent poets have drunk their fill of it that the *Áns rímur* poet is left with only the dregs, hence the poor quality of their verse:

VI.1

Kvinnur geymdu kvæða öl

Women kept the ale of verses

í kjallara löngum.

for a long time in a cellar.

þar var Dúrnis dróttum völ

There people had a choice of

á drykkju föngum.

Dúrnir’s drink [POETRY].

VI.2

Skáldin til með skilnings mennt

Poets with the skill of understanding

sem skjótast runnu,

ran there as quickly as possible,

þar sem meyla miði var rennt

there where a maiden made the mead flow

af mæðar tunnu.

from the barrel of praise [MOUTH?].

VI.3

Fullar könnur fengu þeir

They received full tankards

*af Fjölnis gildi,
annar fekk þar mælsku meir
og mjög sem vildi.*

of Fjölnir's reward [POETRY],
another got there more eloquence,
and as much as he wanted.

VI.4

*Allt var upp með öllu skeinkt
eð ég kom þar.
Kvæða fann ég kvartil eitt
eð kastað var.*

Everything had already been served out
when I got there.
I found a single quart of poetry
which had been cast aside.

VI.5

*Burtu hafa þeir blíðu meiskur
borið með kappi,
harms var eftir bermin beiskur
böls á tappi.*

They have eagerly borne away
the agreeable ale,
the bitter dregs of sorrow and misfortune
were afterwards on tap.

VI.6

*Loksins fekk ég lítið horn
af lagarins minni;
hatast því við mér hringa norn
í hverju sinni.²⁶*

At last I received a little horn
of the liquid's memory [POETRY];
thus the norn of rings [WOMAN] hates me
at all times.

Contrary to the poet's own claims, Ólafur Halldórsson notes that the *Áns rímur* poet is in fact one of the most creative and technically accomplished *rímur* poets of the early period — this innovative use of the myth of the mead of poetry is just one example of his originality.²⁷ Such self-deprecation among *rímur* poets should not therefore be read as reflecting the poets' true opinion of their work, but rather as fulfilling the requirements of the modesty *topos* common to much of medieval poetry.²⁸

Meanwhile, in the fourth *ríma* of *Sálaus rímur og Nikanórs*, the poet combines the concepts of poetry as an intoxicating liquid and a ship as the means by which tales could be physically delivered

²⁶ *Áns rímur bogsveigis*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenskar miðaldarímur*, 2 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1973), pp. 144–45.

²⁷ Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Inngangur', in *Áns rímur bogsveigis*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenskar miðaldarímur*, 2 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1973), p. 72.

²⁸ On the medieval use of modesty see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 83–85.

to an audience in order to speak of a ship of wisdom whose hold is filled with barrels of the mead of poetry:

IV.2

*Fræða skip með fríðan svip
ég fékk hjá Suðra inni,
keypti ég þann hinn kléna grip
kátur í þessu sinni.*

Inside, I got Suðri's handsome-looking
ship of wisdom [POETRY],
I bought that fine treasure
cheerfully at that time.

IV.3

*Væna lykt hefur Vestri byggt
vist hjá siglu miðri,
afmórs frygð með æru og dygð
er undir þilju niðri.*

Vestri has built a handsome enclosure
right in the middle by the sail.
The excellence of love, with honour and virtue,
is down below the boards.

IV.4

*Suptungs mætur milsku sætur
mjöður í krappa rúmi,
finnst eigi skeið á fremri leið
fljóta í minnist húmi.²⁹*

Suptungur's excellent, sweet, blended
mead [lies] amidship,
I cannot recall finding a galley
floating further ahead in the twilight.

In place of straightforward paratextual statements that 'the poetry will begin here', which appear in many *mansöngvar*, some poets also play with the ship metaphor to say, for example, that they are nailing together 'Norða bát [...] með orðin kát' [Norðri's boat [POETRY] with cheerful words] (*Jarlmanns rímur* II.7).³⁰ When the poetry ends, this can be expressed as the ship coming into harbour at the end of its voyage — or, in the case of more pessimistic poets, with the ship ending up dashed to pieces on the rocks, only to be built anew at the start of the next *ríma*.

The most notable feature of these references to poetry is their emphasis on the physicality of verse. Although verbs of speech like *kveða* are used of performances, the verb *færa* [to bring, convey] is also extremely common. Poets spend a great deal of time reflecting on the shape of poetry and how they themselves might shape it, with the verb *smíða* [to craft] and corresponding noun *smíð* [something made through skill] often occurring in this context. In this discussion, poets position

²⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 708.

³⁰ *Jarlmanns rímur* has not been edited; see the 'Note on Quotations' for manuscript details.

themselves as the medium through which poetry is delivered, with frequent references to their mouths, teeth and voices as the channel through which poetry flows.³¹ Other aspects of the *mansöngvar* should also be interpreted in the light of this intense self-reflection about what it means to be a poet that we see here.

When poets make reference to the recurring tropes identified above — rejection by a woman, old age, sorrow — this should therefore be read as part of an ongoing dialogue between *rímur* poets and their audiences which, in the first place, seeks to fashion a model for the quintessential *rímur* poet, and secondly looks to demonstrate that they themselves fit this model. This does not necessarily mean poets are lying when they bemoan, for example, their great age. Indeed, though little is known for certain about early *rímur* performances, it seems most plausible that poets performed their own works, and to have a perceptibly young poet claiming to be afflicted with the pains of old age would add a touch of absurdity that seems out of place in any but the overtly parodic *rímur*. However, mentioning these motifs is not a strict requirement, so the fact that poets do bring them up and dwell on them, sometimes at great length, indicates a conscious engagement with this image of the ideal *rímur* poet.

It is generally agreed that the literary fashions of continental Europe had significant influence even on so-called indigenous Icelandic literature such as the *Íslendingasögur*, and especially the poets' sagas, though this is most commonly seen in the form of shared motifs rather than direct reference.³² By the time of the *rímur* poets, however, this influence is an overt and deliberate part of Icelandic literature. The fondness of *rímur* poets for chivalric and courtly literature is evident in their choice of source texts, as well as in their references (seen especially in *rímur* from towards the end of the medieval period) to figures such as Ovid and Venus, staples in the courtly love tradition, as well as to the heroes of courtly romance as parallels for the poets' own lovesickness. For example, the *mansöngur* to the eighth *ríma* of *Bósa rímur* contains at least fifteen stanzas listing men who have suffered for love of a woman, including characters from *fornaldarsögur* such as Hrólfr Gautreksson alongside biblical (Samson), classical (Príamus) and chivalric (Bévus, Partalopus) figures.³³

³¹ The image of poetry and/or knowledge as a transferrable liquid is not unique to *rímur* and indeed appears throughout the Old Norse poetic corpus. For eddic examples, see Judy Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum*, ed. by Slavica Ranković, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 183–226.

³² See, for example, Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur, um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1961); Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer: en analyse av Kormáks saga og Hallfreðar saga*, Scandinavian University Books (Bergen: Universitetsforlag, 1976); Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing: An Essay Based on Previous Studies* (Stockholm: Thule, 1965).

³³ The uncertainty of stanza numbers is due to a lacuna in the text. *Bósa rímur*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenskar miðaldarímur*, 3 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1974), pp. 93–95.

Elements of this continental influence are also seen in the popular trope of the poet's rejection by women, with parallels often drawn by scholars between *mansöngvar* and the German *Minnesang* tradition.³⁴ The unrequited love motif appears in almost three-quarters of medieval *rímur* cycles, and the regularity with which it appears increases significantly as the genre conventions of *rímur* develop over time. Implicitly, this is a heterosexual romance: the *Landrés rímur* poet is the only known female poet of the pre-Reformation period and also the only poet who speaks of sorrow caused by love of a man.³⁵ In other cases where this motif appears, the poet speaks as a man who has been rejected by women, and when speaking of other unlucky lovers, his sympathies tend to lie more with the men than the women. For example, the *Mágus rímur* poet gives a list in stanzas V.2–4 of men who have suffered for the love of a woman, including Delilah's betrayal of Samson, Flóres' struggles to win Blankiflúr, and the heartsickness Tristram experiences for love of Íseult.³⁶ In the slightly younger *Bósa rímur*, as previously mentioned, there are at least fifteen stanzas listing heroes from Norse, classical and biblical tales who bore 'harmur fyrir fljóði í hjarta landi' [sorrow for a woman in their heart's land] (VIII.3).³⁷ Other poets talk in more general terms about how young men may entice young women with love poetry (e.g. *Skíða ríma* I.2–3), or how men derive joy from a woman's company (e.g. *Jarlmanns rímur* III.4).³⁸

This profession of heterosexual desires in a manner which simultaneously conveys their lack of success in the area allows poets to tread a fine line between performing socially sanctioned heterosexual masculinity and positioning themselves as no threat to a female patron's virtue or a male patron's female relatives. Use of this 'unrequited love for a woman' motif allows the poet to perform a very specific sort of poetic masculinity, setting himself apart from the romantically-but-not-poetically successful men in his audience. Lack of success in love is a common theme in the sagas about poets (e.g. *Kormáks saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*); in *rímur mansöngvar*, its portrayal also draws upon the theme of the abject lover seen in continental love poetry, but there is a clear line of continuity with these earlier poets. The sagas themselves are of course literary products rather than factual historical records, and their portrayals of poets should not be read as accurate reflections of the role of skalds in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but rather as part of a creation of skaldic identity in the thirteenth century. By evoking the same motifs, however,

³⁴ Bjarni Einarsson, "'Mansöngur' Revisited", *Opuscula*, 9 (2003), 307–15; Björn K. Þórolfsson, IX, pp. 270–72; Pétur Húni Björnsson, p. 9.

³⁵ Although, unaware of the poet's gender, Björn K. Þórolfsson does state that a woman's name must be concealed in the words 'frægur fleina lundur' [famous tree of arrows [MAN]] and 'frægur halur' [famous man]. Björn K. Þórolfsson, IX, p. 392; Louis-Jensen, p. 227.

³⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 569.

³⁷ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Bósa rímur*, pp. 93–95.

³⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn* I, p. 11.

rímur poets position themselves within an imagined but nonetheless culturally resonant lineage of skalds.

This evocation of poets past is also seen in the extended confrontations with Elli, the personification of old age, that appear in *Skikkju rímur* and *Jarlmanns rímur*. The poets' use of the story of Þór's wrestling match in *Skáldskaparmál* here serves a number of purposes. Firstly, the scenes allow *rímur* poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to connect themselves with the thirteenth-century poetic treatise of *Snorra Edda*, and through that to skalds of the even more distant past. Secondly, it serves as a token of the poet's store of knowledge about the craft and history of poetry, as well as the mythological knowledge that underpins so much of medieval Icelandic poetry. Finally, the scenes parody the love-meeting the poet purports to desire: rather than a callow young man demanding the attention of a beautiful lady, the female character of Elli is positioned as the aggressor, informing the poet that she is the only woman he will ever get to enjoy. *Skikkju rímur* III.5–9, from the latter half of the fifteenth century, is the earliest example of such a scene:

III.5

*Sú var stærst, er stóð mér hjá,
stundu síðar mælti ég svá:
“hver er þessi hin háa kind,
hún er mjök svo dauf og blind.”*

She who stood next to me was the largest.
A while later, I spoke thus:
“Who is this tall creature?
She is so very deaf and blind.”

III.6

*“Elli heiti ég, ástin mín,
er ég nú komin að vitja þín;
getur það hver, er gírnist á,
gaktu með mér heðan í frá.”*

“My name's Elli, my love;
I've come to visit you now.
Everyone gets that who's eager for it.
Come with me away from here.”

III.7

*Fríðar töluðu falda Gnár:
“fanginn er nú kappinn knár.”
Ansar sú, sem illa kaus,
aldri skyldi hann verða laus.*

The handsome Gnár of headdresses [WOMEN] spoke:
“Now the valiant champion is caught!”
She who chose evilly answers
that he should never get free.

III.8

Þetta segi ég Þrúði seims,

This I told the Þrúðr of gold [WOMAN]:

*þann veg mistig blíðu heims,
hversu sem mér síðar semur,
sá veit gjörist í nökkuð kemur.*

thus I lost worldly joy.
Howsoever things are later shaped for me,
he knows something will come up.

III.9

*“Illa hagaði hann æsku sín,
at enga nýtti hann bauga Lín,
Elli er honum ætluð nú,
ekki þarf hann betri frú.”³⁹*

“He wasted his youth,
that he never enjoyed a Lín of rings [WOMAN].
Now Elli is intended for him;
he doesn’t need a better lady.”

Here the poet — clearly identified as male in III.7 (*hann*) and III.9 (*sá*) — performs a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, he insists that he was once a desirable ‘kappi knár’ [valiant champion] (III.7), putting this assessment in the mouths of female onlookers in order to elevate it from mere boasting. In describing himself as a *kappi knár*, the poet insists on his own agency and his status as a man of action. At the same time, he also positions himself as the helpless plaything of female powers. Not only does he appear to be physically outmatched by Elli, who is described with the superlative ‘stærst’ [largest] (III.5), and who orders him around with the casual imperative ‘gaktu’ [go] (III.6), but the *falda Gnár* who look on, presumably the very women the poet wishes he could ‘enjoy’, dismiss him as a viable romantic prospect, their rejection all the starker for coming in the form of direct speech.

The poet of *Jarlmanns rímur* (found in a manuscript half a century younger than that of *Skikkju rímur*) also employs this device:

XII.4

*Gekk ég út á gleðinnar spil
mér gjörði létt að veita
síðan hitta ég seima Bil
sagðist Elli heita.*

I went out to a joyful game,
it was easy for me to attend.
Then I met the Bil of gold [WOMAN];
she said her name was Elli.

XII.5

*Spranga hugði ég sprundi frá
og spyrja engra fréttu
glotti að mér gullhlaðs Ná
gekk það ei til létta.*

I took heed of the lady of spangles [WOMAN]
and asked for no news.
The Ná of gold lace [WOMAN] grinned at me.
That did not turn out pleasantly.

³⁹ Finnur Jónsson, II, pp. 342–3.

XII.6

*“Viltu ekki vera hjá mér?”
vella mælti þilja,
“ætlað hef ég að unna þér
og ekki við þig skilja.”*

“Don’t you want to be with me?”
said the plank of gold [WOMAN].
“I have planned to love you
and not part from you.”

XII.7

*Á þann veg svaraði þessi snót —
það mun greint í lettri —
“Ætla ég þú sért yfrið ljót
æskan þykki mér betri.”*

In this way I answered this lady —
it will be explained in writing —
“I think you may be ugly enough.
Youth seems better to me.”

XII.8

*Hringþöll réð að hreyfa sig;
hrund var reið og mælti.
Gjörði hún þegar að grípa mig
48rim mog hnefana stælti.*

The ring-fir [WOMAN] stirred herself.
The lady was angry and spoke.
Straightaway she grabbed hold of me,
fierce, and clenched her fists.

XII.9

*“Sterkan hef ég stundum beygt
og stirrða makaði að líku.
Listarmenn í liðunum hneigt
þeir leika ei við slíku.”*

“Sometimes I’ve made the strong hunch
and dealt with the upright likewise.
Men of skill, bowed down in troops,
they don’t play with this stuff.

XII.10

*Af hennar orðum hugði ég snart
hún mun ráðin kunna.
Lagði eg þegar af losa og skart
en lauka skorð ég unna.*

From her words I quickly thought
that she would give good advice.
Immediately I put aside lust and finery,
but I love the prop of leeks [WOMAN].

XII.11

*Upp er komin á Elli sker
á af hljóða ranni*

A river from the hall of sound [MOUTH > POETRY]
has come upon the skerry of Old Age.

*fræðin taka að förlast mér
og fer svo hverjum manni.*

Wisdom begins to abandon me;
so it goes for every man.

In both of these *rímur* cycles, Elli is made monstrous by the way she inverts the usual paradigm of poet-seeking-after-woman, instead becoming a pursuer who is capable of physically catching a man in her steely grip. In *Jarlmanns rímur* especially, the dissonance between Elli's behaviour and the expected role of women in *mansöngvar* is heightened by the use of conventional *heiti* and kennings for women to refer to Elli, for example *seima Bil* (XII.4), *gullhlaðs Ná* (XII.5), *vella þilja* (XII.6) and *snót* (XII.7). Kennings of the '[supporting object] of [decorative item]' type are used for desirable women throughout the *rímur* corpus, where they are often accompanied by mention of the woman's physical beauty;⁴⁰ here, the pattern is inverted when the poet states that Elli is 'yfrið ljót' [ugly enough] (XII.7). These passages allow the poet to demonstrate his creativity and skill by adding a gendered dynamic to the traditional motif of complaining about old age, presenting the experience as one inflicted on a poor male poet by an inverted image of femininity.

Though individual *rímur* poets may vary from the general theme — for example, with the female poet of *Landrés rímur*, or the *Bjarka rímur* poet's admission that he was at least as fickle in love as any woman⁴¹ — the overall impression of the *rímur* poet, as portrayed in *mansöngvar*, is a largely uniform one. In their choice of personal qualities to discuss, poets present themselves as older men, unlucky in love, modest about their skills, but nonetheless craftsmen in a long tradition, conduits through which stories of old can reach their audiences.

The Rímur Audience

Though many *mansöngvar* are nominally addressed to women, poets spend so much time complaining about female behaviour in these verses — especially as the genre develops over the sixteenth century — that one wonders who the intended audience really was. A survey of references to the audience in *mansöngvar* suggests that *rímur* were very rarely performed in a single-gender space. Just under half of the times that the audience's gender is specified, it is male, with the image of the poet physically transporting poetry to *ýtum*, *brögnum*, *görpum*, etc. recurring throughout the corpus. Poetry can also be brought to women, or requested by women, and references to women account for slightly more than half of the times when *mansöngvar* specify their audience's gender. Meanwhile, requests for

⁴⁰ See Chapter Four for an overview of kennings used for women in the *rímur* corpus.

⁴¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, p. 111.

silence or attention are generally gender-neutral, appealing to *þjóð* and *lýður*. The picture that emerges therefore suggests that medieval *rímur* were most commonly performed by men in front of a mixed gender audience.

Such a setting would have allowed canny poets to manipulate the gender dynamics of their audience, currying favour with women through dedicating poetry to them, while at the same time reassuring the male audience members that these silver-tongued poets were no real threat to their wives, daughters, and other female relatives. Nominally, the contents of the *mansöngur* were expected to be particularly pleasing to women: even the female poet of *Landrés rímur* comments that *mansöngvar* delight women (VII.1),⁴² and other poets (e.g. in *Geðraunir* III.1 and XI.59,⁴³ *Dámusta rímur* II.1,⁴⁴ and *Ólafs rímur Tryggvasonar A* II.1⁴⁵) speak of women directly requesting poetry, with still more examples where, even if the poetry has not been actively sought out, it is certainly going to be offered to a woman or women, whether they want it or not.

In a number of cases the women-centric stanzas of the *mansöngur* are explicitly juxtaposed with the main narrative of the *rímur*. For example, the *Geðraunir* poet says:

I.5

<p><i>Mun ég því ekki mansöng slá mens af dýrum skorðum; rímum heldur um rekka þá er randir skáru forðum.</i>⁴⁶</p>	<p>Thus I will not strike up love-poetry about the worthy necklace's supports [WOMEN]; let us rather make rhymes about those men who cut shields long ago.</p>
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Similar sentiments are expressed in *Sturlaug's rímur*:

V.4

<p><i>Hverfum burt með heiður og kurt frá Hrundi seima. Leitum heldur um lönd og geima; listuga mættum hitta beima.</i>⁴⁷</p>	<p>We turn away with honour and courtesy from the Hrund of gold [WOMAN]. Let's rather look at land and sea; we might meet skilful men.</p>
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⁴² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 452.

⁴³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 186, 265.

⁴⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 778.

⁴⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 166.

⁴⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 172.

⁴⁷ Finnur Jónsson, I, p. 490.

Meanwhile, the poet of *Ólafs rímur Haraldssonar B* speaks of a changing fashion in poetry whereby women have claimed for themselves all of the ‘Berlings vín’ [wine of Berlingur [POETRY]] (I.3) that was formerly allotted to eloquent men who told stories about powerful rulers:

I.1

*Vaskir gjörðu virðar fyr
Viðrix gildi að smíða
um þá menn, er efldu stýr
oft á löndum víða.*

Formerly doughty men
crafted Viðrir’s reward [POETRY]
about those men who strengthened their rule
often and widely over the lands.

I.2

*Og svo um þeirra áfrek stór
ýtar gjörðu að ræða:
margir lögðu í minnis kór
mestan hug til kvæða.*

And likewise men spoke
about their great strength:
many placed the greatest thought of poetry
in their memory-bed [MIND].

I.3

*Tungan þeirra af talinu og snilld
var tamin af mælsku þöllum.
Brugguðu svo at brúða vild
Berlings vínið öllum.⁴⁸*

Their tongues were trained with speech and skill
from the path of eloquence.
Thus they brewed all of Berlingur’s wine [POETRY]
to the will of women.

The *Ólafs rímur* poet is therefore self-consciously (and perhaps rather smugly) unfashionable in his decision to write about a saintly king from five centuries ago.

The effect of passages like these, not to mention the more numerous cases where the contrast between female-centric *mansöngvar* and male-centric narrative stanzas is left unremarked but still apparent, is to create the impression that *rímur* as a genre are primarily concerned with the deeds of men, and that the female audience’s approval is a commodity to be won, rather than something to be engaged with on equal terms.

⁴⁸ Finnur Jónsson, I, p. 215.

The Vanishing Maiden King

This masculine focus is apparent in the poets' choice of subject matter. Throughout the corpus of medieval *rímur*, certain themes recur again and again, most notably an abiding interest in the heroic deeds of men of old. That the poets' interest lies mostly in heroic *men* is evident in their treatment of the figure of the maiden king. The maiden king is a female character-type seen in a number of chivalric and legendary sagas — largely the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, as opposed to those translated from French or English. The archetypal maiden king is sole ruler of her kingdom, taking on the male title of 'king' in order to rule; refuses to marry, often humiliating her would-be suitors in grotesque and violent ways; and is eventually defeated by one of these suitors and forced to marry him, frequently in a manner that involves sexual violence or humiliation.⁴⁹ Counterparts to this figure can be seen in literature from across the world, from the figure of Atalanta in Greek mythology, tricked into an unwanted marriage through her fascination with Meleager's golden apples, to Princess ed-Datma from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, who challenges her suitors to single combat to dissuade them.⁵⁰ However, the maiden king was especially popular in Iceland, where she, or closely related figures, appears in approximately a dozen texts.⁵¹

Various explanations have been advanced for the maiden king's popularity. Several scholars, including Marianne Kalinke and Jóhanna Katrín Friðríksdóttir, have argued that such a figure is a natural development of the shieldmaidens and valkyries seen in earlier eddic and legendary material.⁵² Kalinke also points out that the 'bridal-quest motif' which forms the main plot of most maiden king sagas was a major feature of the continental romances whose popularity was at its height in fourteenth-century Iceland.⁵³ Henric Bagerius has also argued that the stories of maiden kings attained particular relevance during this period because the recurrent motif of the maiden king's sexual humiliation or violation was part of an ongoing dialogue about appropriate sexual behaviour for men and women in a society that was increasingly looking towards courtly models of behaviour.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ This definition is adapted from that found in Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 68.

⁵⁰ Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 103–6.

⁵¹ The 'approximately' arises from the question of who 'counts' as a maiden king, as a number of characters fulfil some, but not all, of the characteristics listed above. For example, the princess Ermengá in *Mágus saga jarls* is reluctant to wed and later tricks her unpleasant husband out of his three finest possessions while disguised as a man, but does not rule her own kingdom and is therefore not generally considered a maiden king, whereas the emperor's daughter Elínborg, who appears in a younger redaction of the same saga, is considered one, although she never adopts the title of 'king'.

⁵² Jóhanna Katrín Friðríksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend', pp. 230–34; Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 105.

⁵³ Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence'.

The figure of the maiden king can therefore be seen to respond to contemporary anxieties of the fourteenth century by amplifying tendencies already present in Icelandic literature.

Maiden kings make especially interesting focal points through which to explore constructions of appropriate gendered behaviour in late-medieval Icelandic society. As a group, they transgress the boundaries of acceptable womanhood and their stories usually present their inevitable suffering as just punishment for this transgression. However, depending on the maiden king in question, this transgression can occur in a variety of ways. At the more acceptable end of the spectrum, there is the maiden king's assertion that they can rule alone and have no need of a husband. This is a flaw that also appears in portrayals of male rulers; indeed, the motivation for a number of the bridal quests in these sagas is either the king's own recognition that his greatness is diminished by his lack of a wife (as occurs in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, for example), or a member of the king's retinue puncturing the king's self-importance by pointing this out for him (e.g. in *Mágus saga jarls*). However, while the male protagonists eventually recognise the importance of a heterosexual union to secure their line of descent, and seek to fix their single status, maiden kings do not, instead offering violent opposition to their would-be suitors.

There are also maiden kings who go much further. Not only do they refuse the attentions of a man, but by taking on explicitly male attributes, they make it clear that the reason their kingdom needs no man is because it already has one. Characters such as Þornbjörg/Þórbergur in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* and Ingigerður/Ingi in *Sigurðar saga frækna* alter their behaviour, dress, and even personal names, as well as adopting the unequivocally male title of *kóngur/konungur* [king]. In Þórbergur's case, the character's commitment to this masculine role extends to threatening harm to anyone 'svo djarfur, að hana kallaði mey eða konu' [so bold as to call her maiden or woman] and, in the seventeenth-century redaction of the saga, when the saga's protagonist Hrólfur arrives to propose marriage, he refers to his would-be fiancé(e) as 'herra' [sir] and with male pronouns throughout.⁵⁵ While all maiden kings are inevitably defeated by their suitors and forced back within the boundaries of acceptable womanhood, the extent to which they are able to manipulate the boundaries of male and female in the first place nevertheless points to the saga authors' concerns with the fragility of those boundaries.

However, while maiden kings were popular figures in chivalric and legendary sagas, they are almost completely absent from the corpus of early *rímur*, despite the fact that half of the twelve maiden king sagas have *rímur* based on them from this period:

⁵⁵ 'Saga af Hrólfí konungi Gautrekssyni', in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Poppska prentsmiðja, 1830), III, 55–190 (pp. 69, 87).

Ála flekks saga

Dínus saga drambláta > Dínus rímur drambláta

Gibbons saga

Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar > Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar

Hrólfs saga kraka > Bjarka rímur

Klári saga

Mágus saga jarls > Mágus rímur, Geirarðs rímur

Nítíða saga

Partalopa saga

Sigrarðs saga frækna

Sigurðar saga þögla > Sigurðar rímur þögla

Viktors saga ok Blávus > Blávuss rímur og Viktors

Of these, only *Sigurðar saga þögla* and *Geirarðs rímur* contain the maiden king episode in its entirety. *Dínus rímur* tells only the first half of its saga's narrative, as does *Blávuss rímur og Viktors*, while *Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar* and *Bjarka rímur* only cover a later part of their sagas. *Mágus rímur* does cover the Ermengá episode, but as noted above, it is debatable whether this constitutes a maiden king narrative in the first place. With the *rímur* that retell other sections of their sagas, there is a certain amount of repetition in what they *do* choose to focus on. For example, *Hrólfs rímur* deals with the latter part of the saga, in which Hrólfur and his foster-brother Ásmundur travel to Ireland and attempt to win the hand of the Irish princess for Ásmundur. *Bjarka rímur* too covers a later part of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in which the emphasis is on the adventures of Böðvar *bjarki* and Höttur/Hjalti. Similarly, *Blávuss rímur*, at least in its medieval redaction, stops short before it gets to the maiden king section, and once again, the part it does cover deals with the misadventures of two male protagonists. This interest in the deeds and misdeeds of men echoes the sentiments expressed in the *Geðraunir* and *Sturlaug's rímur mansöngvar* quoted above, in which the poets talk of turning away from praising women in order to relate the heroic deeds of men of old.

In the three *rímur* which do feature a maiden king, approaches differ. *Geirarðs rímur* and *Sigurðar rímur þögla* both retell their maiden king stories in their entirety, though both nonetheless retain their focus on the heroism of their male protagonists. *Geirarðs þáttur*, a part of the younger redaction of *Mágus saga jarls*, is a briskly narrated episode in the prose saga: the valiant earl Geirarður asks for the hand of the haughty emperor's daughter Elínborg, but is rejected on the grounds that he is too low in rank to be worthy of her attentions. When Elínborg's father dies, however, she finds her kingdom besieged by a heathen army, whose leader, King Príamus, is famous for his casual despoiling

of attractive women. It is at this point that Elínborg realises how useful a husband like Geirarður would have been. She manages to persuade him to come to her aid and he makes short work of the attacking army before he and Elínborg are united in apparently happy matrimony. The prose is brief, but the *rímur* version draws out the action to approximately twice its original length, with particular emphasis on the combat between Geirarður and Príamus, which makes up more than a quarter of the poem. Geirarður's heroism is further emphasised by the *rímur* cycle's frequent asides to describe Elínborg sitting wistfully in her tower, admiring the man who could have been her husband if only her own self-importance had not prevented it.

The *Geirarðs rímur* poet's interest in extended battle scenes and their attendant gore and gruesomeness is echoed in *Sigurðar rímur þöglá*, although in this case the *rímur* poet is very much following in the footsteps of the source text. The *Sigurðar rímur* poet gleefully lingers over the details of both the maiden king Seditiana's vicious humiliation of her two would-be suitors, and later her own sexual humiliation by the disguised Sigurður. Her treatment of Sigurður's two brothers is particularly bloodthirsty:

V.30

<i>Bræður voru bundnir fast, búkrinn mjög fyrir líma skarst. Féll af þeim hið fagra blóð, flenging þessi eyktina stóð.</i>	The brothers were securely bound, their torsos greatly injured with rods. Fair blood fell from them, the scourging stopped at the hour of <i>nones</i> .
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V.31

<i>Búkrinn allur er benjum settur: blóðið út fyrir höggum sprettur. Þrællinn hver er þreyttur og móður. Þessi leikur er eigi góður.</i>	Their torsos are all covered with wounds: the blood gushes out from the blows. Every slave is tired and exhausted. This game is not good.
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V.32

<i>“Oddhvöss taki nú, seggir, sverð, síðan risti á ýta herð blóðuglur með benjum tvær. Báðir skulu þér fiðra þær.”</i>	“Now take a sharp sword, men, then cut blood-owls on the men's shoulders with two wounds. You must feather both of them.”
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V.33

<i>Þegar er gjört sem brúðurin biður:</i>	Straightaway it is done as the lady bids:
<i>bragnar eru þá lagðir niður,</i>	then the men are laid down,
<i>uglur er sett á ýta herð.</i>	owls are put on the men's shoulders.
<i>Eigi er þetta sæmdar ferð.</i>	This is not honourable behaviour.

V.34

<i>Ríkur svaraði ristill þá:</i>	The mighty lady then replied:
<i>“Rekkar skulu til mundlaug fá.</i>	“Men should bring a hand-washing bowl.
<i>Setið þér hana á glóandi glæður.”</i>	Place glowing embers in it.”
<i>Gjörist nú leikurinn furðu skæður.</i>	Now the game becomes very harmful.

V.35

<i>Mundlaugin var mjög sem eldur.</i>	The hand-basin was much like fire.
<i>Mjög er sú grimm er slíku veldur.</i>	She who directs this is very ferocious.
<i>Hún var sett á hölda kvið;</i>	[The bowl] was placed on the men's
	stomachs;
<i>hvorgi brá sér kappinn við.</i>	the champion did not flinch at it.

When the time comes for Sigurður's revenge, the action is extended over approximately fifty stanzas, as Sigurður disguises himself as various hideous male creatures in order to force Seditiana into humiliating sexual encounters. Compared to the saga, Seditiana's emotional distress in the *rímur* is highlighted, in contrast with the way the two brothers earlier endured their physical torture in manly silence: 'svanna mun það auka harm' [this will increase the woman's sorrow] (XII.9, 'brúðurin grét af sárum móð' [the lady wept from sore exhaustion] (XII.22), 'geysi hrædd var drottning þá' [the queen was very afraid then] (XII.40) and 'ekki kunn hún mæla á mót' [she was unable to speak against it] (XII.43).

However, *Dínus rímur* takes another approach entirely. This cycle is based on the saga of Dínus the Proud, in itself an unusual twist on the typical maiden king narrative in that the male protagonist is presented as a perfect foil for the maiden king Philotemía in both skills and deficits. In the saga, the mirroring is almost exact: Dínus knows Grammatica, Musica, Rhetorica, Dialectica, Geometrica, Astronomia, and Arithmetica, while Philotemía knows 'alla sjö bóklígar listir' [all seven literary arts].⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *Dínus saga drambláta*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Riddarasögur, 1 (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1960), pp. 6–7, 12.

Dínus ‘formáði allar konur og jomfrúr í veröldinni’ [despised all women and maidens in the world] and Philotemía likewise ‘forsmáði alla kónga syni og jarla’ [all the sons of kings and earls].⁵⁷ In the *rímur*, the description is far more unbalanced, with eight stanzas devoted to Dínus’ generosity, learning, physical beauty, appeal to women, and lack of interest in returning their affections, while barely two are given over to a cursory mention of Philotemía’s beauty, honour, and wisdom.⁵⁸

Though a lengthy description of Dínus’ many fine qualities is in keeping with *rímur* poets’ general interest in discussing men over women, the way in which *Dínus rímur* frames these descriptions in terms of the desire of female onlookers is highly unusual for the genre:⁵⁹

I.14

*Sýndist fróður liljum líkur
litur í herrans kinnum.
Allar vildu auðar bríkur
unna garpi svinnum.*

A wise colour like lilies appeared
in the lord’s cheeks.
All the boards of wealth [WOMEN] wanted
to love the wise man.

I.17

*Hver sú jungfrú augum leit
ungan stilli þenna,
frygðast öll um elsku reit
og afmórs dygðar kenna.*⁶⁰

Whichever young lady looked with her eyes
upon this young ruler,
all the area of love [BREAST] rejoiced
and recognised the virtue of desire.

This is a departure from the saga’s description of Dínus, which is largely in terms of physical strength: ‘[er] hann var tólf vetra gamall, þá var hann svo stór og vaskur, stinnur og sterkur sem fullroskinn maður’ [when he was twelve winters old, he was then as large and valiant, upright and strong as a full-grown man].⁶¹

Dínus rímur is unusual in its treatment of its source material in other respects. It rattles briskly through the plot of the saga in a highly un-*rímur*-like fashion, paying equal (if brief) attention to the respective machinations of both Dínus and Philotemía. It also stops short before the pivotal moment in the saga’s plot, Dínus’ graphic rape of Philotemía, after which events begin their inevitable march

⁵⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 10, 13.

⁵⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 803–6.

⁵⁹ Even *Filippó rímur*, which does frame Filippó’s attractiveness in terms of his effect on women (‘fljóðið hvert, er Filipó sá, | fangið var af stríði’ [every woman who saw Filippó was seized with afflictions [of love]] (I.6)), dispenses with his beauty in a single stanza.

⁶⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 803–4.

⁶¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 7.

towards the two of them becoming happily married in the traditional maiden king fashion. Björn K. Þórolfsson argues that after the *rímur* concludes, ‘fer allt í sögunni að snúast til betra vegar’ [everything in the saga takes a turn for the better],⁶² but given the aforementioned rape scene, I cannot agree with this analysis and nor do I believe the *rímur* poet would have. The *rímur* is tonally quite different to the saga: while the latter is the vehicle by which a didactic moral message about the perils of hubris and excessive learning is delivered,⁶³ the former seems designed as pure entertainment. By stopping short before the story takes a serious turn, the poet is able to cheerfully recount the various tricks Dínus and Philotemía play on one another, none of which cause any permanent damage, and leave the tale as light-hearted entertainment, rather than a heavy-handed lesson in punishing impropriety.

CONCLUSION

As far as both internal evidence and external accounts can reveal, *rímur* performance, for the most part, seems to have been undertaken by male poets in mixed gender spaces. Under the watchful eye of their fellow men and also the women they professed to desire, *rímur* poets over time became increasingly self-conscious in their crafting of a poetic masculinity for themselves, exemplified in their ever more reflective *mansöngvar*. In doing so, they set themselves apart from the male characters whose adventures they recount: while poets are almost universally abject, tormented with sorrows and longing, the knights and kings they depict are rarely troubled by emotional complexity, but are instead shining images of martial and (eventual) romantic success. Women, nominally the subjects and recipients of *mansöngvar*, frequently end up in second place to the poet’s own troubles.

This is a pattern continued to an extent in the main *rímur* narratives, whose interest in bloody battle set-pieces — almost inevitably taking place between two or more men — often forces women into the narrative background. However, even within this focus on martial masculinity, there is still room for nuanced depictions of women. For example, in *Geirarðs rímur*, the addition of asides to show the action through Elínborg’s point of view serves to humanise her and make her more likable, stressing the vulnerabilities that underlie her haughty outward behaviour, while at the same time promoting Geirarður’s impeccable martial masculinity. Similarly, *Reinalds rímur*, while it does spend a great deal of time on Reinald’s fighting prowess, also makes space for an emotionally compelling portrait of the kidnapped Rósa whom he is attempting to rescue. There are also examples of *rímur*

⁶² Björn K. Þórolfsson, ix, p. 399.

⁶³ Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, p. 57.

that have a far greater focus on female characters, most notably *Mábilur rímur sterku*, the majority of whose characters are women. These cycles are discussed more fully in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

The disappearance of the maiden king from the medieval *rímur* corpus can in part be attributed to the aforementioned concern with martial masculinity, coupled with an increasing feeling that the realm of combat was not a place for women, leading to a general discomfort with more warlike women or women who performed female masculinity. However, an additional explanation lies in the changing performance context — including audience — for these texts. Geraldine Barnes argues that the Icelandic romances were originally intended for an educated — and therefore largely male — audience, and that they spread from there to become popular among the secular aristocratic elite of Iceland.⁶⁴ However, *rímur*, while no doubt composed in an elite sphere, seem to most commonly have been performed at gatherings that represented a mix of classes and genders. In this context, it is perhaps worth noting that the absence of the maiden king *also* means the absence of scenes of sexual and/or physical violence being committed against women. What, at the start of this chapter, I termed the ‘masculine voice’ of the *rímur* — perpetuated through the poetic self-fashioning of the *mansöngvar* as well as the male-focused main narratives — may indeed have been what allowed women in the audience to enjoy these poems, without worrying about the fates of female characters within them.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, p. 183.

⁶⁵ I am grateful to my examiner Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for suggesting a possible historical explanation for the rise and fall in popularity of the maiden king figure in the Icelandic imagination, namely the ascendancy of Queen Margrete I as ruler of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Occasionally addressed as the ‘Lady King’ (T. K. Derry, *History of Scandinavia: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 72), Queen Margrete’s role as first regent and then de facto ruler of the Kalmar Union during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century certainly offers a suggestive and contemporaneous parallel to the increased Icelandic interest in single female rulers who are reluctant to cede power to a man. Her death in 1412, whereupon she was succeeded by her adopted son Eric of Pomerania, may have made such issues less relevant to the later *rímur* poets and thus go some way to explaining the relative lack of *rímur* maiden kings.

3. MALE CHARACTERS IN CHIVALRIC *RÍMUR*

This chapter explores the ways in which male characters are portrayed in chivalric *rímur*: what makes a man worthy of praise in these texts, as well as what makes him worthy of criticism. I have chosen to begin my close analysis of gendered figures in these texts by looking at men in part because male characters are so much more plentiful than female ones in *rímur*, but also to avoid the pitfall, thankfully rare these days in gender studies, of treating men as an unmarked default, in comparison to whom women acquire gender by their differences. In fact, *rímur* continue the work, started in the translated romances and continued in the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, of constructing a new model of masculinity for their audiences, one based in the courtly cultural mores of continental Europe.¹ While this new model also has implications for women's behaviour in these texts, as well as the gender system more broadly, it manifests itself most clearly in depictions of men, which tend to be both more developed and more plentiful than those of women or characters outside of binary genders.

In this section, I first lay out a general model for approaching masculinity in these texts, before moving on to explore the stanzas in which male characters are introduced in *rímur*. These introductory stanzas are, while not entirely formulaic, often highly conventional in the traits they ascribe to their protagonists. Through examining which characteristics are treated as integral to being a man in these texts, I aim to both build a model of conventional masculinity and highlight those characters who deviate from the model. The first part of this chapter therefore forms a broad overview of the genre as a whole, while subsequent sections focus on specific case studies. The next section examines the interaction between masculinity and morality in these texts, focusing particularly on their portrayal of antagonists, where the intersection between gender and race becomes especially pertinent. Characters who occupy an ambivalent moral position in the poems are also discussed in this section, with an eye to what flaws can damage the integrity of an otherwise worthy man. The section on foster-brothers and sworn brothers looks at the ways in which relationships between men are both of interest to *rímur* poets in and of themselves, and also a means by which to explore differing but complementary modes of masculinity.

MODELLING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN CHIVALRIC *RÍMUR*

The depiction of men is not monolithic in the chivalric *rímur* and nor is it in their source texts, the chivalric sagas. As this chapter will show, there are several paths a character can take to be considered a respectably model of masculinity, but even more ways in which one can fall short. In analysing these

¹ Bagerius, 'Mandom och mödom'.

various routes to success or failure, the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', first advanced in a 1985 article by Carrigan, Connell and Lee² and subsequently refined by Connell and Messerschmidt in their 2005 article,³ is helpful. A model of hegemonic masculinity posits that, while there are many ways to be masculine and to be a man (not always the same thing), there is also an implicit hierarchy to these. The model of masculinity that occupies the highest position in the hierarchy is not necessarily widespread, or even achievable, containing as it may do a number of contradictory behavioural requirements, but it is *normative*, i.e. it sets a standard for others to aspire to and attempt to emulate.⁴ In applying this concept to *rímur*, we see a form of archetypal masculinity in the conventional descriptors applied to each male character as he is introduced. Whether each character ever exemplifies any of the behaviours they are praised for is somewhat irrelevant: as a protagonist, it is assumed that they will perform to expected standards unless the poet takes the trouble to note otherwise.

In his study of masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*, Gareth Lloyd Evans uses an inverted model of Carol Clover's discussion of *níð*-insults to define a hegemonic model of masculinity for the sagas:

[T]o embody a hegemonic masculine position a character: must be of fine physical appearance; must act heroically (which includes the display of physical and martial prowess); must be bold, sincere, and responsible (actions must have good cause, the person must not be overly domesticated, and must not prefer sexual relations to physical labour); must act according to the dictates of honour at all times (must be both willing and able to exact due vengeance, and must act amicably with kinsmen); must adhere to alimentary taboos; and must not take part in 'irregular' sexual practices.⁵

Some elements of this model are apparent in the portrayal of desirable masculinity in the later chivalric romances, but others have undergone a shift with the influence of courtly literature from continental Europe. The impact of these texts can be seen especially in new modes of emotional and sexual behaviour, aimed particularly at aristocratic men but, by their positioning of aristocratic, secular masculinity as a standard by which everyone else could be measured, eventually affecting all parts of society.⁶

² Carrigan, Connell, and Lee.

³ Connell and Messerschmidt.

⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 832.

⁵ Evans, p. 25.

⁶ Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence'; Sif Ríkhartsdóttir, *Emotions in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

While male characters of the *Íslendingasögur* certainly do act under the influence of heightened emotions, the outward expression of emotions in these texts is largely shown through somatic responses that, while not always explicitly tied to a particular emotion, are nonetheless legible to their audience.⁷ Under the new emotive script found in continental romances,⁸ the free expression of emotions becomes a mark of refined, aristocratic masculinity.⁹ This new model is seen in a number of *riddarasögur*, notably *Flóres saga*,¹⁰ but is considerably less pronounced in the chivalric *rímur*, which favour action over interiority for their characters.

In this respect, it is tempting to see *rímur* as a reversion to the *Íslendingasögur* model of emotions, but this is inaccurate. *Rímur* poets do not prefer to express emotions through somatic responses; rather, they prefer not to express emotions at all. If a character's state is of significance to the narrative, it is most likely to be expressed in straightforward terms: 'varð hann reiður' [he became angry], 'tók hún að gráta' [she began to cry], etc. This results in a stark contrast between the main narratives of chivalric *rímur* — as a rule, full of action, with emotional interiority drawn in broad strokes, if at all — and their *mansöngvar* which, where they exist, are comprised of almost nothing *but* emotions, with terms like *sorg*, *stríð*, *angur*, and *harmur* abounding.¹¹ This echoes the point made in the previous chapter, that by balancing the different genre expectations of *mansöngvar* and the main *rímur* narratives, *rímur* poets are able to lay claim to the free emotional expressiveness and

⁷ Edel Porter and Teodoro Manrique Antón, 'Flushing in Anger, Blushing in Shame: Somatic Markers in Old Norse Emotional Expressions', *Cognitive Linguistic Studies*, 2.1 (2015), 24–49.

⁸ Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir, in her foundational work on emotions in Old Norse literature, defines emotive scripts as follows: 'emotive scripts dictate the rules for emotional behaviour within any given text, utilising narrative structures, verbal or behavioural cues and context to convey those rules to the reader. [...] Emotive scripts consist of emotional signifiers that a reader (or audience) must engage with. These can be emotion words, but can also comprise narrative arrangement, scene construction, gestures, somatic indicia and, significantly, narrative silences.' Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir, *Emotions in Old Norse Literature*, p. 28.

⁹ Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir; Carolyne Larrington, 'Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 87.1 (2015), 74–94.

¹⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Young Love in Sagaland: Narrative Games and Gender Images in the Icelandic Tale of Floris and Blancheflour', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 10 (2014), 1–26.

¹¹ These emotions are almost always attributed to lack or loss of love from a woman. *Jarlmanns rímur* VIII.6 is a particularly woebegone example: 'Sorgar karmur sár og armur | seint mun vilja þrjóta. | Girndar harmur gjörin mér varmur | ef grundar má ég ei njóta' [Pain and wretchedness will slowly diminish for the parapet of sorrows [BREAST/HEART]. The grief of love will warm me if I cannot enjoy the ground [LADY]], but similar expressions of emotion are also seen elsewhere, for example in *Herburts rímur* II.1: 'Því er ég sveldur, að sorgin veldur | sárum harmi og löngum; | kvenna hatur og heimsins klatur | hægt mun verða öngum' [Thus I am [afflicted?], which sorrow dictates, with painful and long-lasting grief; the hatred of women and the losses of the world will [only] slowly become nothing]. The word *sveldur* is unusual and is perhaps a variant form of *sveltur* [starved].

abjection in love of courtly masculinity, while promoting a more aggressive form of masculinity for their protagonists.

By the time the *rímur* genre was beginning to increase in popularity in the mid-to-late fourteenth century, the aristocratic model of gendered behaviour had been well-established. A number of scholars have written at length on the development of new social structures following Iceland's submission to the Norwegian crown in 1262, and how the new system of power coming in the form of official positions granted by the king led to a more closed groups of elites in Iceland and a widening class divide between royal officials and their families on the one hand, and the rest of the population on the other, a distance enhanced by in-group marriage.¹² Henric Bagerius, first in his doctoral thesis *Mandom och mödom* and subsequently in his article 'Romance and Violence',¹³ makes a strong case for the role *riddarasögur*, especially those composed in Iceland rather than being translated from French or English, played in promoting and reinforcing new modes of behaviour, especially sexual behaviour.

Some of Bagerius' arguments about the *riddarasögur* are also borne out in the *rímur* based on these sagas (and indeed in ones based on translated *riddarasögur*). For example, he argues that an increased insistence by both Church and Crown on monogamy, and the resulting decline of concubinage in Iceland, led to marriage to the single best woman available becoming a means of reinforcing bonds between men and enhancing the groom's own status through his acquisition of a superior bride, a shift that is highly apparent in the handful of bridal-quest *rímur*.¹⁴ Kings who are reluctant to marry often state that there is no woman they know of who would suit their high status, or else the retainers, in their efforts to persuade the king into marriage, stress that there is no fairer, or more intelligent, or worthier woman in world than the proposed bride.¹⁵ This results in the perhaps predictable consequence that almost every woman introduced as a worthy bride for the protagonist,

¹² Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity. The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), pp. 406–24; Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', p. 79; Sigríður Beck, *I kungens fránvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1281–1387* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2011), pp. 156–63.

¹³ Bagerius, 'Mandom och mödom'; Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence'.

¹⁴ Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', p. 85. This is particularly apparent in *Mágus saga/rímur jarls* and *Jarlmanns saga/rímur og Hermanns*.

¹⁵ For example, in *Mágus rímur jarls*, Sigurður tells King Játmundur: "Er hans dóttir Ermengá | yfrið væn að líta. | Finnur engi fegri en þá | falda lindi hvíta," ["His daughter Ermengá is sufficiently attractive to behold. No one could find someone fairer than this white linden of headdresses [WOMAN],"], l.27. Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 534. In *Jarlmanns rímur*, Hermann's response to Jarlmann's assertion that the king cannot truly pride himself on the glory of his court while he remains unmarried is to say, "Ég veit þá enga vella rein | að verði oss til sóma," ["I know of no land of gold [WOMAN] who would bring us honour,"], l.61.

in almost every single *rímur* cycle, is described as ‘the fairest in the northern hemisphere’, or ‘outshining all other woman as gold does lead’, or words to similar effect.¹⁶

Another important facet of aristocratic masculinity in these texts is the emphasis on educational accomplishments. This is presented as an important requirement for both men and women, though the specifics of female education are only addressed in rare cases, being more often left simply as *menntuð* [educated] or similar.¹⁷ There are a variety of skills which distinguish the aristocratic male *rímur* protagonist. Sometimes, the protagonist’s possession or lack of a given skill will prove plot-relevant, as with Konráður’s lack of language-learning in *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, or Viktor’s excessive generosity in *Blávuss rímur og Viktors*, but in many cases, these characters are introduced with the skills-list as a largely conventional part of their introduction. Skills commonly appearing on such lists include swimming, playing chess, skiing, and shooting. The resemblance between this list and the stanzas attributed to Jarl Rögnvaldur *kali* Kolsson and King Haraldur *harðráði* Sigurðsson, in which they recount their own accomplishments, is striking. Rögnvaldur boasts:

<i>Tafl emk qrr at efla;</i>	I am quick at playing chess;
<i>íþróttir kannk níu;</i>	I know nine skills;
<i>týnik trauðla rúnum;</i>	I hardly lose [knowledge of] runes;
<i>tíðs mér bók ok smíðir.</i>	I am keen on books and craftsmanship;
<i>Skriða kannk á skíðum;</i>	I know how to slide on skis;
<i>skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;</i>	I shoot and I row so that [both] are useful;
<i>hvártveggja kannk hyggja:</i>	I can consider each of these two things:
<i>harpslött ok bragþóttu.</i> ¹⁸	harp-playing and poetic composition.

¹⁶ This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, which deals with portrayals of women in *rímur*, but some typical examples of this kind of superlative praise include: Brynhildur in *Geðraunir* (‘bar hún af skærri brúða sveit | beint sem gull af eiri’ [she surpassed the troop of women in brightness just as gold does brass] (l.15)), Gratiana in *Dámusta rímur* (‘Litur og vöxtur, limur og hold, | lund með skæru lífi, | því bar langt ljósust lauka fold | svo langt af hverju vífi [Colour and size, limbs and flesh, spirit bright with life, thus the most radiant ground of leeks [WOMAN] so far surpassed every other woman] (l.12)), and Potentiana in *Sálus rímur* (‘Hans er systir fögur og fríð | fram yfir allar snótir’ [his sister is fair and beautiful above all women]] (l.21). Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 174, 772, 690.

¹⁷ An exception to this in the *riddarasögur* is the depiction of maiden kings, who are frequently famed for their learning and whose precise areas of expertise are more likely to be listed than those of other women. However, as the previous chapter notes, maiden king narratives are not well-represented in the medieval *rímur* corpus, and with the loss of this well-educated character type, the picture of male education to female seems more unbalanced in the *rímur* corpus than in the chivalric sagas. For a striking example of the elision of female learnedness in *rímur*, see the discussion of *Dínus rímur* in Chapters Two and Four.

¹⁸ Judith Jesch (ed.), ‘Rögnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 1’, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 2, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), II, 576–77 (p. 576).

King Haraldur likewise claims, in his *Gamanvísur*:

<i>Íþróttir kannk átta:</i>	I know eight skills:
<i>Yggs fetk líð at smíða;</i>	I manage to make Yggr's strong ale [POETRY];
<i>færr emk hvasst á hesti;</i>	I am capable of being swift on horseback;
<i>hefk sund numit stundum.</i>	I have sometimes learnt swimming.
<i>Skriða kannk á skíðum;</i>	I know how to slide on skis;
<i>skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;</i>	I shoot and I row so that [both] are useful;
<i>hvártveggja kannk hyggja:</i>	I can consider each of these two things:
<i>harpslött ok bragþóttu.</i> ¹⁹	harp-playing and poetic composition.

Similarly, Sigurður, in *Sigurðar rímur fóts*, is introduced with the following skills:

I.6	
<i>Ríða í burt og rjóða sverð</i>	Riding out and reddening swords
<i>og renna harma slétta,</i>	and lessening grief,
<i>skotið og sund og skíðaferð,</i>	shooting and swimming and skiing,
<i>skjóldung kunni þetta.</i> ²⁰	the prince knew [all] this.

Konráður, in *Konráðs rímur keisarasonar*, likewise is skilled at:

I.33	
<i>Ríða í dust og rjóða sverð,</i>	Riding in jousts and reddening swords,
<i>rekka í tafli að vinna,</i>	beating men at chess,
<i>skjótliga sund og skíða ferð</i>	swiftly swimming and skiing
<i>og skjóta boganum stinna.</i> ²¹	and shooting unbending bows.

What stands out in contrast to the *riddarasögur* on which these *rímur* are based is the almost formulaic nature of these skill-lists. In *Konráðs saga*, we are told about Konráður's many physical

¹⁹ Kari Ellen Gade (ed.), 'Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, *Gamanvísur 4*', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 2, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), I, 39–40 (p. 39).

²⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 289.

²¹ Wisén, pp. 95–96.

accomplishments, but the list itself is far more in-depth than in the *rímur* cycle, detailing his ability to catch gold rings with his spearpoint while riding full tilt, or to juggle his sword and shield while on horseback; Konráður's highly specific physical achievements set his inability, or unwillingness, to learn foreign languages in starker contrast. In the *rímur* cycle, the languages plot point is set up, not as a deficit on Konráður's part, but rather as something at which Roðbert is particularly good, above and beyond what might be expected of a well-educated young nobleman.²²

While the model for aristocratic education has many points in common from Haraldur *harðráði* to Konráður, there are some points of divergence. Notably, the chivalric model seen in the *rímur* shows no interest in runic or poetic competence,²³ replacing these elements of the curriculum with book learning and astronomy. While *rímur* poets themselves display an almost obsessive interest in the myth of the mead of poetry in their *mansöngvar*, not one character in a chivalric *rímur* displays any interest in poetic composition, though a few are praised for their eloquence. Another notable development is the increasing emphasis on martial prowess, particularly the kind that can be displayed in the courtly context of the tournament. For male characters in *rímur*, an emphasis on their warlike nature and skill in battle is another conventional part of protagonists' introductions, featuring in seventeen cycles out of the twenty-three examined in this thesis. It is a point of significant departure when Hertrygg, the father of Brynhildur in *Geðraunir*, is described as 'ekki gjarn við stríða' [not eager for battle], l.7,²⁴ a piece of characterisation that will later cause significant problems when he promises his daughter to a more warlike man (*not*, crucially, the one to whom she is already engaged) in order to secure his help in fighting off a would-be invader.

More cerebral pursuits are also prized, with nine texts introducing their protagonists as 'wise' or 'intelligent',²⁵ and a further eleven emphasising their characters' learning (as opposed to innate intelligence).²⁶ Neither of these characteristics is unique to men in these texts; indeed, although women's introductions are in general shorter and less detailed, they are at least as likely as men to be described as 'wise' or 'learned'. However, this emphasis on education, often explicitly book-based, is an indication of the way aristocratic class values interacted with gender in this period. As Jessica Clare

²² Wisén, p. 96.

²³ In fact the only *rímur* protagonist noted to be skilled in runes is the princess Rósa from *Reinalds rímur og Rósu* ('rúna málið rista tók' [she learnt to carve the language of runes] (ll.7)).

²⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 172.

²⁵ The most common term used here is *svinnur*, appearing in relation to five characters. *Vitur* is used of four, while two characters each are described as having *spekt* and *viska*, two are deemed *horskur* and one *fróður*.

²⁶ Terms used in relation to learning are: *list* (thirteen times), *mennt* (nine times), *lærður* (eight times) and *fræði* (three times). *Fræði* should perhaps be discounted here, since two of its three uses are in relation to the historical figure of Bjarni Erlendsson, praised by the *Landrés rímur* poet for his cleverness in translating the prose text into Norse, rather than in relation to a character in the *rímur* cycle itself.

Hancock points out in relation to the list of skills taught to Sigurður by Reginn in *Völsunga saga*,²⁷ a list which bears a strong resemblance to both Rögnvaldur and Haraldur's boasts and to the skill-lists given in chivalric *rímur* and sagas, '[c]ourtly masculinity is also explicitly learned', rather than being an innate ability.²⁸ On a pragmatic level, only the children of the nobility have the necessary time and access to tutors to acquire their many skills; the system that proclaims these abilities to be the mark of true nobility is therefore self-perpetuating.

Another key component in men's introductions is the trait of generosity. This characteristic is in fact the most popular across the chivalric *rímur* corpus, appearing in eighteen of the twenty-three texts examined here and surpassing even martial prowess for its desirability. If conventional kennings for men are taken into account, which often take the form 'the destroyer/distributor of valuable items', the prevalence of the motif is only emphasised. The adjectives *mildur* and *ör* are often applied to kings in these texts and, while these terms have meanings other than simply 'material generosity',²⁹ they appear in combination with less ambiguous phrases, e.g. 'Dínus veitti drengjum þar | af Dofri máli skæru' [Dínus offered men there the bright speech of Dofri [GOLD]] (*Dínus rímur* I.13;³⁰ 'virða gladdi hann seimi' [he gladdened men with gold] (*Sigurðar rímur fóts* I.5);³¹ Geirarð er við gumna blíður, | gefur þeim vopn og klæði [Geirarður is cheerful with [his] men, gives them weapons and clothes], (*Geirarðs rímur* I.22).³² Given that, almost without exception, *rímur* protagonists are kings, the sons of kings, or at the very least, other high-ranking members of the nobility, their wealth is unsurprising, but the constant redistribution of it shows their awareness of their social responsibility and engagement in networks of exchange that serve to both intensify personal bonds and strengthen the pre-existing ties of obligation between king and court.

Gifts in *rímur* are most commonly exchanged between men, though there are a handful of women whose generosity is also remarked on in their introductions.³³ That it was important for a man — specifically an aristocratic or royal man — to have a strong grasp of the principles of generosity is

²⁷ 'Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl og rúnar og tungur margar að mæla, sem þá var títt konungasonum, og marga hluti aðra' [he taught him skills, chess and runes and to speak many languages, as was fashionable for king's sons at that time, and many things besides] (*Völsunga saga*, ch. 13). 'Völsunga saga', in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Poppska prentsmiðja, 1829), I, 113–234 (p. 149).

²⁸ Jessica Clare Hancock, "'That Which a Hand Gives a Hand or a Foot Gives a Foot': Male Kinship Obligations in the Heroic Poetic Edda and Völsunga Saga', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 217–36 (p. 222).

²⁹ The Cleasby-Vigfússon Icelandic-English dictionary defines *mildr* as 'mild, gentle, graceful', with 'munificent' as a secondary meaning; *örr* is defined as 'swift, ready', with a secondary meaning of 'liberal, open-handed'.

³⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 803.

³¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 289.

³² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 477.

³³ Nóema in *Mábilur rímur* I.9, Vísivaldur's unnamed wife in *Vilmundar rímur* I.12, Brynhildur in *Geðraunir* I.13, and Potentiana in *Sálus rímur* I.25.

demonstrated by the opening of *Viktors saga og Blávuss / Blávuss rímur og Viktors*. Here, Viktor's subsequent life of adventure is triggered by the fact that, as King of France, he is simply *too* generous to his people, giving with an open hand until he has nothing left to give. While other kings' generosity is alluded to in a half-stanza at most, Viktor's is elaborated upon for two and a half stanzas in his initial introduction, followed by a further stanza and a half narrating the exact circumstances of his gift-giving:

I.14

*Sá var gramur við garpa örr
af greipar hvítu svelli,
Fjölnis sknúða og fránum dörr,
frænings rauðum velli.*

This king was generous to men
with the white ice of the hand [SILVER],
Fjölnir's ornament and gleaming spear,
the red field of the serpent [GOLD].

I.15

*Eptir var engi af brenndum baug,
bragnings niðurinn þýði
fleygdi af hendi Fáfnis laug
við frækna sína lýði.*

Afterwards, there was no burnt ring,
the king's kind son
flung Fáfnir's pool [GOLD] from his hand
towards his valiant people.

I.16

*Hver bar nóga hraunþvengs brú

heim til sinna landa.*

Each bore enough of the serpent's bridge
[GOLD]
home to their own lands.

I.20

*Dögling veitti Draupnis mjöll
og dýrum hringum sáði,
fyrðar hentu frænings völl
með fögru hauka láði.*

The king offered Draupnir's snow [SILVER]
and the costly seed of rings [GOLD],
handed the serpent's field [GOLD] to men
with the fair land of hawks [HIS HAND].

I.21

*Kurteis selur hann kóngsins bú,
kastala hvern og borgir.³⁴*

He offers the courtly royal residence,
every castle and stronghold.

³⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 606–7.

The predictable result of this largesse is that, in giving with no sense of proportion, Viktor has deprived himself of a necessary component of kingship: the reserves of gold needed to symbolise and reinforce the bonds between king and retainer. Thus deprived, Viktor can no longer be a true king; he passes control of his kingdom over to his wiser mother and sets out on a series of adventures that will enrich him both in terms of character development and material possessions. He does not regain his kingly status until he meets Blávus, who insists on sharing half his kingdom's wealth with his new sworn brother: "Land og þjóð sem linna brú / legg ég hálf við stilli," ["I place half my land and people, as well as the serpent's bridge [GOLD], at the prince's disposal"] (II.11).³⁵

Subsequent events in both saga and *rímur* cycle demonstrate how crucial material gift-giving is to maintaining useful friendships: Viktor and Blávus only secure the help of Skeggkarl through offering him a precious ring and a necklace, and when they later meet the dwarf Dímus, his repeatedly life-saving assistance is acquired through the promise of purses of gold. These exchanges should not be viewed as bribery, but rather as the reinforcement of personal bonds through the exchange of a physical object: Skeggkarl is already a friend of Kódier, the sworn brothers' helmsman, and Dímus in turn is Skeggkarl's friend. These scenes also demonstrate that Viktor has learnt to keep some sense of proportion in his gift-giving; perhaps the old Viktor would not have been inclined to shower an old man and a dwarf in riches to the same extent as he did his own nobles, but the new Viktor is markedly restrained in his offer of a single ring and the limited amount of gold that can fit in a purse.

The final conventional trait seen in character introductions is that of physical attractiveness. Identifying this in the texts can be somewhat difficult, as one of the common words used here, *vænn*, can mean both 'handsome', in a visual sense, and 'showing promise', in both a physical sense and a more intangible one. However, *vænn* also appears in phrases such as 'vænn að sjá' [handsome to behold] (*Sigurðar rímur fóts* I.5),³⁶ or 'vænn að lita' [handsome to see] (*Sigurðar rímur þögla* I.15 and I.22); meanwhile, terms like *fríður* and *fagur* are also commonly used to describe men. A rare few, such as Hringur in *Geðraunir*, are so attractive as to be *fríður*, *fagur* and *vænn* all at once.

However, extended descriptions of men's beauty are rare; the trait is included as a convention, a nod to the popular concept that a noble character was reflected in a correspondingly refined outward appearance,³⁷ but rarely expanded upon more than that. Comparisons to lilies and precious metals, and the insistence that someone surpasses all others of their gender for beauty are largely

³⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 614.

³⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 289.

³⁷ Claudia Bornholdt, "Everyone Thought It Very Strange How the Man Had Been Shaped": The Hero and His Physical Traits in the *Riddarasögur*, *Arthuriana*, 22.1 (2012), 18–38 (pp. 20–21). Bornholdt argues that, while continental texts 'interpreted a character's physiognomy as a crucial clue for the understanding of his character and they used the outward appearance as a reflection of inborn worth and nobility', in the chivalric romances, a beautiful outward appearance is in itself a virtue.

reserved for women, although there are a few exceptions. For example, Filippó, in his eponymous *rímur* cycle, is described as: ‘fegri öngvan finna má | en fylkis sonurinn blíði’ [one could not find anyone fairer than the king’s cheerful son] (*Filippó rímur* l.6).³⁸ In the following stanza, we hear that ‘því er hann Filippó fagri kenndur | að fríðleik bar hann af öllum’ [thus Filippó is known for his beauty, because his good looks surpass everyone else’s] (l.7).³⁹

In *Dínus rímur*, as discussed in the previous chapter, the protagonist’s beauty is described at extraordinary length. The saga places more weight on his physical strength than on his beauty, stating that, at the age of twelve, ‘Þá var hann svo stór og vaskur, stinnur og sterkur sem fullroskinn maður’ [then he was as tall and sturdy, unyielding and strong as a full-grown man].⁴⁰ Meanwhile, his beauty is not directly described, only alluded to in his efforts to conceal it from the gaze of others, especially from women: ‘með þeim blóma, sem bar hans ásjóna, heldur haldi hann hana með þeirri himnu, er svo var háttuð sem hún væri holdgróin við hans ásjónu’ [along with that bloom which his face bore, and which he would rather conceal with a mask that was fashioned as if it were skin-tight to his face].⁴¹ The saga is more interested in recounting Dínus’ great learning, listing off his proficiency in the seven liberal arts, along with the arrogance that results from so much learning and beauty, leading him to scorn women: ‘Það var hið þriðja hans dramb, að hann forsmáði allar konur og jomfrúir í veröldinni’ [this was his third piece of arrogance, that he despised all women and maidens in the world].⁴²

The saga emphasises the similarities between Dínus and his rival (and eventual wife) Philotemía, who is also extremely beautiful, learned, and uninterested in men. Even the vocabulary used of each is similar, with both being likened to flowers for their beauty, and the distaste of both for spending time with potential marriage partners noted with the verb *forsmá* [disdain, shun]. Indeed, while Geraldine Barnes has argued that the saga’s main moral message is a cautionary tale about the dangers of too much learning, I would argue that in fact it takes a slightly different approach, positioning Dínus, through his mirroring of Philotemía, as a kind of male maiden king and thus rendering his masculinity at the start of the saga somewhat fraught.⁴³ Over the course of the saga, Dínus begins to display more of the traits of the hegemonic masculine model for *rímur* protagonists, using his learning to render Philotemía and her associates inferior to him, often in sexualised situations (e.g. enchanting them to dance naked), culminating in his rape of Philotemía. As Henric Bagerius has argued, the rape that forms the narrative turning point of many maiden king sagas is an opportunity

³⁸ Wisén, p. 4.

³⁹ Wisén, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 7.

⁴¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 9–10.

⁴² Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 10.

⁴³ Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, p. 57. See Chapter Two for a discussion of the maiden king character type.

for the male protagonist, hitherto effeminised by his defeat(s) at the hands of the maiden king, to reassert his masculinity and therefore his superiority over his female rival.⁴⁴ Though Dínus never comes to exemplify the typical warrior-masculinity of chivalric protagonists — his few attempts at combat are either wildly unsuccessful (e.g. his defeat by Philotemía’s oak trees) or abortive (e.g. the final battle of the saga, which is forestalled by the visions of Heremita) — through his abandonment of his misogynous nature and use of his great learning to achieve his goals, he ends up demonstrating the success of another model of masculinity.

The *rímur* cycle takes a different approach. As Chapter Four will address in more detail, female characters are not always given the same prominence in *rímur* as they are in the prose sagas on which the poems are based. *Dínus rímur* is a particularly egregious example of this. While the saga introduces Dínus and Philotemía in roughly equal amounts of detail and presents them as well-matched opponents because of their many similarities, the *rímur* cycle grants Philotemía only the most cursory and conventional of introductions. In two half-stanzas, we are told only that she is beautiful (‘gulls var þessi skorðan skær | skörungur allra brúða’ [this prop of gold [WOMAN] was radiant, the leader of all women] (I.32), wise, and honourable (‘Siklings dóttur, svo hefi ég spurt, | er sæmd og visku fylldu’ [the king’s daughter, so I have heard, was filled with honour and wisdom] (I.34).⁴⁵ No mention at all is made of her great learning — which, as Geraldine Barnes points out, is one of the key themes of the saga⁴⁶ — nor is there any mention of her disdain for would-be suitors and indeed young men in general, another point of characterisation which is integral to the plot in the saga. Judging by her introduction, the *rímur* version of Philotemía could be replaced with almost any other female love-interest from a chivalric romance with very little impact on the story, and her subsequent battle of wits with Dínus comes across as somewhat inexplicable, lacking the grounding in her arrogance and misogamy it receives in the prose tale.

Meanwhile, Dínus himself is introduced over the course of seven stanzas. While the *rímur* poet is more laconic in their descriptions than the saga author, all the essential points are covered. His learning:

I.18

*Kóngsson lærði listir sjö
er liberalis heita,
fann á bókum brögðin þau*

The king’s son learned the seven arts
which are known as *liberalis*,
[and] found in books those tricks

⁴⁴ Bagerius, ‘Romance and Violence’, pp. 88–90.

⁴⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 806.

⁴⁶ Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*, p. 57.

*er brúðum hefðir veita.*⁴⁷

which he played on the women.

Arrogance:

I.22

*Mein var eitt á mætum rekk –
mörgum eykur vanda –
hilmis dramb úr hófi gekk;
heiðri má það granda.*⁴⁸

There was one flaw in this worthy man –
it increases troubles for many people –
the prince's arrogance was immoderate;
this may damage his honour.

And lack of interest in women:

I.23

*Ásjón frægur fylkis kundur
fal með einni himnu.
Vill hana hvorki, laufa lundur,
líti mey né kvinna.*⁴⁹

The renowned king's son
concealed his face with a mask.
He wants neither maiden nor woman
to see it.

The *rímur* cycle also includes information that the saga does not, notably Dínus' (never-demonstrated) prowess in battle:

I.15

*Hvergi er sá sagt að hjálma valdur
hvassar eggjar flýði.
Fékk í æsku auðar Baldur
alla karlmanns prýði.*⁵⁰

Nowhere is it said that the commanders of helmets
[MAN]
fled from sharp edges.
The Baldur of wealth [MAN] received in his youth
all the glory of a man.

This goes along with another stanza containing the core of conventional praise for any given *rímur* protagonist, namely generosity, renown, and physical strength:

⁴⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 804.

⁴⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 805.

⁴⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 805.

⁵⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 803.

I.13

Dínus veitti drengjum þar

af Dofra máli skæru.

Frægð og afl af flestum bar

og framdi sig með æru.

Dínus offered the men there
the bright speech of Dofri [GOLD].

He surpassed most for fame and strength
and carried himself with honour.

The *rímur* poet is also concerned with establishing that Dínus' incredible physical beauty exists within a framework of heterosexual desire, presenting it always in the context of women's love for Dínus:

I.14

Sýndist fróður liljum líkur

litur í herrans kinnum.

Allar vildu auðar bríkur

unna garpi svinnum.

There seemed to be a wise colour
like that of lilies in the lord's cheeks.

All the boards of wealth [WOMEN] wanted
to love the clever young man.

I.17

Hver sú jungfrú augum leit

ungan stilli þenna,

frygðast öllum elsku reit

og afmórs dygðar kenna.

Whichever maiden beheld
the young prince with her eyes,
the root of love [HEART] blossomed for all
and they knew the virtue of love.

This is a departure from the saga, which, while it establishes that Dínus is 'stinnur og sterkur' [sturdy and strong] and makes various other approving comments on his physical appearance, never troubles to do so in the context of female desire.⁵¹ Indeed, Dínus' only relationship to women mentioned in the saga is that he 'despises' them as part of his general arrogance. Although the saga complicates Dínus' masculinity through his repeated comparison to Philotemía, the *rímur* cycle fits Dínus into its conventional picture of masculinity, ensuring that the audience has no reason to question Dínus' ability to perform to the standards of hegemonic *rímur* masculinity, nor to doubt his position in a heterosexual matrix. The shortening of Philotemía's introduction and expansion of Dínus' allows the poet to downplay the uncomfortable level of similarity between the two rivals, while also maintaining

⁵¹ This framing is also apparent in *Filippó rímur*, in which 'fljóðið hvert, er Filipó sá, | fangið var af stríði' [every woman who saw Filippó was seized with afflictions [of love]] (I.6). There is no prose *Filippó saga* with which to compare the *rímur* cycle's treatment of his beauty, however.

the oft-stated intent of *rímur* poets to turn away from talking about women in order to recount the deeds of men.

In the introduction of Dínus in *Dínus rímur*, we see the *rímur* poet sidestepping the aspects of the saga that make Dínus an unusual — perhaps even unique — chivalric protagonist, in favour of fitting him into the established mould for *rímur* protagonists. This mould turns out aristocratic men who are well-educated, handsome, generous, and skilled in combat; this, apparently, is what peak masculine performance looks like to *rímur* poets and their audience.

kennings

An exhaustive survey of the kennings for men found in chivalric *rímur* could easily become a doctoral project in its own right. This section, therefore, does not claim to cover every kenning that appears, nor to provide statistical analysis of such kennings' frequency of use, but will instead survey some of the broad themes observable within the man-kennings of the chivalric *rímur* corpus, as well as their implications for *rímur* poets' conceptualisations of masculinity in these texts. Kennings for men are one of the most frequently used kenning types in *rímur*, along with kennings for women and gold, and they are accompanied by a host of poetic synonyms for 'men' such as *höldar*, *ýtar*, *kappar*, and many, many more. They allow *rímur* poets to not only demonstrate their linguistic versatility, but also to convert a concept like 'the man spoke' to fit almost any metrical requirements they please, and thus fulfil both a practical and artistic function in the poems.

A common criticism of *rímur* and their poets' (lack of) artistry is that the kennings used in these texts rapidly become formulaic, lacking the innovation and virtuosity seen in the kennings of earlier skaldic verse. It is certainly true that there is nothing in the *rímur* corpus to compete with something like Þórður Særeksson's 'gimsløngvir gífrs hlémána drífu nausta blakks' [fire-slinger of the storm of the troll-woman of the shielding moon of the horse of the boathouse [SHIP > SHIELD > AXE > BATTLE > WARRIOR]] (*Þórólfs drápa Skólmssonar*, st. 1),⁵² but this is because skaldic poetry and *rímur* fulfil very different functions in the poetic ecosystem of early medieval Scandinavia and late medieval Iceland respectively. While skaldic poetry may (eventually) recount an event, most often a battle, the event itself is less important than how it is described, as well as the amount of praise or vitriol that can be heaped on the poet's king and fellow members of the *hirð* versus their opponents. It has even

⁵² Kari Ellen Gade (ed.), 'Þórður Særeksson (Sjáreksson), *Þórólfs drápa Skólmssonar*', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 1, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), I, 236 (p. 236).

been argued that skaldic poetry functioned as a mechanism for maintaining the in-group status of the *hirð*, partially through its members' ability to decipher the complex poetic language at work.⁵³

Rímur fulfil a very different role: they are primarily narrative in nature, telling a series of interlinked events, during which the audience does not have time to parse out a complicated kenning referent in order to determine who is doing what to whom. The performance context of *rímur*, at least as we know it to have been in the early modern period, the *kvöldvaka*, invited the opposite of the sort of class insularity skaldic poetry seems to have encouraged. This was a period in which the entire household was gathered together, during which the performed poetry or sagas needed to hold everyone's attention while they worked on their evening tasks. Needless obscurity would therefore have been unwelcome, but some ornamentation in order to avoid dull repetition would have kept the narrative entertaining. This is the context in which *rímur* kennings should be viewed: while there was some scope for poetic innovation in them, kennings which were not readily comprehensible were unfit for purpose. Within these confines, it is unsurprising that *rímur* kennings quickly became formulaic. Yet by their very conventionality, these kennings still form an intriguing commentary on gender. As discussed above, regarding the stereotypical introductions for male characters in *rímur*, their use demonstrates the form(s) of masculinity that must have been most recognisable to their audiences.

The typical kennings for men bear out the hegemonic masculine model seen in the character introductions. As with the introductions, two of the most prominent features are the man's warrior capabilities and his generosity. The following are a representative sample from across the corpus of chivalric *rímur*.

Warrior kennings:

'málma Þór' [Þór of metal, i.e. weapons [WARRIOR]] (*Sálus rímur* II.30)

'djarfan Gaut | dýra Fjölnis tjalda' [the bold Gaut of Fjölnir's costly wall-hangings [SHIELD > WARRIOR]] (*Viktors rímur* I.22)

'odda viður' [tree of points, i.e. arrows [WARRIOR]] (*Viktors rímur* I.40)

'hreytir skjalda' [scatterer of shields [WARRIOR]] (*Dámusta rímur* III.13)

'hjörva spennir' [gripper of swords [WARRIOR]] (*Dámusta rímur* III.30)

'stýrir Hrungrnis skíða' [steerer of Hrungrnir's skis [SHIELDS > WARRIOR]] (*Jóns rímur leiksveins* I.25)

'Generous man':

⁵³ John Lindow, 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47.3 (1975), 311–27 (pp. 321–23).

‘sjóvar elda beiðir’ [offerer of the fire of the sea [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]] (*Sálus rímur* I.24)
 ‘reifir bjatra hringa’ [giver of bright rings [GENEROUS MAN]] (*Viktors rímur* I.37)
 ‘veitir ófnis spanga’ [offerer of the serpent’s spangles [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]] (*Dínus rímur* I.21)
 ‘fleygir gulls’ [distributor of gold [GENEROUS MAN]] (*Mágus rímur* IV.25)
 ‘meiðir grettis valla’ [harmer of the serpent’s fields [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN (who ‘harms’ gold by cutting it up for distribution)]] (*Geirarðs rímur* I.14)
 ‘greiðir nöðru palla’ [distributor of the adder’s pallets [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]] (*Landrés rímur* VII.51)

Throughout these kennings — especially in the ‘warrior’ kennings — the poets show a certain level of familiarity with the stories found in the Prose and Poetic Eddas. For example, in the list given above, ‘stýrir Hrungnis skíða’ refers to the story of Þór’s fight against the giant Hrungrnir, who stood on his shield in order to prevent a subterranean attack by Þór, and ‘dýra Fjölnis tjalda’ refer to the description of Ægir’s hall in *Skáldskaparmál* in which the walls of the hall are hung with decorative shields.⁵⁴ The names of various gods are also used as the base-word of man-kennings, especially Týr, Þór, and Baldur. Meanwhile, many of the ‘generous man’ kennings reference the belief that dragons and other mythical serpents sleep on a bed of gold, an idea which appears in a number of sagas including *Gull-Þóris saga*⁵⁵ and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*.⁵⁶ That martial prowess and generosity were key aspects of noble masculinity from the time of our earliest surviving skaldic poems is readily apparent, but what we see in these *rímur* kennings is the way in which aspects of older folklore, mythology, and cultural expectations could be fitted into a new chivalric model with minimal disruptions.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the hegemonic model of masculinity seen in *rímur* is inherently an aristocratic one. Even Vilmundur from *Vilmundar saga/rímur viðutans*, a rare protagonist not born into the aristocracy, eventually rises to become royalty through his excellence in the fields seen as essential, in particular through his outstanding abilities as a warrior. However, as the title of his *saga/rímur* suggests, his low birth and the modes of behaviour he was taught by his parents are seen as a constant marker of his outsider status, only able to be overcome by his performance of feats surpassing those of the king’s son. This model is not, therefore, one accessible to any man. In particular, it is almost impossible to access for anyone who is not the son of a king or

⁵⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Skáldskaparmál. 1. Introduction, Text and Notes*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), pp. 20–22, 2.

⁵⁵ *Gull-Þóris saga, eller Þorskfirðinga saga*, ed. by Kr. Kålund, STUAGNL (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1898), p. 13.

⁵⁶ ‘Saga af Ragnari konungi loðbrók’, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, ed. by Carl Christian Rafn, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Poppska prentsmiðja, 1829), I, 235–99 (pp. 237–38).

earl, as well as for anyone who is not white or able-bodied.⁵⁷ It is difficult to build up a picture of subordinate masculinities in *rímur* simply because characters who do not fit the aristocratic model are seldom developed to the same extent; those that are presented at any length tend to be antagonists, which necessarily calls for a very different set of qualities from those of a protagonist. These qualities will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

CONSTRUCTING THE ENEMY

The first part of this chapter discussed what makes the perfect *rímur* protagonist: fair appearance, generosity to one's followers, and skill at both intellectual and physical pursuits, especially combat. Though it is nowhere stated outright that a *rímur* hero *must* be male, white, able-bodied, and interested in heterosexual marriage, these are the traits of the overwhelming majority of main characters in *rímur*.⁵⁸ What, then, of the antagonists? In a handful of cases, there is significant overlap between their characteristics and those of the men they oppose, especially in *rímur* cycles in which the antagonistic relationship revolves around deceit rather than physical combat. But in many cases, the *rímur* antagonist is drawn from a small number of stock figures, most of which are heavily racialised,⁵⁹ distinguished from the protagonist by physical appearance and religious beliefs, as well as behaviour.

Though the focus of this thesis is primarily on gender in chivalric *rímur*, it is impossible to separate gender from other forms of social identity. In particular, race and class both play a huge role in societal efforts to define appropriate models of gendered behaviour.⁶⁰ Race, especially, cannot be ignored when dealing with a set of texts like the chivalric *rímur* in which the protagonists are

⁵⁷ On the intersection of race with gender in portrayals of men in *rímur*, see the following 'Constructing the Enemy' section. While the *Íslendingasögur* occasionally feature characters who have suffered physical impairment over the course of a warrior life, e.g. Öundur *tréfót*, and a number of Norse gods are missing body parts, *rímur* do not, as a rule, engage realistically with the inevitable outcome of frequent armed conflict, i.e. large numbers of war-wounded. A grievously injured protagonist may, on occasion, be nursed back to health, but their recovery will eventually be a complete one, with no lingering effects. Those unfortunate enough not to be protagonists simply die from their wounds.

⁵⁸ One notable exception is Mábil in *Mábilur rímur sterku*, who is neither male nor in any hurry to find a spouse, but this text is remarkable for a number of reasons and is discussed at greater length in Chapter Four of this thesis.

⁵⁹ The concept of 'racialisation' was identified by K. Anthony Appiah in his 1994 lecture, 'Race, Culture, Identity', to reflect the fact that race is not a biological aspect of the body, but rather a concept whose meaning is socially constructed and, most often, imposed by a dominant racial group on those over which it has power. K. Anthony Appiah, 'Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections', in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (University of California, 1994), pp. 53–136.

⁶⁰ On the impossibility of analysing the effects of gender separately to those of race, see Crenshaw.

overwhelmingly described as pale and Christian and their enemies are so often described as dark and pagan⁶¹ — particularly when this may be the only obvious distinction between who the narrative treats as hero and villain.⁶² This situation is not unique to the *rímur*, which, after all, draw their material from pre-existing sagas. Critics have rarely accused the *riddarasögur* of subtlety; however, the nature of *rímur* narration, conditioned by the context of the poems' performance, has led to the excision of much of the existing nuance of the sagas. The result of this is that characterisation is often reduced to only its most salient points; characters become flatter and lose their interiority, becoming, in the case of antagonists, little more than cardboard cut-outs with the words 'cruel heathen' scrawled on them.

There has been relatively little work done on race in the Old Norse/medieval Icelandic corpus, partly due to the relative newness of critical race studies as a field, but also partly due to the weighting of scholarly interests in favour of eddic material and the *Íslendingasögur*, bodies of texts generally, though not entirely accurately, considered to be so racially homogenous as to not warrant attention from that angle. Yet even within the *Íslendingasögur* and eddic texts, the narrative racialises certain characters — sometimes through emphasising physical differences between them and the unmarked default of Icelandic society, sometimes through noting their differing religion or language — positioning them on a hierarchy of acceptability.⁶³

Some critical attention has been devoted to the concept of the *blámaður*, a rather nebulously defined figure who appears across the saga corpus but whom the authors of chivalric romances are particularly fond of pressing into use as a stock villain whose actions need little in the way of motivation. However, in many cases, the medieval use of the term has been conflated with its meaning

⁶¹ *Rímur* poets make little distinction between non-Christian religions; 'heathen' antagonists will frequently direct prayers to Óðinn, Mohammed, and the Christian Devil all in the same poem. For example, of Príamur in *Geirarðs rímur* we are told that 'kóngurinn heiðrar Mákon mest of marga djöfla aðra' [the king honours Mákon (probably a corruption of 'Mohammed') most, and many other devils] (III.5). Later, his brother Baldvin entreats 'góður Óðinn' [good Óðinn] (VI.28) to grant them victory in battle. Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 486, 511.

⁶² This is starkly illustrated in *Geðraunir*, in which the pagan Hárekur engages in the typical *rímur* antagonist pursuit of besieging a kingdom until its ruler hands over his unwilling daughter. Unusually, however, the 'hero' Tryggvi, who arrives to liberate the kingdom from Hárekur's forces, *also* demands marriage to the unwilling princess, refusing to act unless this condition is granted. While *rímur* protagonists may perhaps *expect* to be offered a wife and kingdom for their great deeds (as happens under similar circumstances in *Jarlmanns rímur*), Tryggvi is the only one to demand such a price up front, a condition he sticks to in the face of the king's reluctance and the princess' protestation that she is already engaged to another man.

⁶³ For example, Richard Cole, 'Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the Blámaður', *Saga-Book*, 39 (2015), 5–24; Richard Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt: Proto-Racial Thinking and Its Application to Jews in Old Norse Literature', in *Fear and Loathing in the North. Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, ed. by Cordelia Heß and Jonathan Adams (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 239–66; Richard Cole, 'Snorri and the Jews', in *Old Norse Mythology - Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Pernilla Hermann and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 243–68; Basil Arnould Price, 'Búi and the blámaður: Comprehending Racial Others in *Kjalnesinga saga*', *postmedieval*, 11.4 (2020), 442–50.

in Modern Icelandic, where it is an impolite term for Black people, especially those of Ethiopian descent.⁶⁴ As Arngrímur Vídalín has argued, this leaves us with the inaccurate impression that *blámenn* in the medieval sources are a coherent racial group, one that can even be localised to a particular region, whereas in fact the term is used by authors in a wide range of contexts, from those where a Middle English text might use ‘Saracen’, to points where the term is used interchangeably with *berserkur*, *víkingur* and even *tröll* to refer to beings of supernatural strength and capacity for violence.

This conflation of *blámenn* with overtly supernatural creatures like trolls combines with the berserker trope of having skin that iron cannot pierce, as well as the repeated use of bestial terminology to describe the sounds made by *blámenn* (*ópandi* [screaming], *grenjandi* [howling], etc.), to exclude the *blámenn* in these texts from the category of human. Under these conditions, it is debatable whether the *blámenn* in these texts constitute a racial grouping, since only human beings can be racialised. However, one need only look at the long history of racist cartoons in Europe and the United States to realise that this dehumanising treatment, designed to mark out racialised bodies as an Other as entirely separate from white bodies as possible, is demonstrably used on human beings every day. How far should we accept these texts’ claims about the inhuman capabilities of *blámenn* as part of the quasi-magical world in which the romances are set, and how far do they express the same insular fear and fascination with difference that motivated the display of colonised people for the Victorian public to gawp at in the Great Exhibition?

The treatment and conflation of *blámenn*, berserkers and trolls in these texts is in keeping with the uses of monsters in other Icelandic texts and in medieval literature more broadly. These beings highlight the imprecision of the line between humanity and inhumanity, and serve as a warning of the dangers of exceeding the bounds of acceptable behaviour.⁶⁵ As Ármann Jakobsson argues, a troll in Icelandic literature is defined not by physiognomy but by their engagement in trollish behaviour, by their strangeness and by their inherent threat.⁶⁶ It is therefore no surprise to see these terms applied to *rímur* antagonists, who are both human and not; whose outsider status makes any and all behaviour a threat. This is evident in the *riddarasögur* that serve as source texts for these poems, but what we see in *rímur* particularly is a shift towards a more explicitly monstrous physicality, as detailed below and in the section on female monstrosity in Chapter Four.

⁶⁴ Arngrímur Vídalín, ‘Demons, Muslims, Wrestling Champions: The Semantic History of *Blámenn* from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century’, in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), pp. 203–26.

⁶⁵ Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society. Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland*, The Northern Medieval World (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 11.

⁶⁶ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meaning of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland’, *Saga-Book*, 32 (2008), 39–68 (p. 52).

While the term *blámaður* should not be understood in its modern, purely racial sense, nor can *blámenn* be comfortably separated from humanity and relegated to the realm of the supernatural. In a world where our protagonists are capable of bisecting their enemies with one blow and single-handedly wrestling dragons, without, for the most part, having their humanity called into question,⁶⁷ why should *blámenn* be treated any differently? Part of the problem is that *blámenn* (and the groups with which they so often overlap in later texts, *berserkir* and *víkingar*) are often presented as an undifferentiated crowd with no named individuals among them. Such a faceless sea of opponents lends itself well to the exaggerated violence of the chivalric sagas and *rímur*, where mass slaughter of the enemy is presented as evidence of a protagonist's great prowess, rather than a horrifying act of butchery. Even in some cases with individual *blámenn*, such as the innocent man who is tricked into playing a role in Milon's schemes in *Landrés þáttur/rímur*, or the *blámaður* at the Norwegian court in *Kjalnesinga saga*, the characters remain unnamed and, as Basil Arnould Price observes in his study of the racial dynamics of *Kjalnesinga saga*, largely unvoiced. Indeed, as Price notes, throughout the prose sagas, *blámenn* are almost never given the humanising trait of speech.⁶⁸

This is not entirely the case in the *rímur*. Here, characters explicitly referred to as *blámenn* rarely get the chance to speak — the exception being the man in *Landrés rímur*, who refuses Milon's extravagant offers with impeccable insight into the steward's true motives — and are often treated as the same howling, undifferentiated mass as the *riddarasögur* portray. However, by virtue of describing the vast majority of their antagonists as, for example, 'hálfu dökkra en svarta mold' [twice as dark as black earth] (*Geðraunir* IV.54)⁶⁹ or 'blár sem hrauns á renni' [blue/black as a lava flow] (*Lokrur* II.13),⁷⁰ even in cases where the prose source makes no mention of this,⁷¹ the *rímur* corpus ends up containing a surprising number of characters of colour who are given speech and agency in the text, albeit in a highly circumscribed, stereotyped role.

⁶⁷ Although c.f. the recent article by Védís Ragnheiðardóttir on *Viktors saga*, as well as Rebecca Merkelbach's work on *Grettis saga*. Merkelbach, pp. 176–82; Védís Ragnheiðardóttir, "'Meir af viel en karlmennsku": Monstrous Masculinity in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*', in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), pp. 421–32.

⁶⁸ Basil Arnould Price, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 202.

⁷⁰ Finnur Jónsson, I, p. 296.

⁷¹ For example, *Lokrur*, although not a chivalric *rímur*, demonstrates some of the changes *rímur* poets could make to their material. In the account found in the Prose Edda, we are given almost no physical description of Skrímir, the giant that Þórr and Loki encounter on their journey to Útgarðar, other than his size. However, the *rímur* poet gives an extensive description of Skrímir, likening his mouth to a cave and his body to the colour of running lava, his nose to a ram's horn and his teeth to the tusks of a wild boar, a description that associates him far more strongly with the Icelandic landscape and the trolls of later folklore that inhabit it than the *jötnar* of mythology.

A discourse of masculinity must not only praise certain traits and behaviours as markers of idealised masculinity; it must also position other qualities as undesirable, as detracting from their possessor's manliness. Excessive sexual voracity is one of these qualities. It is a trait not seen in *rímur* protagonists, who, though they may well engage in sex outside of marriage, or even rape, usually marry the woman in question eventually.⁷² Even in a case like that of Hringur in *Geðraunir*, where he is forced to wed a woman other than his one true love, the *rímur* poet is careful to specify that his union with Brynveig does not result in any children; with none of the usual euphemisms for sex present, the audience is free to imagine that their marriage is entirely chaste.

In contrast, in *Geirarðs þáttur/rímur*, we encounter the heathen king Príamus, whose appetite for women in the lands he conquers is notorious:

Drottningar og konungadætur lætur hann leggja niður hjá sér viku og hálfan mánuð og svo lengi hverja sem honum fellst í þokka. Síðan sendir hann þær heim, sumar með barni, en sumar með annarri háðung. Allar fóru þær brott með harmi nógum.⁷³

[He forced queens and princesses to lie with him for a week or half a month or a similar amount of time, each of them who took his fancy. Then he sends them home, some with child, and some with some other form of disgrace. All of them went away with sorrow enough.]

Geirarðs rímur sidesteps the issue of pregnancy, but still clearly conveys Príamus' outrageous sexual appetites:

III.9

*Kóngurinn hefur þá eina art
undarlega má kalla.*

*Þykkja mun það þegnum hart
að þola hans sneypu alla.*

The king had then one trait
which might be called strange.

It will seem hard for men
to endure all of his shamelessness.

III.10

*Vissi hann, að vænar frúr,
væri í ríkum höllum,
lítt var þessi lofðung trúr:*

If he learnt that handsome women
were in rich halls,
this king showed little faithfulness:

⁷² The one exception here is Bæringur from *Bærings saga/rímur*, who has both a human lover and a fairy mistress.

⁷³ 'Mágus saga jarls (hin meiri)', in *Riddarasögur*, ed. by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1949), II, 135–429 (p. 404).

leggst hann með þeim öllum.

he lay with them all.

III.11

Horskar flutti hann hertogadætur

He delivered the wise daughters of dukes

heim þegar stríði linnti.

home when battle ended.

Aldrei meir en átta nætur

He never spent more than eight nights

einni hverri hann sinnti.

with each of them.

III.12

Sú var engi mektug mæð

There was no worthy maiden

í mildings ríki fríðu,

in the king's fair kingdom

að eigi kæmi kóngurinn nær

that did not come near the king

og kenndi hennar blíðu.

and was taught her pleasure.

It is no coincidence that in both texts, these descriptions follow hard on the heels of statements reinforcing Príamus' position as a specifically *heathen* king, from the distant (and therefore potentially dangerous) land of Serkland. For *rímur* poets, these traits come bundled together in associations: a foreign king will, practically by definition, be a worshipper of false gods, whose threat lies in his desire to possess both the lands and the women belonging to the *rímur* cycle's male protagonist.⁷⁴

Príamus is a particularly striking example of the trope, one whose proclivities are dwelt upon at length by both saga author and *rímur* poet, but similar hints of sexual rapaciousness underlie the majority of *rímur* antagonists. A typical antagonist is a foreign king (or warlord) who has marched on the kingdom of the protagonist or their ally with the aim of conquering it and marrying (or otherwise laying claim to) the ruler's daughter. Into this category fall Hárekur and, to a lesser extent, Tryggvi in *Geðraunir*, Kastor in *Filippó rímur*, Ermanus in *Jarlmanns rímur*, Mattías and his brother in *Sálus rímur* og *Nikanórs*, and Noterus, Kaldarius and Tirus in the various sub-tales of *Ektors rímur*. Variations on the theme also appear in *Reinalds rímur*, where the matter is confused by the fact that the

⁷⁴ The collocation of 'land og frú' / 'víf og lönd' [land(s) and lady] as the objects of an antagonist's desire appears several times within the *rímur* corpus. To say that women are treated simply as the property of their male relatives in *rímur* would be an oversimplification; as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued, women in chivalric texts are often portrayed as wise counsellors whose advice should be heeded. Men who do not listen to women are frequently worse off for it. That said, while female characters are granted some agency in *rímur*, they are also strongly associated with material possessions, especially gold, which a good ruler gives freely but not *too* freely (c.f. Viktor in *Viktors saga*), and land, which a good ruler protects and governs. The association between women and wealth is expanded upon in Chapter Four. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*.

protagonist's mother is the one to orchestrate a great deal of the kidnapping, and in *Dámusta rímur*, where King Jón of Smáland inverts the trope.

Jón arrives as a foreign king seeking to wed the beautiful Gratiana, with whom the eponymous protagonist Dámusti is deeply in love. Gratiana initially refuses Jón, which, in a typical *rímur* narrative, would be the cue for Jón and his accompanying army to besiege her kingdom and win her that way. Instead, Jón succeeds in persuading her with clever speech that even though she may not be in love with him, she might as well marry him if there is no one she likes better. The two marry and the *rímur* poet comments that Gratiana soon comes to love Jón so much that she can scarcely take her eyes off him (II.39). Meanwhile, Dámusti acts as though his love truly has been carried off against her will, pursuing her and Jón and fighting a spectacularly bloody battle with Jón that results in the latter's death. If Jón were in reality the cruel abductor of many other *rímur* cycles, Dámusti's actions would be perfectly fitting, but as it is, Dámusti's 'rescue' of Gratiana in fact leads to her apparent death from sorrow. It later emerges that Dámusti's actions at this point were controlled by the giant Alheimur, a self-described enemy of 'the White Christ'.

If Dámusti had been only a little more genre-aware, he might have realised that Jón is given the protagonist treatment in his introduction and is therefore unsuitable as sword-fodder. As Dámusti himself describes him:

II.3

*“Ég hefi fundið fylkir þann.
Frægra litum væri aldrei mann:*

*hárið er sem hrannar bál;
hilmi prýðir snjalligt mál.*

“I have met with that king.
There is no man of more famous
appearance:
his hair is like the wave's fire [GOLD];
eloquent words befit the king.

II.4

*Þess er lofðungs litur að sjá
líkt sem hleypt sé blóði í snjá;
höndin fögur og harðla sterk.
Heiðra kónginn sæmdar verk.*

This king's colour appears as if
blood has been scattered on snow;
fair hands and very strong.
Noble deeds honour the king.

II.5

*Engan flýr hann geira galdur,
gramur er ern við stála hjaldur.*

He never flees the magic of spears [BATTLE],
the king is mighty in the battle of steels

[BATTLE].

*Sá hefur öðling örnu brætt,
allt er folk við hilding hrætt.*⁷⁵

This king has fed eagles,
everyone fears the king.”

While Dámusti’s praise of Jón’s handsome appearance is a little excessive by *rímur* standards, his description does an excellent job of establishing Jón and Gratiana’s mutual suitability. Both are described in terms of the radiance of their physical forms, Jón with ‘hárið [...] sem hrannar bál’ [hair like the wave’s flame [GOLD]] (II.3) and Gratiana ‘björt’ [bright] (I.10; I.11), ‘skær’ [radiant] (I.8), ‘ljósust’ [brightest] (I.12) and ‘skugglaus að lita’ [without shadows to behold] (I.8).⁷⁶ Their resemblance is perhaps made most obvious when both have their complexion likened to blood in snow: ‘Þá er sem blóð við bjartan snjá | brúðar holdið hreina’ [the lady’s pure body is then like blood with bright snow] (I.9) and ‘Þess er lofðungs litur að sjá / líkt sem hleypt sé blóði í snjá’ [This king’s colouring appears as though blood has been scattered in snow] (II.4).⁷⁷ The couple’s shared beauty — within a mutually comprehensible framework of beauty standards — fits them for one another in a way that none of the various kings described as ‘darker than earth’ or similar could ever achieve. Jón is an acceptable foreign suitor, one whose epidermal race⁷⁸ matches that of his prospective bride, and one who demonstrates that he is quicker to talk than to fight.

It is not a coincidence that antagonists described as racial outsiders should also be depicted as sexually voracious. As a number of scholars have argued, the late medieval period in Iceland was a time of changing sexual norms, particularly among the elite, literate strata of society.⁷⁹ The new model of aristocratic male behaviour, promulgated by and reflected in the courtly literature of the period, favoured sexual restraint. In Icelandic texts, this is almost always seen within the bonds of marriage, or as a prelude to marriage; the love triangle plots that underpin, for example, the Lancelot tales in France and England, simply do not appear to have been popular in Scandinavian circles.⁸⁰ In characterising their antagonists as lacking in sexual restraint, *rímur* poets and saga authors strengthen

⁷⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 779.

⁷⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 772.

⁷⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 772, 779.

⁷⁸ ‘Epidermal race’ is a useful term coined by Geraldine Heng to describe the racialisation of groups based on physical appearance, especially skin colour. Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 181.

⁷⁹ See, for example Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “‘How Do You Know If It Is Love or Lust?’ On Gender, Status, and Violence in Old Norse Literature”; Bagerius, ‘Romance and Violence’.

⁸⁰ With the exception of the story of Tristan and Iseult/*Saga af Tístram og Ísödd* and *Le lai du cort mantel/Möttuls saga*, none of the romances translated into Old Norse feature infidelity as a plot point. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 204–5.

both the idea that sexual continence is the marker of a gentleman and also that its lack reveals a man who cannot be integrated into the social hierarchy of the elite.

As a rule, most antagonists are depicted as people from outside the protagonists' society, arriving to threaten it with violence. *Rímur* poets favour the kind of antagonistic relationship that lends itself well to a gory battle-scene with corpses littering the landscape, a motif that is easy to present as exciting and free of moral consequences when the poet has already done the work of depicting the enemy forces as inhuman, to be slaughtered as a ready demonstration of the protagonist's battle prowess. The idea of a traitor within the court hierarchy itself appears to have been considerably less popular, but there are two examples from the medieval *rímur* corpus — three, if *Mágus rímur* is included, although as I will discuss later in this section, *Mágus rímur* is unusual in its approach to pro- and antagonists in general. Both *Landrés rímur*/the *Landrés þáttur* section of *Karlamagnús saga* and *Konráðs saga/rímur* feature treacherous retainers as their antagonists. In both cases, although the men are thoroughly enmeshed in their surrounding social hierarchies, their sexual behaviour reveals them to be out-of-step with the more admirable members of the court.

In *Landrés rímur/þáttur*, the events of the narrative are precipitated by the king's steward Milon attempting to convince Queen Ólíf to have an affair with him while the king is absent on a hunting trip. He presents himself as deserving of her attention by dint of his loyal service to her husband (II.66) and the implication that it is somehow her responsibility to cool the fires of his 'logandi' [burning] lust (II.67).⁸¹ When Ólíf, a deeply pious Christian woman, refuses to countenance adultery, Milon uses drugged ale in order to stage a scene in which the king returns home to find his wife in bed with an unnamed *blámaður* whom Milon has similarly tricked and drugged. The innocent *blámaður* is executed on the spot and Ólíf is walled up in a chamber filled with poisonous snakes and toads for the next seven years.

Throughout these texts, Milon shows a canny awareness of the prevailing social and sexual attitudes of his court, and is able to manipulate others into acting in accordance with these norms while he himself transgresses them. His revenge on the queen would be ineffectual if he were not aware of the violent reaction even the suggestion of miscegenation would provoke. He could, presumably, have procured any man he could persuade to drink drugged ale for this purpose — one cannot imagine the king being thrilled to find his wife in bed with *anyone* — but his choice of a *blámaður* in particular reveals a finely tuned knowledge of precisely which cultural anxieties to press on in order for Milon to achieve his ends. He likewise uses his position as the king's steward — a position of some power, but nonetheless a subservient one — to gain the trust of both Ólíf and her husband, using this position to abuse the trust placed in him at every turn — most starkly

⁸¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 406–7.

demonstrated when he persuades Ólíf not to tell her husband about Milon’s proposition and then drugs her with the very drink they use to seal their agreement (II.75–85).⁸²

The portrayal of the *blámaður* here is significant. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *blámenn* who are identified solely as *blámenn* are rarely humanised enough to be granted the power of speech in these texts. Yet when Milon offers the man gold, honour and ‘þar með fljóð svo fagurt og hvítt’ [therewith a lady so fair and white] (II.91), far from being tempted by these things, the *blámaður* replies: “‘Kjör ég mér heldur, kesju rjóður, | kost og drykk að fanga,’” [“I would rather, reddener of halberds [WARRIOR], choose to receive food and drink,”] (II.92), and observes that, while God has never granted him the joy of a wife or wealth, he is certain that accepting Milon’s offer will result in his death, which seems like a poor trade (II.93).⁸³ In contrast to the duplicitous Milon, the man is presented as humble, God-fearing, and courteous (not to mention, keenly aware of his likely fate as a *blámaður* in a chivalric romance), thus emphasising the depths of Milon’s depravity. Sadly, the *rímur* poet does not seem entirely prepared to deal with a sympathetic *blámaður* in her text, falling back on conventional descriptors more appropriate for adversaries than for innocent bystanders. In II.89, we are told that Milon ‘lýsti það, sem leturinn tér, | ljótan blámann fanga’ [desired that which the writing describes: to seize an ugly *blámaður*], and in II.96 and II.30, the man, whose free or enslaved status is otherwise unspecified, is called ‘þrællinn’, a term which could be interpreted literally as ‘the slave’ here, but which also appears as a general term of abuse in *rímur*.⁸⁴ The fact that a character who otherwise seems intended as a sympathetic figure could be referred to with these conventional insults shows how deeply connected *rímur* poets found *blámenn* — with all their proto-racialisation in these narratives⁸⁵ — with wickedness and antagonism.

The treacherous retainer of *Konráðs saga/rímur*, Roðbert, is an unusual figure in the *rímur* corpus. As mentioned above, *rímur* cycles tend to prefer antagonists whose villainy is clear and apparent to all from early in the narrative, an inevitable consequence of tying moral virtue and physical appearance so closely together: if a character is villainous and their external appearance bears the markers of that villainy, keeping up a long-running pretence of innocence is not really feasible. However, Milon and Roðbert are two notable exceptions.

Roðbert is the son of Earl Roðgeir, a loyal retainer of King Ríkarður. As Roðgeir is known to be unusually skilled in knightly accomplishments, as well as a learned man, the king sends his son

⁸² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnaafn*, II, pp. 408–9.

⁸³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnaafn*, II, p. 410.

⁸⁴ Similar, in fact, to the way Milon is repeatedly called *trúður(inn)* (e.g. in II.90) — he is certainly not a juggler, as the term would literally translate to, but *rímur* poets draw on a large number of words within the semantic ranges of ‘fool’, ‘weakling’, and ‘poor person’ when looking for unflattering epithets, most of which should not be understood literally. Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnaafn*, II, pp. 410–11, 416.

⁸⁵ Cole, ‘Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the *Blámaður*’.

Konráður to be fostered alongside the earl's son. In the subsequent section on sworn brotherhood, I will discuss the ways in which the two young men are presented as a complementary pair, at least in Konráður's eyes, with Roðbert's skills making up for any deficiencies in Konráður's own. Roðbert is presented, superficially at least, as the ideal young retainer, with nothing to distinguish him from genuinely loyal vassals such as Jarlmann in *Jarlmanns saga/rímur*. In the *rímur*, he is introduced in the conventional terms one would expect of a young nobleman:

I.22

Listugur var hann á líkams burð,

lýstur að vega með stáli,

mannvits fékk hann þeygi þurð

og þótti snjallur í máli.⁸⁶

He [Roðbert] was skilful in the carriage of
his body,

eager to make blows with steel,

yet with no waning of his wits

and he seemed eloquent in speech.

There is certainly more emphasis on his wits and eloquence than Konráður receives in his own introduction:

I.14

Buðlungs son var blíður og merkur,

brodda femur að hjaldri,

þýður og ör og þrautar sterkur

þegar á ungum aldri.⁸⁷

The king's son [Konráður] was cheerful and
noteworthy,

agile in the battle of points [BATTLE],

pleasant and generous and strong in his
efforts

already at a young age.

However, given a key element of Konráður's character, indeed a necessary component of the narrative as a whole, is his lack of intelligence, both emotional and linguistic, this is unsurprising. Roðbert is certainly not introduced immediately with epithets such as *illur* [evil] or *slægur* [sly], as other morally dubious figures are in *rímur* (e.g. Loki in *Þrymlur* and *Lokrur*; Hárekur and Eiríkur in *Geðraunir*).

The saga also does not immediately draw attention to Roðbert's villainy, but does introduce him as a lesser shadow of Konráður, framing his talents as a reaction to that inadequacy:

⁸⁶ Wisén, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Wisén, p. 93.

Roðbert er og næmur að íþróttum og kemst þó hvergi nær Konráði og er hann getur það að lita, leggur hann fyrir sér að nema að tala allar tungur; og verður hann algjör í þessari íþrótt. [...] En Roðbert iðkaði þetta svo mjög, að hann kunni jafnvel að mæla tungur annarra þjóða og sína sjálfs.⁸⁸

[Roðbert was also skilled at physical accomplishments, and yet could not come near Konráður. And when he sees this, he applies himself to learning all languages; and he became proficient in this pursuit [...] And Roðbert cultivated this [skill] so much that he was better able to speak the languages of other peoples than they themselves.]

With no obvious external or narratological markers of villainy at this point, it therefore comes as something of a surprise to the audience to learn that Roðbert shares the trait of immoderate sexual appetites seen in so many other *rímur* antagonists. Our first indication that Roðbert is not, in fact, a nice young man comes in his treatment of Sivilia/Silvía,⁸⁹ Konráður's sister. In I.41 of the *rímur* cycle, we are told that Roðbert 'lýsti brúði að gilja' [longed to seduce the lady]. In the saga, the question of how consensual the affair was remains highly ambiguous. Sivilia expresses her unhappiness at the pregnancy and implies that the fault lies mostly with Roðbert, suggesting that this was more likely rape than a mutual affair: "Það skaltu vita, að ég er ekki heil, og kenni ég þér það, því að þú veldur," ["You should know that I am not well, and I blame you for that because you made it happen,"].⁹⁰

In the *rímur*, however, Silvía seems a more active party in proceedings and her main concern, upon discovering her pregnancy, is for Roðbert to avoid being hanged or tortured by her father when he finds out:

I.44

*“Örlög vilja yfrið þungt
oss með nauðum spenna;
nú geng ég með jóðið jungt,
jarlsson, mun ég þér kenna.*

“Fate wants to embrace us with
sorrows heavily enough;
now, earl's son, I will tell you:
I am pregnant with a young child.

I.45

*Faðir minn verður stríði strengður
stóru um atburð þenna;
muntu því með háðung hengður*

My father will be greatly strained
with fury about this event;
thus you will be shamefully hanged

⁸⁸ 'Konráðs saga', in *Fornsögur Suðrlanda. Magus saga jarls, Konráðs saga, Bærings saga, Flovents saga, Bevers saga*, ed. by Gustaf Cederschiöld (Lund: Fr. Berlings, 1884), pp. 43–84 (p. 44).

⁸⁹ The name varies between *rímur* and *saga*.

⁹⁰ Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga', p. 46.

og harður þínur kenna.”⁹¹

and experience harsh torment.”

The fact that she firstly considers their misfortune a joint one (‘Fate wants to embrace *us*’) and secondly attributes it to ‘örlög’ [Fate] rather than Roðbert’s actions suggests that the *rímur* poet considered their affair to be a mutually consensual one. Nonetheless, Roðbert’s seduction of the king’s daughter — his foster-brother’s sister — in a fashion that does not result in their marriage presages his later efforts to ‘seduce’ the princess Mátthildur.⁹²

While *Jarlmanns saga*, with its falsely suspected retainer, is generally considered to be a response to Roðbert’s treachery in *Konráðs saga*,⁹³ Roðbert himself is a reaction to pre-existing character types in *rímur*. An audience familiar with other medieval Icelandic texts would have been well acquainted with the concept of both the foster-brother and the sworn brother; while fostering alone is not enough in the *Íslendingasögur* to prevent later treachery and disruption of the relationship, the swearing of oaths in adulthood, as Konráður and Roðbert do, is usually the basis for a firmly loyal relationship.⁹⁴ Roðbert’s later betrayal therefore subverts this expected pattern of sworn brother behaviour, as established in the earlier body of sagas, while at the same time defying the expectation of romance audiences that an antagonist will be easily identifiable by their foreign origins and appearance.

Mágus saga/rímur, meanwhile, plays with the moral ambiguity of its characters to an unusual extent. Its opening plotline appears, at first glance, to be a typical bridal-quest narrative: King Játmundur⁹⁵ demands of his court whether he is not the finest model of kingship they have ever seen. One brave courtier, Sigurður, observes that while the king cannot be matched for his martial skills, his *marital* situation is a flaw in his otherwise excellent character.⁹⁶ Sigurður is then sent as a proxy wooer

⁹¹ Wisén, p. 97.

⁹² On the trope of foster-brothers marrying one another’s sisters, see the later section of this chapter.

⁹³ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words. The Evolution of Medieval Romance in Iceland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 143.

⁹⁴ Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (York: York Medieval Press, 2015), pp. 211–12. C.f. also *Gísla saga*, in which the disruption of an oath-swearing ceremony is what foreshadows the later breakdown of the would-be sworn brothers’ relationship. ‘Gísla saga Surssonar’, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1958), pp. 1–118 (pp. 22–24).

⁹⁵ Consistently referred to as *Játmund* in the nominative in *Mágus rímur*. *Rímur* poets often elide the nominative *-(u)r* ending of masculine names; the same is also true of *Híring(ur)* in this text and *Reinald(ur)* in *Reinalds rímur*. As the saga calls these characters by the more expected forms *Játmundur* and *Híringur*, I have used this form throughout for consistency.

⁹⁶ Whether the king’s character is in fact excellent is something the subsequent narrative throws into doubt, but he certainly performs the requisite actions of generosity to his retainers and success in battle to be convincing as a ‘good king’. A very similar scene to this one precipitates the bridal quest in *Jarlmanns saga*,

to the princess Ermengá, reputed to be the most excellent and beautiful woman in the world, and the only woman the king deems worthy of himself. Ermengá expresses some reluctance about the match, but observes that if King Játmundur cannot win her by wooing, he will no doubt win her by war:

I.40

<i>“Ef biður þú ekki,” að brúðurin tér,</i>	The lady says: “If you don’t grant
<i>“buðlung þann að ráða,</i>	this king his will,
<i>hann mun hefndina hyggja þér,</i>	he will quickly think
<i>herra faðir minn, bráða.”⁹⁷</i>	to take revenge on you, my lord father.”

She consents to the arrangement but refuses to let the king see her true beauty, instead concealing her face with a mask that makes her appear much paler than she really is. King Játmundur is furious to receive what he considers a substandard bride and claims he is being mocked by Ermengá. As a result of this, he is cold and cruel towards his new wife, and when he is called away to battle, leaves her with three impossible tasks to perform: to build him a hall as magnificent as her father’s within three years; to acquire three treasures which are no less than his own horse, hawk and sword (previously described as the best in all the world); and to bear him a son, though he has thus far refused to sleep with her and will now be away for several years. In an elaborate scheme requiring her to disguise herself as both an Irish earl called Híringur and this earl’s wife, Queen Ermengá does succeed in fulfilling the three challenges and reveals her true beauty to the king, resulting in what the saga claims is thereafter a happy marriage for the two of them.

However, as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued in a recent article on the younger redaction of *Mágus saga*, the process of getting to this point calls into question not only King Játmundur’s own masculinity, but the stability of masculinity as a construct.⁹⁸ My own study focuses on the older, shorter redaction as this is the one the *rímur* cycle is based on, but the point stands. The interactions between Híringur and Játmundur are quite different in the older redaction: rather than presenting ‘himself’ as the kidnapper of a beautiful maiden whom Játmundur (or Hlöðvir, as he is called in the younger redaction) can then rescue and seduce, Híringur is instead an ally of Játmundur, one whom Játmundur is willing to credit with their joint success in battle. In the older redaction,

from which it is apparent how key to the successful performance of royal masculinity the acquisition of a suitable wife was thought to be.

⁹⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 536.

⁹⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, “‘With mirthful merriment’: Masquerade and Masculinity in *Mágus saga jarls*’, in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 77–94.

Játmundur claims to want to reward Híringur for his help with one of his three famous treasures, then suggests that they should play three chess matches for them, winner takes all. Híringur initially protests, saying that he would happily receive just a single treasure, but the king insists: “‘Ég skal ráða,’” he declares flatly [I shall decide].⁹⁹ Híringur handily defeats the king in all three games and departs with the treasures, leaving the king ‘allreiður’ [extremely angry].¹⁰⁰

In the introduction to this chapter, I noted that chess is one of several skills male *rímur* protagonists are conventionally introduced as being good at, along with swimming, horse-riding, and martial skills. King Játmundur especially values his chess skills: in the saga, we are told ‘en á tafli var honum mestur metnaður’ [and he prided himself most at chess],¹⁰¹ while in the *rímur*, it is just included alongside the other conventional accomplishments:

I.13

*Sjóli kunningi sundið mest,
sæmdir má það kalla,
tefla skák og temja hest,
traustur á burtreið alla.*¹⁰²

The king was best at swimming –
one may call that fitting –
playing chess and training horses,
reliable in all jousting.

Híringur’s easy, repeated victories on this front, as well as the explicit acknowledgement that Játmundur could not have won his war without Híringur’s help, demonstrate not only Ermengá’s skill in performing masculinity, but also the deficiencies in Játmundur’s own performance. While neither text explicitly connects this to his mistreatment of his wife — his failure to perform socially sanctioned heterosexuality, which is an intrinsic part of gender performance in these texts — none of this humiliating sequence of events would have occurred without it.

Játmundur is also villainised for his aberrant sexual behaviour. In the first place, he refuses to sleep with his wife in anything more than the most literal sense, spreading a cloth between them on their wedding night and turning away from her: ‘Og er þjónustumenn voru braut gengnir, tekur keisari eina blæju og breiðir aðra yfir sig, en aðra á kóngsdóttur; síðan leggst hann niður og snerist ekki að henni’ [And when the serving men had gone away, the emperor takes a cloth and spreads one over

⁹⁹ ‘Mágus saga jarls’, in *Fornsögur Suðrlanda. Mágus saga jarls, Konraðs saga, Bærings saga, Flovents saga, Bevers saga*, ed. by Gustaf Cederschiöld (Lund: Fr. Berlings, 1884), pp. 1–42 (p. 5).

¹⁰⁰ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 1.

¹⁰² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 532.

himself and one over the king's daughter; then he lay down and did not turn towards her].¹⁰³

Meanwhile, in the *rímur* cycle:

I.73

*Blæju eina buðlung tók
og breiddi þeirra á milli;
garpurinn enga gleðina jók
til gamans við bauga stilli.*

The king took a cloth
and spread it between them;
the man did not take any joy
in entertainment with the ruler of rings
[WOMAN].¹⁰⁴

I.74

*Faðmar ekki fljóðið ríkt
fylkir þessi inn svinni:
leit ég engan leika slíkt
lofðung brúði sinni.¹⁰⁵*

This clever king did not
embrace the wealthy lady:
I never saw such games
[between] the king and his bride.

That this is not a case of celibacy or asexuality, but rather a deliberate punishment for Ermengá's supposed humiliation of him at their wedding feast, is borne out by his later treatment of 'Híringur's wife' (in reality Ermengá, stripped of the disguising mask she has worn thus far). As Híringur's fleet prepares to depart for Ireland, Játmundur comes across a tent left alone on the shore, in which a woman lies sleeping. Játmundur assumes this must be Híringur's wife and 'hann leggst niður hjá þessi konu. Hann þykkist nú hafa nokkuð fyrir gripina, er hann hefir gert jarli skömm' [he lay down beside this woman. He now thinks to have something for the treasures, [with] which he has shamed the jarl].¹⁰⁶ The saga leaves the true identity of the woman unrevealed, while the *rímur* poet chooses instead to emphasise the foolishness of King Játmundur's behaviour here:

II.67

*Keisarinn litur kvinnu þá,
kenni mátti hann Ermengá;*

The emperor sees a woman then,
he might have been able to recognise
Ermengá;

¹⁰³ Cederschiöld, 'Mágus saga jarls', p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Stilli* here appears to be a feminine form of the masculine king-*heiti stillir*; although both words look identical in the accusative, a kenning for 'woman' is expected here.

¹⁰⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 541.

¹⁰⁶ Cederschiöld, 'Mágus saga jarls', p. 5.

*hún hvílir þar með heiður og skraut,
hinnan var þá tekin á braut.*

she rests there with honour and adornment,
the mask was then taken off.

II.68

*Heimskan var honum heldur nær
harla mjög, sem greinum vér,
því að hann hyggur Híring nú
hann muni eiga þessa frú.*

He was then extremely close to foolishness,
as we will explain,
because he now thinks that
this woman must be Híringur's wife.

II.69

*Vísir hefur ei vant um það

víst og gerði þegar í stað
að leggjast þar með ljósri frú;
leikið trú ég hann gæti nú.¹⁰⁷*

The king does not trouble himself about
that
of course and immediately made
to lie down there with the radiant lady;
I think he managed [some] games now.

The combination of 'leikur' with an authorial aside here in II.69 recalls the very similar phrasing of I.74, contrasting the lack of 'games' in the expected, socially sanctioned place of the wedding night bed with these wholly unsanctioned 'games' played (as far as Játmundur is aware) with another man's wife. Although this scene is less explicit than other rape scenes seen in *riddarasögur*, the fact that it results in the son Játmundur demanded of Ermengá before he left leaves us in no doubt as to what has occurred. While the encounter was in fact orchestrated by Ermengá all along, the fact that Játmundur is willing to so mistreat the wife of an ally in a fit of temper reveals him to be far from the model of masculinity a king should be.

Játmundur continues to display violence against inappropriate subjects throughout the course of the saga and *rímur*. When he eventually returns from the war and learns that Ermengá has succeeded in the three 'impossible' tasks he set, he grows so angry that he knocks his wife to the floor:

III.31

*Sjóli upp úr sæti spratt,
síðan frá ég að þústurinn datt,
vífi svo við vanginn skall,*

The king sprang up from his seat,
then I heard he landed such a blow,
it resounded on his wife's cheek,

¹⁰⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 552.

*hún varð að þiggja á gólfi fall.*¹⁰⁸

she ended up falling to the floor.

In the saga, ‘keisari hratt drottningu frá sér, svo að hon lá fallin á gólfinu’ [the emperor pushed the queen away from him, so that she lay fallen on the floor],¹⁰⁹ rather than outright striking her, but in both cases, this is an almost unique example of a man using physical violence against a woman who has not been explicitly designated as monstrous in some way.¹¹⁰ Following this scene, Ermengá removes the mask that has been making her appear unnaturally pale, revealing her to be the beautiful woman Játmundur assaulted earlier. In the saga, Játmundur makes no apologies for his actions: Ermengá explains that she was the woman in the tent, Játmundur acknowledges that they are the same person, and the saga tells us, ‘Tokust þá upp nýjar ástar með þeim drottningu ok keisara’ [then new love began between the queen and the emperor],¹¹¹ a somewhat unlikely conclusion to this section.

In the *rímur*, Játmundur is at least willing to acknowledge Ermengá’s brilliance in solving his impossible challenges: “‘Að viti og ráðum, vífið hér, visku ber þú langt af mér,’” [“In wits and counsel, lady, you far surpass me for wisdom,”] (III.36).¹¹² He also declares that he will attempt to make amends: “‘Bæti ég allt með blíðu það,’” [“I will improve everything with joy,”] (III.37).¹¹³ The conclusion that ‘Ástir takast nú upp með þeim’ [love now begins for them] (III.38) still comes across as an abrupt about-face, given the foregoing c. 180 stanzas’ content, but this is in keeping with the *rímur* poet’s marginally less negative portrayal of Játmundur.¹¹⁴ This treatment is evident when the king’s introduction in both texts is compared. In the saga, he is given very little in the way of positive descriptors, termed ‘eigi svo vinsæll’ [not so popular] and ‘ofmetnaðarmaður’ [an arrogant man]; the kindest that is said of him is that he is ‘þróttamaður mikill’ [a great sportsman], although without the ‘good sport’ sense that the term carries in English.¹¹⁵ We are also told that his courtier Sigurður plays a vital role in the court because ‘hann var góðgjarn og vinsæll og bætti það mjög skaplyndi keisara’ [he was kind and popular and this greatly improved the emperor’s temper];¹¹⁶ Játmundur’s temper is apparently so notorious that he requires someone to constantly smooth things over for him.

¹⁰⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 557.

¹⁰⁹ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ Giantesses and maiden kings are generally acceptable targets for male violence in *ridðarasögur*, neither of which category applies to Ermengá.

¹¹¹ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 7.

¹¹² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 558.

¹¹³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 558.

¹¹⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 558.

¹¹⁵ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Cederschiöld, ‘Mágus saga jarls’, p. 1.

Meanwhile, the *rímur* cycle grants him a fairly conventional introduction. He is generous ('öðling var við ýta mildur, | ör af gripar eldi' [the king was generous to men, free with the fire of the fist [GOLD]] (I.11)), skilled at suitably manly pursuits (I.13), well-educated, and eloquent (In mesta frægð af milding rann | mennt og heiðri snjöllum [The greatest fame flowed from the king [in terms of] education and honourable eloquence] (I.17)).¹¹⁷ As with the *blámaður* of *Landrés rímur*, the poet seems inclined to fall back on conventional descriptors even when they are incongruous with the character of the man being described.

Despite the apparently happy conclusion of the bridal-quest portion of *Mágus saga/rímur*, the king, egged on by the villainous Earl Ubbi, remains a major antagonist of the piece. The next time he is defeated at chess, he is so enraged that he kills his opponent, beginning a long-running feud with the sons of the earl Ámundi (nephews of the eponymous Mágus) that lasts until his own death. While the saga is straightforward about the king's bad temper and jealous nature, the *rímur* cycle seems less prepared to deal with a king who is not a shining example of chivalry, praising the 'list' [skill] with which he plays chess, even as he loses match after match (II.45; II.51).¹¹⁸ The poet has an easier time working with the 'wicked retainer' archetype already discussed in *Landrés rímur* and *Konráðs rímur* when it comes to Earl Ubbi. His introduction leaves no doubt that he is the villain of the piece:

IV.27

Lygi og pretti lærði hann,

lymskur í öllum greinum;

halurinn allt með hvinsku vann

*heldur en drengskap hreinum.*¹¹⁹

He learnt lies and trickery,

all manner of deceit;

he won everything by dishonesty

rather than clean courage.

Despite Játmundur's poor behaviour earlier in the narrative, he is never described in such overwhelmingly negative terms as these. Though the latter part of the *Mágus saga* narrative revolves around Mágus' superiority over the king, the *rímur* poet adapting it evinces a certain discomfort with this level of disruption to the social hierarchy, being far readier to assign negative descriptors to a power-hungry earl than a bad-tempered king.

As a general rule, *rímur* antagonists are threats to the established hierarchy of the protagonists' society. Many are presented as outsiders, invaders from another land, racialised and

¹¹⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 532–33.

¹¹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 597.

¹¹⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 563.

often dehumanised in the process.¹²⁰ Others are of lower social status than the protagonists: Milon the steward; Roðbert the earl's son; Ubbi the earl. In both scenarios, their efforts to seize power for themselves — power which is often symbolised through their claims to women's bodies — are profoundly disruptive to existing social structures. In their commitment to depicting kings — even bad kings — with conventional terms of praise while being willing to heap insults on antagonists who are *not* on top of the social pyramid, *rímur* poets reveal a concern with stability and conservation that is perhaps unsurprising in a genre that would go on to survive relatively unchanged for the next five centuries.

FOSTER-BROTHERS AND SWORN BROTHERS IN CHIVALRIC SAGAS AND RÍMUR

The other side of the coin to men who fight and kill one another is men who choose a lifelong relationship with one another. Sometimes, of course, as in *Konráðs saga/rímur*, the two become one and the same. Close relationships between pairs or groups of men are well known from across the saga corpus, not just the *riddarasögur*. Notable examples in the *Íslendingasögur* include Kjartan Ólafsson and Bolli Þorleiksson in *Laxdæla saga*, and Njáll Þorgeirsson and Gunnar Hámundarson in *Njáls saga*. In both these cases, the men begin the saga on friendly terms and only later grow antagonistic, their amicable relationship ending up subordinated to the status-fuelled rivalry between their wives, whether that status is based on material wealth (Hallgerður and Bergþóra in *Njáls saga*) or on desired affection from one of the men (Guðrún and Hrefna in *Laxdæla saga*). A similar pattern to that of *Laxdæla saga* can also be seen in a number of poets' sagas, in which an antagonistic relationship between two men is triangulated through the woman they both desire — although unlike in *Laxdæla saga*, the men rarely have a background of friendship gone sour.¹²¹

The *riddarasögur* and their *rímur* reworkings handle the 'sworn brother' motif rather differently: here brotherhood, once sworn, is seldom put on such a downward trajectory.¹²² A foster-

¹²⁰ Meanwhile, the raiding excursions of *rímur* protagonists are universally presented as a praiseworthy aspect of their martial masculinity, the people they defeat for the most part faceless and voiceless in the narrative.

¹²¹ On the triangulation of homoerotic desire through a woman who is often little more than a focal point for the relationship of two men, see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972). In at least one poet's saga, *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, the homoerotic subtext becomes text through the in-story creation of a carving of the two men in a sexually suggestive position. 'Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa', in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), pp. 109–212 (pp. 154–55).

¹²² I will be using the terms 'foster-brother' and 'sworn brother' somewhat interchangeably here, partly in order to avoid too much repetition, and partly because the texts themselves do not distinguish between men who are fostered together, i.e. raised from childhood in the same household (e.g. Hermann and Jarlmann in

brother is for life, not just for the beginning of the saga. The major exception to this is *Konráðs saga*, which, as already discussed, combines the foster-brother topos with that of the treacherous retainer, though even here, Konráður remains steadfastly loyal to his adoptive brother, pleading for Roðbert's life not once but twice, in the face of the latter's seduction (or possibly rape) of Konráður's sister, not to mention multiple attempts to get Konráður himself killed. Meanwhile, *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns* plays with the familiar trope of two sworn brothers driven to enmity by their love of the same woman, but this is ultimately proven to be a figment of Hermann's jealous imagination and the saga concludes with Jarlmann's marriage to Hermann's sister Herborg, a clear symbol of the renewal of his close relationship with Hermann himself.

Love at First S(wordf)ight

In several cases, far from starting close and gradually growing estranged, the sworn brothers begin their relationship with outright combat. This is the case for Viktor and Blávus (*Viktors saga og Blávuss/Blávuss rímur*), Alanus and Lucius (*Ektors saga/rímur*), Hringur and Tryggvi (*Hrings saga og Tryggva/Geðraunir*), Sigurður and Ásmundur (*Sigurðar rímur fóts*), and Sálus and Nikanór (*Sálus saga og Nikanórs/Sálus rímur*),¹²³ though the circumstances for each of these pairs are somewhat different.

Viktor and Blávus' meeting appears the least constrained by circumstances; rather, the two seem to meet out of a mutual, though unplanned, desire to ride out into the world in search of adventure and challenge.¹²⁴ Though Blávus is the one to issue the challenge, it does not stem from any

Jarlmanns saga, both raised by Jarlmann's father Roðgeir), and those who swear brotherhood as adults (e.g. Viktor and Blávus in *Viktors saga*) in their use of the terms. Viktor and Blávus repeatedly refer to one another as *fóstbróðir* throughout their saga, despite only meeting as adults, while Konráður and Roðbert in *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* are called *svarabræður* [sworn brothers] in the narrative, although they were both raised by Roðbert's father Roðgeir. The concept of 'blood brotherhood' seems less applicable to the chivalric texts; as far as I am aware, there is no comparable example to the scene in *Gísli saga* where the swearing of brotherhood requires the physical mingling of blood (though it is worth noting that even in *Gísli saga*, this process is still termed *fóstbræðralag*). Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 22–24.

¹²³ In its medieval form, *Hrings saga og Tryggva* exists only as two single-folio fragments (27r, AM 489 4to and 27r, AM 586 4to, both from the fifteenth century). Agnete Loth, 'Preface', in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances V. Nitida saga. Sigrgarðs saga frækna. Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands. Sigurðar saga turnara. Hrings saga ok Tryggva*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagæðar B, 24 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965), pp. vii–xii (p. ix). There is another version of the saga known from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts that appears to have been written based on the *rímur*. Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 316. All the other texts discussed in this section have complete saga and *rímur* forms, although the *rímur* do not always cover the full narrative as found in the sagas.

¹²⁴ The attitude seen throughout *Viktors saga/Blávuss rímur* of seeking adventure for its own sake, or for the sake of proving one's chivalric prowess, is relatively rare in the chivalric *rímur*, although it is a prominent theme of *Ektors saga/rímur*.

enmity on his part, but rather a recognition of his and Viktor's great similarity, and therefore a need on Blávus' part to discover how well-matched they truly are. This is even more apparent in the *rímur* cycle than the saga, where Blávus' opening speech to Viktor specifically notes that they are of 'jöfnum aldri' [equal age] (I.44) as a reason for them to test their skills against each other.¹²⁵ This is not mentioned in the saga, but in both texts, as soon as the various trials of strength and skill get underway, the narrator observes that 'þeir voru í öllum íþróttum jafnir' [they were equal in all activities],¹²⁶ and in the *rímur* that '[á] íþróttirnar jöfrar tveir | jafnir báðir voru' [the two princes were both equal in [their] activities] (I.47).¹²⁷

One notable point of divergence between the saga and the *rímur* cycle is in their respective depictions of the combat between the two future foster-brothers. The saga chooses to emphasise their mutual skill at avoiding each other's blows, commenting, after the fight has gone on for some time, that 'hafði þá hvergi sári komið á annan' [then no injury had occurred to either].¹²⁸ In the saga, the combatants' strength is conveyed through their effects on the surrounding countryside, which 'skalf sem á þræði léki' [trembled like a plucked string],¹²⁹ rather than through the fight's impact on the two men's bodies, or even their armour or weapons — with the exception of the easily broken lances.

Conversely, the *rímur*, apparently bowing to the genre's demand for gory fight scenes, focuses on the ferocity of their attacks:

I.49

Bragnar kljúfa brynjur ótt

— *bert er hold á þegnum.*

Hlífina renndi hjörinn fljótt

*hverja senn í gegnum.*¹³⁰

The men cleave mailcoats furiously

— the men's bodies are bare.

The swords swiftly ran the shields

completely through at the same time.

Far from neither being injured, the blood flows freely:

I.54

Lagaði blóð úr benjum heitt.

Hot blood flowed from the wounds.

¹²⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 610.

¹²⁶ 'Victors saga ok Blávus', in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances I. Victors saga ok Blávus. Valdimars saga. Ectors saga*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagæanæ B, 20 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962), pp. 1–49 (p. 7).

¹²⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 611.

¹²⁸ Loth, 'Victors saga', p. 7.

¹²⁹ Loth, 'Victors saga', p. 7.

¹³⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 611.

Brustu Hildar klæði.

Hild's clothing [MAILCOATS] burst.

Pegnar fá svo brandi beitt

The men got so bitten by the swords

*að báðir falla af mæði.*¹³¹

that both collapsed from exhaustion.

Indeed, the *rímur* poet appears to be having so much fun with their fight that, rather than the single episode of combat depicted in the saga, the fight is given an interval and redoubled in the second half, which is where I.54 appears in all its bloodstained glory. In the saga, once the two have fought long enough to prove their equal skill, both parties are content to sit down for a picnic lunch, during which they swear an oath of brotherhood. Indeed, they both courteously dismount, 'lofandi hvor annars hreysti og riddaradóm' [each praising the other's valour and chivalry].¹³²

In the *rímur* cycle, however, Blávus makes two failed attempts to call a halt to the proceedings. At his first attempt, he offers Viktor his name (hitherto unrevealed, though in the saga this is part of his initial introduction) but refuses to reveal his lineage, which provokes Viktor into continuing the fight. In his second attempt, he declares that he is willing to trust Viktor as a brother and also concedes Viktor's superiority in combat, a sentiment he does not express in the saga: "Fæddist engin fremri en þú, | fleygir grænra skjalda," [no one greater than you has been born, O destroyer of green shields] (I.55).¹³³ Yet despite this peace-offering, the fight continues for another stanza and its bloodiness is once again stressed: 'Seggir vöktu sára lauður; | sama rann blóðið heita' [The men stirred up the lather of wounds [BLOOD]; the hot blood ran together] (I.59).¹³⁴

The style of *rímur* narration, with its occasional rapid jumps between topics, leaves it somewhat ambiguous as to whether this stirring up of blood should be taken as belonging to the fierce combat of the previous stanza, or whether we should instead read it as an elliptical reference to an oath of blood-brotherhood. Given the second half of the stanza relates the two men's mutual admiration for each other's courage, perhaps the blood here, while borne of combat, should be read as sealing the peace between Viktor and Blávus. There is certainly no other references to them swearing an oath of brotherhood at this time; we move from Blávus' mid-combat entreaties in I.55 to the two men departing on Blávus' magical cloth, with only this ambiguous stanza intervening. In fact, it is not until they arrive in Blávus' kingdom and Blávus introduces Viktor to his assembled populace that their relationship is clarified:

¹³¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 612.

¹³² Loth, 'Victors saga', p. 7.

¹³³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 612.

¹³⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 612.

II.11

<i>“Við höfum bundið bræðra trú</i>	“We have bound ourselves together with the faith
<i>og ber þar ekki á milli.</i>	of brothers
<i>Land og þjóð sem linna brú</i>	and nothing comes between us.
<i>legg ég halft við stilli.”¹³⁵</i>	[My] land and people, like [my] bridge of the
	serpent [GOLD],
	I give half of to the king (i.e. Viktor).”

It is extremely unclear how much of this arrangement Viktor was informed of in advance.

Meanwhile, in the saga, the swearing of brotherhood is a protracted and tactile experience:

Blávus svarar, “[...] en hitt vill ég vita, hvort þú vilt sverjast í fóstbræðralag við mig [...].” Viktor svarar, “[...] og vil ég gjarna þinn fóstbróðir vera.” Takast nú í hendur og minnst við og fremja sitt fóstbræðralag eftir fornra manna síð: skyldi hvor annars hefna sem bur eða bróðir.¹³⁶

[Blávus replies, “[...] but I also want to know whether you will swear to foster-brotherhood with me [...].” Viktor replies, “[...] and I will willingly be your foster-brother.” Now they take each other by the hands and kiss each other and make their declaration of brotherhood in the manner of men of old: each should avenge the other like a son or a brother.]

This scene is entirely absent from the *rímur*. Similarly, Blávus’ subsequent presentation of Viktor to his people is also far more affectionate, both in words and actions, than in the *rímur*. As seen in II.11 quoted above, Blávus’ introduction of Viktor in the *rímur* cycle focuses far more on the material consequences of their relationship, rather than any underlying emotions. Conversely, in the saga, there is no mention made of this admittedly rather touching division of property, but Blávus is more explicit as to the emotional component of their relationship:

Herra Blávus tekur þá í hönd sínum fóstbróður Viktor, talandi svo til höfðingjanna: “Hér er sá kóngur kominn að þér skuluð allan heiður veita og þjónustu jafnvel sem mér eða framar, því að hann er minn kær fóstbróðir.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 614.

¹³⁶ Loth, ‘Victors saga’, pp. 8–9.

¹³⁷ Loth, ‘Victors saga’, pp. 9–10.

[Lord Blávus then takes his foster-brother Viktor by the hand, speaking thus to his nobles: “Here that king has arrived to whom you should show all honour and service just as well as you do to me, or better, because he is my dear foster-brother.”]

Nowhere does the *rímur* poet make any mention of emotional closeness between the two foster-brothers, and their only physical contact is explicitly violent. The running of their blood together may be an intimacy not found in the saga, but it is one intrinsically connected to the brutality of combat. This reflects a broader pattern in *rímur*, in which the potentially dangerous ambiguities of physical affection are excised by establishing a more rigid binary of touch: violence or heterosexual romance.¹³⁸

As with all attempts to impose strict categorisation onto the inherent messiness of humans and their behaviour, these efforts at binarisation ultimately serve to shift the site of the ambiguity without succeeding in removing it entirely. With the removal of non-sexual physical affection from the range of behaviours available to *rímur* characters, violence becomes eroticised, as with the ‘bert hold’ [naked flesh] and mingled hot blood of Viktor and Blávus’ combat seen above, and heterosexuality becomes violent, as seen in the threats of abduction, rape, and forced marriage that underlie almost every chivalric *rímur*.

Viktor and Blávus are far from the only characters to find friendship through fighting, though theirs is arguably the purest distillation of the trope: they have no prior history and Blávus seeks out Viktor solely in order to test the truth of his reputation and therefore his worthiness to be Blávus’ companion. A condensed variation on this pattern also occurs in *Ektors rímur/saga*, in an episode in which a knight challenges the current tournament champion to combat. When the first knight wins, the former champion is quick to swear his allegiance and his brotherhood, becoming the retainer of the victor.¹³⁹

Other eventual sworn brothers have a more complicated history. Sálus and Nikanór’s dispute is borne out of pettiness and alcohol. Sálus, described by the *rímur* poet as ‘blíður og þekkur | ef blés honum engi í móti, | en sem vargur ef vínið drekkur’ [cheerful and agreeable as long as no one

¹³⁸ On medieval English and French anxieties surrounding the chivalric ideal’s promotion of male-male intimacy and its potential to blur the lines between homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual behaviour, see Tison Pugh, “‘For to Be Sworne Bretheren Til They Deye’”: Satirizing Queer Brotherhood in the Chaucerian Corpus’, *The Chaucer Review*, 43.3 (2009), 282–310; Richard E. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the 14th Century*, The New Middle Ages (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹³⁹ Stanzas VI.44–45. *Ektors rímur* is unedited; see the ‘Note on Quotations’ for manuscript details. ‘Ectors saga’, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances I. Victors saga ok Blávus. Valdimars saga. Ectors saga*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagæanæ B, 20 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962), pp. 79–186 (p. 118).

contradicts him, but like a wolf when he drinks wine] (I.15),¹⁴⁰ is angered by the seating arrangements at the emperor's feast, as well as by his fellow noble Nikanór's aloofness while their men quarrel. He challenges Nikanór to a chess match in order to determine which of them is the superior strategist. At first, the two appear to be evenly matched – 'Engi gat fyrir enda séð / en hvor sigrast mundi' [No one could see before the end [of the game] which of them would win] (II.13)¹⁴¹ — but when one of Nikanór's men speaks up to mock Sálus and praise his own lord, Sálus loses his temper spectacularly:

II.20

<i>Ræsis sonur af reiði brenn</i>	The king's son (Sálus), burning with rage,
<i>rykkir til með afli,</i>	yanks [the purse] over with force,
<i>slær þá beint á bragnings tenn</i>	then strikes out straight at the ruler's (Nikanor's)
	teeth
<i>bæði með pung og tafli.</i>	with both the purse and the chess piece.

II.21

<i>Hertugans rann hið heita blóð</i>	The duke's (Nikanor's) hot blood gushes
<i>hart um borð og klæði.</i>	over the board and his clothes.
<i>Beggja herr í brynju stóð,</i>	Both their armies stood there in their mailcoats,
<i>búinn með grímd og æði.¹⁴²</i>	ready and grimly furious.

Nikanór, who seems to be keeping his own temper largely in order to spite Sálus, comments that this bare-knuckle boxing is the behaviour of a 'fantur eða fól' [low-class wretch or fool] (II.26),¹⁴³ especially when the emperor has tried so hard to reconcile the pair of them. Instead, he proposes that if they are to fight, a proper tournament would better suit their noble status. Whether or not Nikanór himself intends this to be a deadly test of superiority, Sálus certainly plans to see 'annar tveggja deyja' [one of the two [of us] die] (II.33),¹⁴⁴ a bloodthirsty wish that is also found in the saga.¹⁴⁵

Their battle is couched in the same terms of equality and reciprocity as that of Viktor and Blávus, in both the saga and the *rímur* cycle. Throughout the entire combat, there is no action specified as being undertaken by Sálus or Nikanór as an individual. In the *rímur*, actions are undertaken by

¹⁴⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 689.

¹⁴¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 697.

¹⁴² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 698.

¹⁴³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 698.

¹⁴⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 699.

¹⁴⁵ 'Saulus saga ok Nikanors', in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances II. Saulus saga og Nikanors. Sigurðar saga þoggla*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ B, 21 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), pp. 1–91 (p. 16).

‘báðir’ [both] (III.18), ‘garpar tveir’ [the two men] (III.15; III.25), and ‘sæmdar menn’ [honourable men] (III.17).¹⁴⁶ In the saga, the duel is narrated as a series of actions which ‘þeir’ [they (masculine plural)] undertake, ‘hvor annan’ [each on the other].¹⁴⁷ The fight only ends when the two men, both severely injured, collapse from exhaustion, neither able to outmatch the other.

Yet despite these indications that the pair are well-matched, their foster-brotherhood still requires outside intervention from the emperor; when the two men begin to recover from their injuries, they are still eager to continue their rivalry, and it is only by insisting that the two become reconciled that the emperor is able to broker peace between the two of them, ordering that:

III.40

*“Bræðralag með blíðu og spekt
báðir skulu þið festa.
Þá mun ykkur æra og mekt
aldri kunna að bresta.”*¹⁴⁸

“Both of you shall secure
your brotherhood with cheerfulness and wisdom.
Then your honour and might will
never know disruption.”

Though the oath of brotherhood does not, at this point, appear to be borne out of any particular affection between its two subjects, it is a good example of the ways in which chivalric ideals of loyalty blur the lines between emotional relationships and legal ones.¹⁴⁹ Sálus and Nikanór’s loyalty to their emperor forces them to perform emotional closeness: following the king’s instructions, ‘hvor réð öðrum hendur um hals, | halur með blíðu að leggja’ [Each man cheerfully threw his arms around the other’s neck (i.e. they embraced)] (III.43).¹⁵⁰

This simulated affection apparently has the ability to develop into real admiration, at least on Nikanór’s side. After his and Sálus’ reconciliation, he returns home to inform his sister that, following the emperor’s command, he has arranged for her to marry Sálus as a way of further strengthening their bond. In describing her prospective husband, he waxes lyrical about Sálus’ many fine qualities:

III.49

*Ber hann afl og alla mekt
um fram aðra drengi,
útan á ræði, ráð og spekt,*

He surpasses other men
in all strength and might,
except for speech, advice and wisdom,

¹⁴⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 702–4.

¹⁴⁷ Loth, ‘Saulus saga’, pp. 20–22.

¹⁴⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 706.

¹⁴⁹ See Zeikowitz, pp. 22–23.

¹⁵⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 706.

*reita þarf hann engi.*¹⁵¹

he has no need to be irritable.

Nikanór's sister observes that she would never choose to marry a man who has shamed her brother, but that will nonetheless abide by the emperor's judgment. The idea that a bond between men can be strengthened through marriage to each other's female relatives is of course widespread in both fact and fiction.¹⁵² For its specific use in strengthening emotional ties, rather than purely political ones, see the later section of this chapter, 'Keeping it in the Family'.

Hringur and Tryggvi, of *Hrings saga og Tryggva* or the *rímur* retelling *Geðraunir*, are an interesting counterexample: here the two men eventually enter into a reluctant sworn brotherhood, which includes Hringur marrying Tryggvi's sister, but the saga is primarily concerned with the two men's relationship to their mutual love interest Brynhildur. Unlike Viktor and Blávus, who seek one another out to fight in recognition of their mutual prowess, or Sálus and Nikanór, whose conflict stems from a more fractious wish for each to prove his own superiority, the combat between Hringur and Tryggvi has little to do with either's interest in the other's personal qualities. Instead, it is rooted in the fact that, while Tryggvi has performed the role of a typical *riddarasaga* hero in liberating Brynhildur and her father from the threat of a would-be abductor and his berserker army, and expects the typical heroic reward of marrying the princess he has saved, unfortunately for everyone involved, Brynhildur is already engaged to her childhood companion Hringur, currently away claiming his kingdom after his father's death.

Tryggvi, in a mercenary display atypical of *rímur* protagonists, refuses Hertrygg's initial offer of adoption as his son and heir, and instead insists that he will only make any effort towards chasing off the berserker army if he is promised Brynhildur, a demand he maintains even once he is aware of Brynhildur's prior engagement:

IV.12

Kóngurinn frá ég að kallsar það:

“Kemur þú mér í arfa stað;

þinn verður eigi þroskinn seinn;

þú skalt ráða öllu einn.”

I heard the king calls this:

“You will have the position of my son;

your promotion will not be slow;

you shall rule everything alone.”

¹⁵¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 707.

¹⁵² C.f. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157–210.

IV.13

“Hlutur er einn,” kvað Tryggvi, “til,
tiginn, sá er ég þiggja vil:
ef þú, dögling, dóttur þín
dýra gefur í eigu mín.”

“There is only one thing, king,” said Tryggvi,
“that I want to receive [from you]:
if you, king, will give your precious
daughter into my ownership.”

IV.15

“Fósturson hefi ég frægan átt!
Föstnuð var honum silki gátt.

Þegar hann verður þessa víss,
þá er mér vist að styrjöld rís.”

“I already have a famous foster-son!
The doorpost of silks [WOMAN] was engaged
to him.
When he becomes aware of this,
then I am certain conflict will arise.”

IV.16

“Farið mun ekki en að því,”
ansar Tryggvi, og kvað við ní.
“Ver ég nú aldrei veldið þitt,
vífið nema þú giftir fritt.”¹⁵³

“The matter will only go thus,”
replies Tryggvi, and with that refused [him].
“Now I will never defend your kingdom
unless you marry the handsome woman [to
me].”

At this point, it is unclear how Tryggvi differs, morally speaking, from the besieging Hárekur.¹⁵⁴ Brynhildur’s unwillingness to marry him is unambiguously established: not only does she protest that she already has a fiancé, one who will surely be angered to learn that she has been married off to someone else in his absence, but she also attempts to pass her lady’s maid Ingibjörg off as herself in order to escape the match, although Tryggvi is not deceived.¹⁵⁵

Tryggvi’s moral ambiguity is unusual among *rimur* characters, who, as the subdivision of this chapter suggests, tend to fall cleanly into ‘good’ characters and characters whose evil nature renders them inhuman. Certainly ‘good’ characters can make foolish mistakes (for example, Hermann in *Jarlmanns rímur* and Konráður in *Konráðs rímur*), and may indeed perform acts of appalling cruelty

¹⁵³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 196.

¹⁵⁴ A reader familiar with *riddarasaga* tropes may have correctly guessed that the crucial difference for both King Hertrygg and the *rimur*’s audience is that Hárekur is presented as dark — ‘Háreks sýndist holdið svart’ [Hárekur’s body appeared black] (IV.56) — while Tryggvi is pale — ‘Tryggva hold var bjart og blautt’ [Tryggvi’s body was bright and soft] (IV.57). Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 203.

¹⁵⁵ The uses noblewomen make of the bodies of lower-status women is a topic I will return to in the next chapter. A similar, albeit successful, substitution also occurs in *Vilmundar saga/rímur viðutans*.

against acceptable opponents (for example, maiden kings, berserkers, and *blámen*), but their targets have been established, either by the conventions of the genre as a whole, or within their specific narrative, to be deserving of ill-treatment. This is certainly not the case for Brynhildur and her father, who are only ever portrayed as innocent victims of first Hárekur's and then later Tryggvi's demands.

In the face of Brynhildur's repeated warnings, it is therefore no surprise when Hringur, upon discovering his fiancée has been married off against both her and his will, decides that battle is the best way to win her back. Even by the usual bloodily enthusiastic standards of *rímur* poets, their battle is a gory one, 'hið þriðja mest | Þundar él [...] | norður í lönd' [the third greatest storm of Þundar [BATTLE] in northern lands] (VI.67).¹⁵⁶ Blood flows freely and a whole menagerie of beasts of battle descend to feast upon the corpses of the slain, including serpents, wolves, bears, and even lions, leopards, and dragons. Unlike other conflicts discussed in this section, this is not single combat between skilled opponents, but a slaughter that claims the lives of many on both sides.

Nonetheless, the battle forms the proof of equal prowess that these fights typically function as — throughout the battle, Hringur and Tryggvi's actions are paralleled until eventually 'þeir fellu báðir senn' [they both collapsed at once] (VI.77)¹⁵⁷ — and this recognition of Tryggvi's worthiness as a warrior apparently supersedes his more morally dubious actions sufficiently for Hringur to accept the formerly unsatisfactory arrangement of marriage to Tryggvi's sister and sworn brotherhood to Tryggvi himself. In fact, while the battle serves to bring the two men together through mutual recognition of each other's skills, it has worsened the relationship between Hringur and his prospective bride Brynveig considerably. Prior to the battle, she declares herself willing to marry Hringur if it will bring peace (VI.33), but once the fight is over, she repeatedly states that she now dislikes Hringur (VII.42) and will only interact with him in order to please her brother (VIII.26).¹⁵⁸ Though *Geðraunir* makes changes to the more typical bonding-through-violence paradigm, it still offers meaningful commentary on the importance of shared violence for relationships between men — while demonstrating the negative consequences this can have for relationships between men and women.

Sigurðar saga/rímur fóts, on the other hand, demonstrates what happens when the woman in a love triangle becomes a fungible good to be exchanged between the men involved. Through a series of unfortunate miscommunications, the princess Signý ends up engaged to both Ásmundur, king of the Huns, and Sigurður, king of France. Unlike in *Geðraunir*, this situation is not due to any dishonourable actions on the part of her two suitors. Instead, Ásmundur makes his suit at a time when

¹⁵⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 223.

¹⁵⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 225.

¹⁵⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, pp. 218, 231, 235.

Signý's father is away and receives the princess' consent to the match, while Sigurður seeks out her father and receives *his* permission. Neither man is willing to surrender his claim, and the two prepare to go to war, culminating in a duel between the two kings to determine who the worthier suitor is. However, despite the fact that Sigurður objectively loses the combat, surviving only because Ásmundur has him carried from the field on a shield to tend his wounds, it is he who eventually ends up married to Signý. Ásmundur, who has been conciliatory from the start, repeatedly offering to swear brotherhood with Sigurður even as Sigurður's army marches down on him, offers Sigurður the chance to marry another lady, but when he is refused, he decides that maintaining good relations with Sigurður is more important than any feelings he may have for his fiancée, and agrees that *he* will marry another lady while Sigurður marries Signý. Sigurður agrees to this, and at this point the saga notes that 'svörust þeir fóstbræðralag að þeirri veislu' [they swore an oath of brotherhood at this feast].¹⁵⁹ The *rímur* poet does not explicitly mention an oath of brotherhood, but the fact that this betrothal is more about the two men than about Signý herself is emphasised by the poet's choice to leave out the scene from the saga in which Ásmundur asks Signý to agree to the new arrangement.

Even with the inclusion of that scene, Signý remains an incredibly passive love interest, even by the standards of women in *rímur*. In both saga and *rímur* cycle, she tells Ásmundur that she cannot agree to marry him without her father's permission, but in both, she makes no protest when he betroths himself to her anyway; the saga explicitly states that 'hún gerir hvorki að að neita né játa' [she does nothing to either refuse or accept], though she does later tell her father that she would prefer Ásmundur to Sigurður.¹⁶⁰ Even when asked by Ásmundur whether she would accept Sigurður as a husband, she tells him she has only ever wanted to marry Ásmundur himself, but ultimately leaves the decision in his hands — resulting in her marriage to Sigurður, which she does not protest.

The *rímur* cycle is rather more perfunctory than the saga in its depiction of Sigurður and Ásmundur's relationship. As mentioned above, it never makes explicit mention of their oath of brotherhood and, while the saga concludes with the statement that 'þykkjast menn varla vitað hafa aðra fóstbræður betur hafa unnist í neyti þessa' [men seem scarcely to have known any other foster-brothers who loved each other more in companionship than these], the *rímur* cycle only states that 'bragnar engir betur en þeir | borgist hafa með sæmdum meir' [no better men than them have stood guarantee for one another with greater honour], with no mention of any love or brotherhood.¹⁶¹

However, throughout the narrative, the relationship between the two men allows both the poet and the saga author to juxtapose two different models of masculinity. In both the prose and

¹⁵⁹ 'Sigurðar saga fóts', in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances III. Jarlmanns saga. Adonias saga. Sigurðar saga fóts*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ B, 22 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), pp. 231–50 (p. 244).

¹⁶⁰ Loth, 'Sigurðar saga fóts', p. 236.

¹⁶¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 324; Loth, 'Sigurðar saga fóts', p. 250.

poetic accounts, the two kings are introduced in similar terms, emphasising their generosity and prowess in battle, but it rapidly becomes apparent that Sigurður is by far the more warlike of the two. When Ásmundur hears of their conflicting engagements, he is ready to offer Sigurður terms, including trading his entire kingdom for the chance to marry Signý; he says if Sigurður wants to marry her, he too could offer up his kingdom and Ásmundur would be willing to accept the trade. In the *rímur* cycle, these generous offers are also accompanied by a promise of sworn brotherhood, but in both prose and poetry, Sigurður turns them down with explicit insult to Ásmundur's masculinity for being so cowardly as to try to arrange a settlement, rather than fight for his right to marry. In the saga, he calls Ásmundur 'ragur' [effeminate, cowardly] and declares, "'Ég veit Ásmund enga karlmennsku sýnt hafa,'" ["I know Ásmundur has shown no manliness,"],¹⁶² while in the *rímur* cycle he states, "'Bind ég aldrei bræðra trú | við blauðan hjörva spennni,'" [I will never swear brotherhood to the cowardly sword-gripper [MAN],"].¹⁶³ Yet for all Sigurður's pugnacious boasting, he is the one defeated in battle by the more moderate Ásmundur, and while he does eventually win his chosen bride, it is made clear that this is only because of Ásmundur's generosity and forbearance. As the next section will discuss in more detail, chivalric narratives favour pairs of men whose qualities complement one another's, and this is also the case with Ásmundur and Sigurður: Ásmundur's ability to compromise brings an end to the bloodshed between himself and Sigurður, while Sigurður's martial prowess is what frees Ásmundur when he is later captured attempting to win his own wife.

The bride-exchange episode in *Sigurðar saga/rímur fóts*, as well as sister-marriage in *Geðraunir*, demonstrates the relative value placed on personal feeling when it comes to male-male relationships versus male-female relationships. In the latter, successful (albeit short-lived for other reasons) marriages can occur in the face of reluctance or even outright dislike, as long as the would-be husband and the woman's father or brother can come to an agreement. In the former, there is no legal or familial framework to enforce a relationship without some measure of interpersonal regard being present. The foster-brother or sworn brother relationship is an attempt to formalise a bond between two men who otherwise have no reason to aid one another. In some of the examples in this section, this bond is formed out of mutual respect and affection; in others, the swearing of brotherhood functions as a surprisingly successful method to prevent bloodshed between two worthy men — in the chivalric sagas and *rímur*, sworn brotherhood is for life, and cannot be reneged upon.¹⁶⁴ The worthiness of the two participants is crucial: a *riddarasaga* protagonist could never swear brotherhood with a typical antagonist, who, as is argued in the 'Constructing the Enemy' section of

¹⁶² Loth, 'Sigurðar saga fóts', p. 241.

¹⁶³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 303.

¹⁶⁴ With the one exception of *Konráðs saga/rímur*.

this chapter, is often portrayed as barely human. Instead, an ideal sworn brother demonstrates a solid grounding in the key virtues of chivalric masculinity, namely warrior prowess and education, while offering additional strength in areas the other brother lacks: prudence, in Blávus' case, and diplomacy in Ásmundur's. These complementary strengths are explored in more depth in the next section.

By Their Powers Combined

The idea that the two men's inherent qualities and skills are enhanced through their relationship reaches its ultimate expression in *Konráðs saga*, where Roðbert, Konráður's foster-brother, declares:

“Hvar sem við forum, þá muntu ekki finna þinn jafningja í leikum og burtreiðum og í allri atgervi, en ef viturligra orða þurfi við eða ýmisligrar mælsku og vitsmuna annara, þá mun ég þess vilnast að ég skal keppa það við flesta, og megum við því vel slíku veitast.”¹⁶⁵

[“Wherever we travel, you will not find your equal in games or tilting or in any [physical] accomplishments, but if we have need of wise words or various languages or other wit, then I will hope to compete at that against almost anyone, and then we may both help one another well in such things.”]

Roðbert has his own nefarious reasons for wanting to convince Konráður that he and Roðbert are two complementary parts of a single unit: namely to ensure that Konráður feels the need to keep Roðbert from harm, even when faced with direct evidence of Roðbert's untrustworthiness in the form of Konráður's unhappily pregnant sister.

Marianne Kalinke has argued that Konráður's refusal to learn languages is the key to his near defeat by Roðbert, and certainly this gap in his knowledge is an unusual flaw for the heroes of *riddarasögur*, who are conventionally described as being skilled in all things.¹⁶⁶ In the saga, Konráður responds to his father's suggestion that he learn ‘bækur fróðar og þann fróðleik er á þeim er ritaður, og mælsku annarra þjóða’ [clever books and the knowledge that is written in them, and the languages of other peoples] with the retort that, “Þess þarf ég eigi, meðan Roðbert er á lífi, því að hvergi landa er við komum, þá þarf ég eigi annars en hann tulki mitt mál,” [“I have no need of that while Roðbert is alive, because whatever land we come to, then I need nothing other than that he interpret my speech,”].¹⁶⁷ However, as the following examples will show, reliance on a sworn brother to

¹⁶⁵ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, pp. 44–45.

¹⁶⁶ Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 158–60.

¹⁶⁷ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 45.

complement one's own skills is not inherently foolish. Indeed, in other circumstances, such reliance is treated as good and proper behaviour between a lord and retainer.¹⁶⁸ Instead, I concur with Otto J. Zitzelberger, the most recent editor of *Konráðs saga*, who argues that Konráður's fatal flaw lies not so much in his refusal to learn languages as in his poor judgment in choosing Roðbert as a worthy companion in life.¹⁶⁹ Even his initial naivety as to Roðbert's true nature would be understandable, but his persistence in clinging to Roðbert — interceding for his life with his father the king; accompanying him in his exile — even when faced with undeniable proof that Roðbert is unworthy of his trust demonstrates a lack of good judgment that the saga must address and remedy before Konráður can reasonably expect to receive his kingdom and live happily ever after.

Konráður and Roðbert's mutual dependency is the most clearly stated example in the *riddarasaga* corpus, but a similar sentiment underlies several of the sworn brother pairs discussed here. In *Viktors saga*, for example, Blávus is clear-eyed about Viktor's flaws, especially the lack of foresight Viktor's mother has already upbraided him for prior to this scene. When he offers his sworn brotherhood, it is on the condition that he have sole decision-making power in the relationship, “Því að ég veit að hamingjan hefir meir gefið þér vöxt og vænleik og röskann riddaradóm en vísdóm til veraldarinnar framferða,” [“Because I know that Fortune has given you more in the way of height and handsomeness and bold chivalry than wisdom in worldly matters,”].¹⁷⁰ As the saga progresses, Viktor is granted a greater say in proceedings, but only once he has demonstrated that he has matured from the rash young king who gave away a kingdom's wealth and also that his plans for the two foster-brothers align well with Blávus' own. Although the two brothers' plans often seem rash, and are treated as such by their older companions Kódiar and Skeggkarl, their pursuit of the impossible does bring them the renown they desire, as well as gold enough to make up for all Viktor's past mistakes.

In general, the characters in the *rímur* retellings of these stories do not spend much time explaining their inner motivations, unlike in the *riddarasögur*. Because of this, the sense of complementary personalities forming an ideal union that we get from *Konráðs saga*, *Viktors saga* and *Sálus saga* is downplayed in their *rímur* retellings. Yet enough of the original characterisation remains

¹⁶⁸ C.f. *Jarlmanns saga*, generally considered to be a direct response to *Konráðs saga*, where King Hermann explicitly states his reliance on Jarlmann as a proxy wooer: “En ég trúi þér betur en öðrum mönnum bæði um þetta og allt annað,” [And I trust you more than any other man, both regarding this [matter] and anything else]. Hermann's confidence is fully justified, and problems only arise between the foster-brothers when Hermann begins to unjustly suspect Jarlmann of trying to seduce his wife. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 169; ‘Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns’, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances III. Jarlmanns saga. Adonias saga. Sigurðar saga fóts*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagagnæanæ B, 22 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), pp. 1–66 (p. 8).

¹⁶⁹ *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, ed. by Otto J. Zitzelsberger (New York: Peter Lang, 1982), p. xvi.

¹⁷⁰ Loth, ‘Victors saga’, p. 8.

in the *rímur* for the message to come through: Viktor is still the foolish spendthrift, Blávus the one who considers the moral implications of their victory over Öundur and Randvér; Konráður is still given more to feats of physical strength than intellectual prowess, while Roðbert's mastery of languages is his brother's undoing; Sálus is still quick-tempered in his drink, Nikanór more moderate and slower to anger.

Keeping it in the Family

I have already touched on the trope of sworn brothers marrying each other's sisters, but it is such an integral part of the foster-brother motif that it requires fuller discussion. Of the pairs of sworn brothers examined in this section, only Roðbert and Konráður, and Alanus and Lucius do not cement their bond through one of them marrying the other's sister. In the latter case, the brotherhood episode is only briefly recounted as one of a number of Alanus' adventures, and is not developed to anything like the extent of the other examples in this chapter. For the former pair, as theirs is a tale of brotherhood falsely sworn and betrayed, their lack of familial union in the end is unsurprising. Yet it is still significant that a subverted form of the trope appears here, in both saga and *rímur*. Rather than such a marriage being the happy conclusion of the sworn brothers' relationship, Roðbert's seduction (and possibly rape; the saga is reticent on this point) of Konráður's sister is the saga's first intimation that theirs is not a brotherhood destined to end happily.

In other, more positive depictions of sworn brotherhood, these marriages serve a different role. Although not a classic case of triangulation, in which both men focus their desire on a single woman, several of the cases in which foster-brothers become brothers-in-law can plausibly be read as symbolic of the sublimation of desire between the two men. This is most suggestively the case in *Viktors saga*, where, as discussed above, the two sworn brothers display a measure of physical and emotional closeness that is remarkable when compared to the rest of the *riddarasaga* corpus. In the saga, there is a sense that, while the two young men's relationship has been productive and happy thus far in their co-rulership of each other's lands, it cannot continue forever. Blávus, generally characterised as the more sensible of the pair, is the one to point out that in order to be a successful ruler, Viktor will need a wife.¹⁷¹ Yet when Viktor demands to know which woman Blávus has deemed suitable for him to marry, Blávus becomes extraordinarily reticent. This could perhaps be attributed to Blávus' wish to spare Viktor humiliation at his half-sister's hands (another mark of affection between the two foster-brothers if so), but another motivation does suggest itself, namely that Blávus

¹⁷¹ Although this was apparently not a concern when Blávus left his own kingdom to the unmarried, childless Samarjón in order to accompany Viktor on his adventures.

acknowledges the necessity of Viktor's marriage, but is reluctant to do anything to help speed up the process that will bring an end to their happy co-kingship.

While the *rímur* cycle, as noted above, mostly excises the displays of physical affection between Viktor and Blávus, thus arguably attempting to downplay the homoerotic overtones of the saga, its introduction of 'bert hold' [bare flesh] into their initial meeting means that it cannot escape a certain intimate atmosphere. Moreover, although there is none of the saga's hand-holding at the time, Blávus still introduces Viktor as his co-ruler and demands that 'hér mega ýtar arfa hans [Vilhjálm's] | allar sæmdir veita' [here men may show his [Vilhjálm's] son all honour] (II.10).¹⁷² All the events of the first half of the saga play out in the *rímur*, albeit in a form which places more weight on bloody battles and marvellous treasures than on tender emotions, and the *rímur* poet then concludes their narrative at the moment Viktor and Blávus have begun their joint rule of France, precisely the point where the saga chooses to introduce the bridal-quest plotline.¹⁷³ As the second chapter of this thesis discusses, *rímur* poets do in general show less interest in maiden king storylines than the prose sagas, which seems to be connected to their widespread interest in the more traditionally masculine activity of warfare. The excision of the Fulgíða plotline from the medieval *rímur* cycle may be a reflection of this more general trend, or it may instead be a rare recognition of the fact that, while Viktor and Blávus' co-rulership cannot last forever, the narrative can choose to leave it preserved at that point.

Although other sagas are less concerned with the intimacy between their two sworn brothers than *Viktors saga*, in all cases the sister-marriage motif has more to do with the relationship between the two men than between the two spouses. Sisters married off to foster-brothers are, with the exception of *Viktors saga*, never the women sought after in the bridal-quest storylines so beloved of the romance genre, but instead are often included almost as an afterthought, a way to round out the tale's happy ending: one half of the sworn brother pair has found his heterosexual life partner, but this leaves the other half at something of a loose end unless a wife is found for him too.

The eventual marriage of Jarlmann to Hermann's sister Herborg appears at first glance to be of this kind. While Herborg has (conceivably) expressed some interest in Jarlmann, in her statement that he is the only man she would trust with a ring capable of making the wearer fall in love with whoever Jarlmann chooses, Jarlmann expresses no reciprocal interest, and the match at first looks simply like a way for the saga author to balance out Hermann's marriage to Ríkilát. However, on closer examination, I believe something more complex is occurring here. Despite the saga's early claims that

¹⁷² Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 614.

¹⁷³ AM Acc. 22 (late seventeenth century) contains a continuation of the story that does cover the marriage plot, but both Finnur Jónsson and Björn K. Þórólfsson deem these *rímur* (IX–XII) to be later compositions by a different poet, with Finnur noting their failure to adhere to the metrical requirements seen in the first eight. Björn K. Þórólfsson, IX, p. 328; Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 604.

Hermann and Jarlmann are ‘svo jafnir sín í milli að hvergi bar í milli’ [so equal that there was nothing to choose between them],¹⁷⁴ at the start of the saga, Hermann nonetheless clearly views Jarlmann as his social inferior. This of course is objectively the case: Hermann is the son of a king, while Jarlmann — as his name suggests — is merely the son of an earl. But there is still something unnecessarily insulting about Hermann’s declaration that if Ríkilát, whom Jarlmann is being sent to woo on his behalf, is unsuitable material to make a king’s wife, perhaps she will do for Jarlmann instead? “‘Ef þér líst hún vel og þó eigi við mitt hævi, þá máttu biðja hennar þér til handa,’” says Hermann. [“If she seems good to you and yet not suitable for me, then you may ask for her hand for yourself.”]¹⁷⁵ Jarlmann leans into his subordinate position, telling Hermann, “‘Skyldur er ég að fara [...] þangað sem þú sendir mig,’” [“I am bound to go [...] wherever you send me;”].¹⁷⁶ Later, when he arrives at Ríkilát’s castle, he adopts the disguise of an impoverished merchant in order to trick his way into Ríkilát’s presence. Yet as the saga progresses, the two men are gradually placed on a more equal footing. When Jarlmann arrives in the kingdom to which Ríkilát has been abducted, he presents himself as a travelling hero named Austvestan; when Hermann arrives, he is given the part of Austvestan’s brother Norðsunnan — but Austvestan has already had considerably more time to ingratiate himself with the king of this land, leaving Norðsunnan as a mere afterthought to the party. The eventual marriage between Jarlmann and Herborg therefore seems designed to cement Jarlmann and Hermann’s status as equals — in the eyes of one another, if not in their official titles.

As is the case with all of these sister-marriages, Jarlmann and Herborg’s marriage also serves to create a legal and familial bond to strengthen a less formal relationship between the two men.¹⁷⁷ Sometimes these marriages are proposed in order to improve poor relations, as is the case when the emperor suggests that Sálus should marry Níkanór’s sister Potenciana as a symbol of the two men’s newly sworn friendship (III.41).¹⁷⁸ In *Geðraunir*, a marriage between Hringur and Tryggvi’s sister Brynveig is initially put forward as a means of preventing bloodshed between the two men’s armies.

¹⁷⁴ Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 5.

¹⁷⁵ Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 8.

¹⁷⁷ Though the *Grágás* lawcode attaches legal importance to the relationship of foster-parents and foster-children, it is unclear what legal rights a sworn or foster-brotherhood offered. *Jónsbók*, the legal code introduced by King Magnús lagabætur to Iceland in 1281, contains no explicit guidance on the legalities of fostering unrelated children, though the provisions for the adoption of illegitimate children and a reference to the payment needed to ensure the maintenance of abandoned children (‘svo að barnið hafi fulla hjálp sér til fósturs’) indicate the practice was not uncommon in this period. *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás. The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, ed. & trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, 2 vols (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), II, p. 46; *Jónsbók. The Laws of Later Iceland. The Icelandic Text According to MS AM 351 fol. Skálhóltsbók eldri*, ed. & trans. by Jana K. Schulman, Bibliotheca Germanica. Series Nova, 4 (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2010), pp. 114, 140.

¹⁷⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 706.

Though this is ultimately unsuccessful, after their battle, a similar arrangement to Sálus and Nikanór's is put forward: now that Hringur and Tryggvi are grudgingly willing to recognise each other as worthy opponents, the marriage between Hringur and Brynveig will offer their future friendship a stable footing.

Love triangles like the one in *Geðraunir* between Hringur, Tryggvi and Brynhildur are sometimes viewed as more concerned with the relationship between the two male antagonists than any heterosexual interest in the woman at the centre of their rivalry.¹⁷⁹ However, such a reading is inaccurate when applied to *Geðraunir*. Although the narrative initially suggests that it aims towards the typical 'happy ending' for a romance of sworn brothers, with both brothers happily married, this scenario is only a stopping point on the way to the narrative's eventual conclusion. *Geðraunir* does not end with the cementing of Hringur and Tryggvi's partnership through the legal and familial bonds created when Hringur marries Brynveig, but rapidly escalates events until Tryggvi is killed by his traitorous former retainer and Brynveig conveniently dies of grief for her brother, leaving the childhood sweethearts Hringur and Brynhildur free to marry one another. Nevertheless, for the time it lasts, Hringur and Brynveig's marriage serves its purpose of bringing Hringur and Tryggvi closer, and when Tryggvi is killed, Hringur is quick to avenge him.

The texts discussed in this section reveal a wide variety of approaches to the foster-brother motif, from Viktor and Blávus' open affection to the barely restrained violence of Hringur and Tryggvi, to the complete subversion of the trope in the form of the faithless Roðbert and hapless Konráður. Establishing these pairs of men allows the saga authors and *rímur* poets to draw comparisons, both implicit and explicit, between the characters, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the ideal masculine behaviour as well as the many ways it was possible to fall short. Above all else, the popularity of the trope in both the *riddarasögur* and their *rímur* adaptations emphasises the importance these texts' authors placed on the emotional and practical bonds between men, albeit ones that were often sustained, supported and formalised by both men's relationships to women.

CONCLUSION

The idealised form of masculinity seen in *rímur* is the logical development of that seen in the prose romances. Similar traits are lionised in both, in particular a man's abilities on the battlefield, which becomes such a standard expectation for chivalric masculinity that *rímur* poets even introduce it for characters who, in their source texts, are not particularly noted for it (for example, Dínus in *Dínus rímur*). Sexual continence is also key to the correct performance of masculinity in these texts, as was

¹⁷⁹ Girard.

the case in the prose romances that serve as their source. Infidelity plotlines like that of the Tristan narrative are virtually unknown in the prose romances, and not present at all in the medieval *rímur*, with the exception of the irreverent *Skikkju rímur*. Sexual rapaciousness is used to characterise the enemy, either explicitly (as in the case of Príamur in *Geirarðs rímur*) or implicitly (in the repeated motif of the kingdom besieged by an unsuitable suitor). Protagonists, meanwhile, show interest in only a single woman over the course of the *rímur* cycle. The two exceptions, Ásmundur in *Sigurðar rímur fóts* and Hringur in *Geðraunir*, are forced into their subsequent marriages through exceptional circumstances, and for Hringur in particular the poet makes it clear that this is a matter of practicality rather than passion. This theme is also apparent in the adaption (or lack of adaption) of maiden king sagas into *rímur*: where these exist, they very rarely depict the part of the story that features extra-marital sex (most commonly rape) between the maiden king and her eventual husband; *Sigurðar rímur þögla* is the one exception.

What is also apparent in *rímur* adaptations of *riddarasögur* is the increasing tendency to link certain traits in the assured belief that to possess one is to possess the other. This is evident in the formulaic character introductions, which stress learning, skill in battle, and generosity for the vast majority of male characters, regardless of whether those traits are ever demonstrated. It is also clearly apparent in the treatment of antagonists in these poems, most notably in the accretion of terms like *svartur* [black] and *ljótur* [ugly] to characters who, in the prose texts, are not described. While race in *rímur* is not the focus of this dissertation, its intersection with gender in these depictions of male antagonists is key to understanding how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in these texts. The hegemonic form of masculinity in chivalric *rímur* is one that defines itself by what it is not: if all antagonists are presented as sexually licentious, dark-skinned, and barely capable of human speech, then the ideal protagonist is chaste except in certain sanctioned contexts, pale-skinned, and eloquent.

4. FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHIVALRIC RÍMUR

This chapter explores the presentation of women in medieval chivalric *rímur*. Women, both historical and fictional, are often the first subjects of gender-focused studies, in part due to gender theory's roots in the feminist movements of the 1970s, but also perhaps due to a lingering feeling that men can exist as an unmarked default while women and people of other genders 'have gender'.¹ This presents an interesting problem when it comes to studying gender in *rímur*, in which the poets' focus is overwhelmingly on the actions of men. While all chivalric *rímur* cycles contain at least a mention of female characters, their presence in the narrative is often limited and there are few *rímur* cycles in which women can be considered main characters.

In general, women in *rímur* fulfil an auxiliary function: they assist the male hero when he is in danger, and they serve as desirable marriage prospects, which, as the previous chapter argues, often serve to motivate interactions between men. These latter can be both positive (a worthy suitor who receives the woman's father's permission to marry, often being appointed his heir in the process) and negative (an unwanted, dangerous suitor, who fights other suitors or male relatives in order to secure his wife). With only a few exceptions (notably *Mábilár rímur sterku*, *Reinalds rímur og Rósu* and *Vilmundar rímur viðutans*, all of which are unusual for featuring a woman as an antagonist), chivalric *rímur* show little interest in the interactions between women, which in many texts occur only as brief exchanges between an aristocratic female love interest and her usually unnamed serving women. In these exchanges, we can see a little of the intra-gender relationality of femininities along class axes, but these interactions are usually so brief that it is difficult to build up a truly intersectional understanding of the hierarchy of femininities in these texts.

This chapter is divided into four main sections, mirroring the previous chapter on men. The first is an introductory overview of the presentation of women in *rímur*, looking at their introductory stanzas and the kennings used to describe them, with the aim of building up the same kind of model for idealised femininity as was done for masculinity in Chapter Three. The second section looks at the treatment of antagonistic women in these texts and the ways that such characters permit these texts to explore relationships between women, as well as between different models of femininity. This section discusses the dehumanisation of women in light of the racialised dynamics we have already seen at work in the depiction of male antagonists in *rímur*, as well as the threat posed by women in unchecked positions of power. The third section examines the ways positively portrayed women's skills are depicted, and especially the ways in which the idealised form of femininity in these texts complements the idealised form of masculinity. The final section looks at the possibility apparent in

¹ See Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

Mábilár rímur for women to perform the sort of martial masculinity men in these texts are most praised for.

HEGEMONIC FEMININITY IN CHIVALRIC *RÍMUR*

Given the chivalric *rímur* genre's inclination to conclude its narratives with a(n inevitably heterosexual) wedding, there by definition have to be a roughly equal ratio of women to male protagonists. However, in many cases, these women are treated as little more than the prize to be acquired by a worthy male protagonist as a reward for his feats of strength, and they are therefore seldom developed beyond the most conventional image of femininity. There are of course exceptions to this rule, many of whom will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, but even these factory mould images of women can help to develop a model for the kind of femininity viewed as desirable enough to need no explanation in these texts.

The most common trait for a female character to be introduced with is her beauty. Unlike male characters who, with a few exceptions,² rarely have their physical attractiveness detailed at any length greater than a statement that they are *vænn* or *fríður* [handsome], women's beauty is dwelt on in far more detail. In particular, beautiful women are described in terms of their radiance, with terms like *skær* and *björt* [bright, radiant] being common. Occasionally, poets will be moved to more flowery descriptions — sometimes literally, although within the medieval *rímur* corpus, there are in fact more men explicitly likened to flowers than women.³ A comparison between the radiance of a woman's skin and the brightness of gold is far more common. A typical example of such image can be seen in *Dámusta rímur*:

I.8

Svo er hún skær sem skýjanna blóm,

skuggalaus að líta;

sigrar ekki sævar ljóm

sætu horundið hvíta.⁴

She is so bright, like the flower of the clouds

[SUN],

without shadow to look upon;

the light of the sea [GOLD] cannot defeat

the white skin of the lady.

² Notably Dínus, Jón, Filippó and Bæringur from their eponymous *rímur*, as well as Jón from *Dámusta rímur*.

³ The aforementioned Dínus *drambláti* and Jón *leiksveinn*.

⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 772.

Similarly, in *Geirarðs rímur*:

I.12

Svo bar fasta fjarðar grund

fegurð af öllum snótum,

sem það gull, er glóar á und,

greitt hjá málmí ljótum.⁶

The ground of the fire of the fjord [GOLD >
WOMAN] so surpassed

all [other] women in beauty,

like that gold, which glows in wounds,⁵

clearly [does] beside ugly metal.

A slightly more disturbing simile proved even more popular among poets of this period, namely a comparison to the beauty of blood mingled with snow, highlighting both the fairness of the woman in question's skin and also the contrast between this and her rosy cheeks.⁷ Examples of this trope can be seen in *Bærings rímur*, *Dámusta rímur*, *Geirarðs rímur*, and *Sigurðar rímur þögla*, though in *Bærings rímur*, the description is applied to the wildly attractive male protagonist Bæringur, while in *Dámusta rímur*, the trope is used to emphasise the mutual suitability of the princess Gratiana and her suitor Jón (see Chapter Three, 'Constructing the Enemy'). For example, *Sigurðar rímur þögla* describes its beautiful but deadly maiden king as follows:

I.31

Hörundið var svo hreint og bjart

á hvítri menja þöllu

sem þá blóðið blandist hart

úr benja hvítri mjöllu.⁸

The skin was so clear and bright

on the white fir-tree of necklaces [WOMAN],

as if blood from wounds

mingled greatly with white snow.

In this particular instance, the rather Scandi-noir image could be read as commentary on Seditiana's own bloodthirsty nature, but the fact that the same imagery is used of women who do not engage in any acts of violence, such as Elínborg in *Geirarðs rímur* and Gratiana in *Dámusta rímur*, the latter of whom is positively saintlike in her passivity, suggests that this was considered a desirable complexion for women, regardless of their murderous intentions. Of Gratiana, for example, we are told:

⁵ Or perhaps 'which glows in wonder', which makes more sense contextually but does require the assumption that the poet has reanalysed the neuter noun *undur* as a masculine noun with an *und* accusative or dative form.

⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 475.

⁷ *Rjóð(ur)* ('red') is also a relatively common adjective to find in conjunction with descriptions of female beauty in these texts and should be understood as a reference to rosy cheeks rather than some kind of all-over sunburn effect.

⁸ *Sigurðar rímur þögla* is unedited; see the 'Note on Quotations' for manuscript details.

I.9

þegar að hitnar hringa Ná

When thoughts become heated for the Ná of
rings [WOMAN]

hugur í landi greina,

in her land of understanding [MIND],

þá er sem blóð við bjarta snjá

then it is as if [there is] blood against the
bright snow

*brúðar holdið hreina.*⁹

on the woman's pure body.

Here the image seems fairly clearly to indicate a blush on the woman's cheeks whenever her thoughts 'hitnar' [become warm]. Images of what, to modern readers, seem like unnaturally flushed cheeks are apparent in the rare examples of Icelandic illuminated manuscripts from the medieval period (e.g. *Flateyjarbók*, GKS 1005 fol., 79r), as well as in manuscripts from the early modern period, such as the depiction of the famously beautiful Baldur in AM 738 4to, 35v.

What is perhaps most apparent from these descriptions of feminine beauty, as with those of masculine beauty seen in the last chapter, is the intrinsic association in these texts between beauty and whiteness. Given how many characters in these texts come from India and Africa, where white skin is hardly the default, this cannot be viewed as mere coincidence, but rather as a product of the same sort of proto-racist worldview that positions *rímur* antagonists as almost uniformly dark-skinned and ugly.¹⁰ Jacqueline de Weever observes a similar trope in the French *chansons de geste*, which frequently feature Saracen princesses as brides to be won by Frankish knights. De Weever notes that, even in cases where the future bride's own family — the father and brothers who oppose the Frankish knight-protagonist — are presented as having dark skin, the woman herself is almost always pale and blonde:

The Saracen woman is, therefore, blond and white-skinned, even when her father and brothers are black Saracens. An aesthetic of beauty intended for Frankish women is applied to Ethiopian and Saracen women without modification.¹¹

⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 772.

¹⁰ For example, Philotemía in *Dínus saga/rímur* is the daughter of the King of Bláland, a country that appears in other texts as the home of *blámenn*. See Arngrímur Vídalín; Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, 'Towards a decentred Global North Atlantic: Blackness in *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*', *Literature Compass*, 16.9–10 (2019).

¹¹ Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters. Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1998), p. xviii.

The same could well be said of the chivalric sagas and *rímur*, and indeed, although the poems de Weever examines are rather earlier than the *rímur* genre, their similar function as popular but not necessarily prestigious literature makes them a very suitable point of comparison. Though concerns about miscegenation are largely unvoiced in these texts when it comes to European nobles marrying foreign princesses, they are implicit in authors' assumptions that only a woman who meets the 'fair' beauty standards of Western Europe could be a suitable wife for these knights.¹² This is perhaps most evident in *Dínus rímur's* description of Philotemía as 'bjarta' and 'skær' ('bright, radiant', l.31 and l.32)¹³ while her father's kingdom is Bláland, the name often given to the homeland of *blámenn* in these texts, and which the *rímur* cycle explicitly notes to be defended by giants, on whose racialisation in these texts, see Chapter Four, 'Constructing the Enemy'.¹⁴

Compared to male antagonists, there are fewer women in *rímur* who form an active obstacle to the protagonist's plans; as discussed in Chapter Two, there are very few maiden king *rímur*, which is the sub-genre most likely to feature an antagonistic woman. The racialised treatment of female antagonists is therefore less clear-cut than that of men. This is of course connected to de Weever's point about 'Saracen' brides quoted above: most women in *rímur* are enmeshed in the court and family structures of their white, Western European husbands, and therefore *must* be presented as fair in order for such a match to be comprehensible by the standards of these texts. Moreover, while male antagonists most often take the form of an invader from a distant land, Othered by both skin-tone and religion, female antagonists enact their manipulations from within the court. In almost every example in the corpus, their targets come to them, or are already members of their own family, rather than these women going out into the world looking for trouble. The only exception to this rule is Philotemía in *Dínus saga/rímur*, who is the one to initiate the rivalry between her and Dínus through use of her enchanted wine. Even Seditiana, the cruel and vengeful maiden king of *Sigurðar saga/rímur þöglá*, who tars and blood-eagles¹⁵ her would-be suitors, is disinclined to seek out men to injure; the targets of her wrath all come to her, defying her walls and protections in order to do so.

¹² Poets are far more concerned with miscegenation in the context of the perceived threat of foreign invaders, and frequently seek to emphasise the horror of women's potential abduction by focusing on how fair she is in contrast to her dark-skinned would-be abductor, e.g. in *Filippó rímur* IV.11: 'Hennar skart við holdið svart - hamingjan mun það banna' [her finery against the black body – Fortune will forbid it]. Wisén, p. 25.

¹³ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 806.

¹⁴ *Dínus saga drambláta* concurs with the *rímur* cycle that Philotemía's father's kingdom is Bláland, and is indeed even more explicit that the people there *eru margir staðar sviðnir og brunnir af solar hitanum* ('are in many places scorched and burnt by the heat of the sun', p.11), but does not take the same whitewashing approach to Philotemía's beauty.

¹⁵ Or, as the *rímur* cycle has it, blood-owls (V.32).

After beauty, the next most common trait to see in women’s introductions is learnedness or wisdom. The two overlap to some extent, but in contrast to many of the descriptions of men, or indeed the descriptions of women in the prose sagas, which emphasis taught skills or book-learning, women’s wisdom in *rímur* is often presented as an innate quality, using adjectives like *vitur* and *svinn* (‘wise’), or the noun *viska* (‘wisdom’). In contrast to the long list of chivalric skills learnt by men, we are rarely told precisely what women’s wisdom entails. There are a few exceptions: Ríkilát in *Jarlmanns rímur* is a remarkable healer, while Elínborg of *Geirarðs rímur* is well-versed in astronomy and foreign languages, as is Mábil of *Mábilr rímur*. There is some overlap with the skills seen as necessary for male characters, particularly in the foreign language requirement demonstrated so fully in *Konráðs sag/rímur*,¹⁶ though it should be noted that the two characters who most exemplify this, Elínborg and Mábil, both have a complicated relationship to femininity. Elínborg is a rare example of a maiden king in *rímur*, and though she does not masculinise herself to the same extent as other examples of the type (most notably Þornbjörg/Þórbergur in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* and Ingigerður/Ingi in *Sigurgarðs saga frækna*, who both adopt male names in order to rule as men), she still adopts a masculine role as sole ruler after her father’s death. Her educational specifics could therefore be attributed to a need to fulfil this role — implicitly gendered in that this is the knowledge needed for rulership and rulership is, in these texts, no job for a woman. Mábil, who insists on being taught to joust and fence in contrast to her sister’s needlework, has an even more complicated relationship to femininity, as this chapter will explore in more detail in the section on ‘Female Masculinity’.

kennings

Women are one of *rímur* poets’ favourite subjects for kennings, though this does not always lead to much in the way of poetic variety in the terms used. The typical woman-kenning in *rímur* takes the form ‘the [supporting object] of the [decorative item]’. Some examples of these types of kennings include:

‘auðar grund’ [ground of wealth [WOMAN]] (so common that in later poetry this is reanalysed as a single word and treated as a simple *heiti* for ‘woman’)

‘refla skorð’ [support of ribbons [WOMAN]] (*Vilmundar rímur* XIV.52)

‘falda gátt’ [doorpost of headdresses [WOMAN]] (*Geðraunir* XI.4)

‘Sifjar reikar Rist’ [the Rist (valkyrie) of Sif’s haircut [GOLD > WOMAN]] (*Geirarðs rímur* I.10)

¹⁶ On the prevalence of foreign languages as a required masculine accomplishment, see Kalinke, ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’.

‘hringa Hlín’ [the Hlín (valkyrie) of rings [WOMAN]] (*Dínus rímur* I.37)

While poets are adept at finding any number of objects which could conceivably be adorned in gold, silk and gemstones, as well as the opportunity this form grants them to invent kennings for gold, the basic idea remains the same: as far as the corpus of *rímur* kennings are concerned, women can be defined by their ability to wear beautiful things. Men are also sometimes referred to as ‘the [supporting object] of gold’ — frequently enough that terms like *auðarlundur* [tree of wealth], like *auðargrund* [ground of wealth], are treated as a single word more akin to a heiti than a kenning in later poetry — but their relationship to precious objects is fundamentally different to that of women. Wealth-associated kennings for men frame men as the ones who possess and distribute wealth; they may also be decorated by it, but their relationship to gold is at heart an active one. A large subset of man-kennings use agentive nouns like *fleygir* [the one who flings (=distributor)], *skýfir* [the one who pushes (=distributor)], and *brjótir* [the one who breaks [the gold into usable pieces for distribution]]: the one who does something to/with the gold/rings/necklaces, most commonly distributing it to their followers. These sorts of agentive nouns never appear in kennings for women; while women may be adorned with costly items, the kenning corpus constructs this as a passive interaction, with no indication that the woman has any input in the matter. While the occasional woman is characterised as generous to her people,¹⁷ this is not treated as such a conventional part of female behaviour as to be reflected in the collection of kennings for women, unlike those for men. The result of this difference is to set up a binarised, gender-based hierarchy for the appropriate interaction of the aristocracy with wealth, in which praiseworthy men *use* gold to reinforce bonds of loyalty, and women, like the less-wealthy retainers, are presented as the passive recipients of such generosity.

FEMALE ANTAGONISTS

The Monstrous Regiment

Chapter Three has already discussed the dehumanisation of male antagonists in *rímur* through their monstrous presentation. This treatment is also applied to a number of female antagonists. In *Jarlmanns saga/rímur*, we see perhaps the closest female equivalent to the figure of the male heathen invader in Þorbjörg, the giantess sister of King Rúdent, who is at least partially responsible for the capture of the princess Ríkilát and who forms the greatest threat to Jarlmann and Hermann’s efforts

¹⁷ For example, Vísivald’s unnamed wife in *Vilmundar rímur*, who ‘ýtum gullið veitir’ [offers gold to men] (I.12), and Mátthildur in *Konráðs rímur*, who ‘görpum veitti [...] grettis snjá’ [offered men the serpent’s snow [gold]] (II.18).

to save the princess. Þorbjörg, despite being sister to a king who is not described in any inhuman terms at all, is consistently presented as monstrously huge and ugly, in a very similar way to the descriptions of berserkers and *blámenn* in other romances. Over the course of the *rímur* cycle, she is called ‘geysi dökk’ [very dark] (XI.38), ‘ljótri brúði’ [ugly woman] (XII.102), and the possessor of ‘holdið svarta’ [the black/dark body] (XII.103).¹⁸ In fact, it is clear that the *rímur* poet had an established image in mind of what a giantess should look like and Þorbjörg is fitted into this mould without much reference to her description in the saga, which is as follows:

Þar fylgði kona svo stór að hann hafði enga slíka séð, og þó þó digurð hennar af meir en hæð, og var þó hvortveggja með miklu móti. Eigi var hún svo ófríð sem hún var augnamikil og munnvið.¹⁹

[There followed a woman so large that he had never seen the like, and yet her stoutness surpassed her height, and yet each was above average. She was not so much unattractive as she was large of eye and wide of mouth.]

The Þorbjörg of the saga is an unusual-looking woman, certainly, but she is also explicitly ‘eigi [...] svo ófríð’ [not so ugly], in contrast to the *rímur* cycle’s ‘ljótri brúði’. The effect of the *rímur* poet’s alterations is to elide some of Þorbjörg’s strangeness as a figure, fitting her instead into a mould built for the overlapping categories of heathen/giant/berserker that are so typical for male *rímur* antagonists. In both texts, Þorbjörg is a somewhat mysterious and ambiguous figure: she does not appear to be the instigator behind Ríkilát’s kidnapping, but is the main obstacle to Jarlmann and Hermann successfully retrieving the princess. She is also the figure responsible for the mysterious ‘paðreinsleikar’ [hippodrome games], which involve bizarre and suggestive gymnastics displays by various other trolls, noisy and vigorous dancing, and some creative uses of goat-skins, none of which can take place until the king has thoroughly bribed the attendees with fat purses of silver. Þorbjörg is also wondrously large and strong, and in her displays of split-legged athleticism, not to mention her eagerness to marry ‘Austvestan’, we see traces of the sexual licentiousness often associated with female trolls in the *Íslendingasögur* and legendary sagas.²⁰

Þorbjörg is not the only giant in the family: the king’s son from a previous marriage, Rodian(t), is also described as ‘mikill sem rísi’ [large as a giant] in the saga²¹ and ‘blár og rísi svo hár’ [blue/black and tall as a giant] (VIII.60) in the *rímur* cycle. As with Þorbjörg, although the saga does not depict

¹⁸ *Jarlmanns rímur* is unedited; see the ‘Note on Quotations’ for manuscript details.

¹⁹ Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 50.

²⁰ Matthew Roby, ‘Troll Sex: Youth, Old Age, and the Erotic in Old Norse-Icelandic Narratives of the Supernatural’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2019).

²¹ Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 41.

giantishness as related to anything other than size, for the *rímur* poet, skin-colour seems to be an essential identifier of giants, terms like *dökk*, *blár* and *svartur* being added to the descriptions of Þorbjörg and Rodiant where they do not appear in the source saga. However, all we are told about the appearance of the king himself is that he is ‘gamall’ [old] in the saga²² and ‘stórmjög hniginn á elli’ [much bowed with age] (VIII.56) in the *rímur* cycle. The saga comments that he is *so* old that no one recalls the start of his reign, and also notes that only the king’s own sword can harm him, which may suggest that the king, like his relatives, is not conventionally human, but there is still no indication that he is physically monstrous. Even in terms of character, Rúdent appears at first to be the model of a good king, polite and generous to his visitors, to the extent of building them a hall and offering them expensive gifts. As discussed in Chapter Three, generosity is one of the key components of socially desirable masculinity in these texts, and it is a trait the *rímur* poet also emphasises, noting of Rúdent that ‘frá æsku kjaldur er orma hjaldur | ýtum kann að veita’ [from childhood he knew to offer the serpents’ battle²³ [GOLD] to men] (VIII.58) and that his son Rodiant also ‘frænings bár að fyrðum sár’ [bore the serpent’s wound²⁴ [GOLD] to men] (VIII.60). For Rodiant, this comes in the same stanza in which he is described as ‘blár og rísi svo hár’, an unusual juxtaposition of traits in a character: on the one hand, physically likened to *blámenn* and monsters, on the other credited with one of the defining characteristics of noble masculinity. These ambiguities, however, are precisely the point of *Jarlmanns saga/rímur*, a text that challenges its audience’s genre expectations at every turn.

In addition to Þorbjörg, there are a number of other characters in the chivalric *rímur* corpus who blur the boundaries between woman and monster. One of the most intriguing is the figure of Öskubuska in *Vilmundar saga/rímur viðutans*, a serving woman at the court of King Vísinvald, the king of Garðaríki. She plays a complex role in the saga, first forced by the scheming princess Sóley to exchange appearances with her and take her place as the bride ‘won’ by another servant Kotur for his suitor-murdering services, then as Kotur’s well-matched partner, and finally as a powerful sorceress and co-author of the outlawed Kotur’s reign of supernatural terror.

As she and Kotur are frequently presented as a matched pair, it is only by looking at the two of them together that it is possible to gain a full picture of either of them as individuals. In the saga, although neither character is explicitly introduced as a giant, troll, or other non-human entity, their physical descriptions foreshadow their eventual decline into wicked sorcery:

²² Loth, ‘Jarlmanns saga’, p. 41.

²³ Although ‘hjaldur’ seems like a mistake for ‘hjallur’ [platform] here — ‘serpents’ platform’ would be a far more usual gold-kenning.

²⁴ Again, this is a strange gold-kenning. ‘Frænings sáð’ [serpent’s seed] would make more sense, but does not fit the rhyme scheme. ‘Serpent’s wound’ seems more akin to the ‘serpent’s flaw/injury’ kennings for winter seen for example in *Grettis rímur* I.16. Colwill, p. 7.

Hann var mikill vexti og ljótur mjög. Hárið var brunnið af honum og skóklæðin neðan að kné. Hann hafði kistil mikinn á herðunum og lútur í hálsinum. Hann var illa eygður, en verr tenntur.²⁵ [He was large in size and very ugly. his hair had been burnt off and likewise his cloth shoes below the knee. He had a great hump on his shoulders and was bowed at the neck. He had unpleasant-looking eyes and worse teeth.]

Such a description echoes the physical deformities with which trolls and giants are frequently described in sagas and *rímur*.²⁶ Öskubuska is similarly described: ‘Ambátt var sú ein þar í garðinum, er Öskubuska hét. Hún var stór vexti og sterk að afli, og var hún mjög fyrir öðrum ambáttum’ [There was a serving-woman there in the courtyard who was called Öskubuska. She was large in size and mighty in strength and greatly superior to the other serving-women].²⁷ As with Kotur, although this initial description of her unusual size and strength certainly hints at a possible trollish origin, it is not until far later in the saga that this becomes explicit. The *rímur* does not make any such attempt at subtlety. Though the description of Kotur echoes that of the saga closely, noting all the same points of deformity, when the *rímur* poet moves on to talk of his great strength, this is explicitly likened to that of a troll: ‘afl hefur hann við alla þá | er hann því tröll að mætti’ [he has such strength that he might measure up to trolls] (I.78).²⁸ Similarly, Öskubuska’s unnatural abilities are highlighted from the start by the poet referring to her as ‘gyðja’ ([priestess], but here likely meant in the sense of ‘magic-worker’ or ‘troll’, I.80) in the stanza immediately after her introduction.²⁹ She is also called ‘ljót’ [ugly] (I.79) early on,³⁰ recalling the giants, dwarves, and berserkers of other texts, whose ugliness marks out their unbelonging in the human sphere.

Despite these unpromising introductions, the monstrosity of Kotur and Öskubuska’s actions are built up slowly over time. Kotur does no harm to anyone at King Vísivald’s court until he is bribed into killing Úlfur the Evil by the king’s daughter Sóley, who is opposed to the idea of Úlfur as a suitor. Even then, Kotur protests that he does not want to be called ‘drottinssvikari’ [a traitor to one’s lord]³¹ for betraying the king’s hospitality. Sóley eventually persuades him by insulting his courage and

²⁵ *Vilmundar saga viðutan*. *The Saga of Vilmundur the Outsider*, ed. by Jonathan Y.H. Hui (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2021), p. 4.

²⁶ C.f. the description of Skrymir in *Lokrutur* II.9–13, which is one of the earliest examples of such a description in *rímur*. Finnur Jónsson, I, pp. 295–96; Haukur Þorgeirsson, ‘List í Lokrum’, pp. 30–32.

²⁷ Hui, p. 6.

²⁸ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 43.

²⁹ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 43.

³⁰ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 43.

³¹ Hui, p. 8.

promising herself as a wife if he succeeds. Apparent in this scene is an unusually developed example of the interaction between gender and social class in the *riddarasögur*, a genre in which there are few extensive portrayals of non-aristocratic characters. Kolur may be enslaved and coded through his physical appearance as someone on the margins of human society, but he still feels the same impulse to prove his courage as any ‘hero’ in these texts, and in both saga and *rímur* cycle, he responds to Sóley’s insinuations by telling her not to ‘frýja mér hugar’ [challenge my courage]³² or ‘afls né hugar að frýja mér’ [challenge my courage nor strength] (II.46).³³

Sóley’s interactions with both Kolur and Öskubuska are intriguingly complex here, as befits a saga which plays with narrative convention to the extent *Vilmundar saga* does. As I have discussed elsewhere in both this chapter (see the later section on Medía in ‘Cruel Queens’) and the rest of the thesis (Chapter Three), explicit sexual commodification of women (as opposed to the implicit sexual undertones of marriage negotiations) is generally a trait associated with the antagonists of these texts. This applies to both male and female villains, but is especially prominent in cases where it is women offering sex with themselves or, less commonly, with another woman over whom they have power (c.f. particularly *Mábilur rímur*) as a bribe.³⁴ Such an offer is how Sóley finally convinces Kolur to agree to her plan and murder her would-be suitor Úlfur the Evil, and yet Sóley is neither an antagonist (except perhaps to herself) nor the sort of saintly figure that one might expect of the future wife of the narrative’s eponymous hero.

The saga is a little coy about the precise nature of the bargain, though it is clear that both parties understand the implications when Sóley offers to ‘legg sjálfa mig í veð’ [offer up myself as a pledge]; Kolur immediately asks ‘hversu ég nýt þín’ [how I will enjoy you] if he is a wanted criminal, the verb *njóta* here undoubtedly used in its euphemistic sense of specifically sexual enjoyment. Meanwhile, Sóley’s side of the bargain lies in implications: she speaks of running away together, but never explicitly promises to marry Kolur, nor that he will get to ‘enjoy’ her in the way he wants, stating only that that “Ég veit eigi, að mér muni annan bóndason vetra að eiga en þig,” [“I do not know that there’s a better farmer’s son for me to marry than you,”], hardly a ringing endorsement of the match.³⁵

Sóley’s deviousness continues when she bribes Öskubuska into exchanging clothes and appearances with her in order to take her place with Kolur when the time comes. Öskubuska is not informed of the arrangement with Kolur in advance, only that ‘nokkuð viðmæli’ [a certain promise]

³² Hui, p. 8.

³³ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 50.

³⁴ Arguably, the use of sexual violence against women in the maiden king romances also falls into this category: while the bargain is coerced, maiden kings like Seditiana in *Sigurðar saga/rímur þögla* do use sex with themselves as a bargaining chip to win some advantage for themselves in untenable situations and are subsequently scorned by the narrative for it.

³⁵ Hui, p. 8.

has been made and Öskubuska should go along with whatever Kolur wants.³⁶ Perhaps Öskubuska is worldly wise enough to understand what is implicit in this ‘certain promise’ and agrees to the bargain anyway; if not, we are left with the unsettling scene of the princess setting another woman up to be raped in her place, despite the narrative’s assurance that ‘Öskubuska lét vel yfir þessu kaupí’ [Öskubuska was pleased with this bargain].³⁷

In general, the saga paints Sóley as a difficult, ambivalent figure, most clearly reflected in her interactions with Öskubuska, while the *rímur* cycle is quicker to fit both women into their expected roles of noble princess and wicked serving woman. The saga contrasts Sóley’s character with that of her sister Gullbrá. Though both girls are born ‘mikil og fögur’ [large and beautiful],³⁸ their different characteristics and fates become immediately apparent in a postpartum ceremony performed by a *völva*, in which the infant Gullbrá puts a gold ring on her finger and the baby Sóley attempts to eat a dandelion. The symbolism of their respective choices is explained in-text as reflecting their future marriages: Gullbrá will marry a prince, whereas Sóley is destined to marry a farmer’s son of berserker lineage. The fact that ‘ekki aldin er jafnramt eða beiskara en skariffill’ [no fruit is stronger or more bitter than the dandelion] is taken as a reflection on the strength and power of Sóley’s future husband, which, given she eventually marries the eponymous Vilmundur himself, is hardly inaccurate.³⁹ However, such a description is also fitting for Sóley herself, willing to engage in distasteful acts, whatever the cost to herself or others — in order to avoid her unwanted marriage with Kolur, she takes Öskubuska’s place as a kitchen servant for years as part of their bargain. Meanwhile, Gullbrá’s choice of a gold ring is as fitting for a daughter of the nobility as it is possible to be; as we have seen earlier in this chapter, jewellery such as rings is one of the key associations for noblewomen found in *rímur* kennings.

Gullbrá subsequently proceeds to embody the virtues of an ideal noblewoman far better than her sister could ever hope to. When their father returns from his royal council, he passes judgment on his two daughters, declaring that of the two Gullbrá is ‘miklu fríðari’ [much more attractive], whereas Sóley’s good qualities are tempered with the fact that she seems ‘skapmikil og hyggilig í bragði’ [arrogant and clever in trickery].⁴⁰ As they grow up, Gullbrá proves to be ‘blíð og hýr og þýð við alla’ [cheerful and warm and friendly with everyone], while Sóley is ‘nokkuð fálátari, áfangamikil og veitul af fé, og sparði ekki við vini sína, og vildi hún og hafa það af hverjum sem hún kallaði’ [somewhat reserved, very openhanded and generous with money, and spared nothing for her friends’ sake, and

³⁶ Hui, p. 8.

³⁷ Hui, p. 8.

³⁸ Hui, p. 2.

³⁹ Hui, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Hui, p. 4.

she also wanted to have everything just as she ordered].⁴¹ The good-tempered Gullbrá is beloved by all, while ‘kóngur unni henni [Sóley] minna’ [the king loved her [Sóley] less].⁴² As the two girls get older, Sóley reaps the freedom of being the less-wanted child, fostered out to the magical Silven and able to roam the countryside at will. Meanwhile, Gullbrá is raised at court at first, but soon confined to a castle in her brother’s estate, following his oath that he will only permit her to marry a man who is his equal in knightly skills. Gullbrá achieves perhaps the ultimate recognition of her desirability as a noblewoman, but at the cost of her own freedom: confined to her chamber and forbidden from speaking to any man without her brother’s permission.

While the *rímur* poet does note that ‘Gullbrá lét þó gramur ávallt | til gildis halda meira’ [Yet the king always considered Gulbrá to be of more value] (I.49),⁴³ there is no mention of her father’s disparaging remarks about Sóley’s arrogant, deceitful nature. This is part of a general rehabilitation of Sóley’s character in the *rímur* cycle. For example, in her conversations with Kolur and Öskubuska, much of the careful doubletalk she engages in in the saga is erased, along with the implication that she has tricked Öskubuska into taking her place without informing her of the consequences. Indeed, when she makes her deal with Öskubuska, the poet says:

II.56

Sóley allt hið sanna þá

sagði snót hinu lyndis grá

allt um slíkt sem orðið var;

ekki frá ég hún skrökvi þar.⁴⁴

Sóley then told it all truly

to the spiteful-minded lady (Öskubuska),

all about everything that had happened;

I have not heard she made up a scrap of it.

While Sóley’s truthfulness is mentioned twice in this stanza, Öskubuska, who thus far in the narrative has done nothing other than exist as a person of low social status, is the one presented as untrustworthy, the one with ‘lyndis grá’ [a spiteful temperament].

This continues throughout their exchange, the format of *rímur* allowing the poet to slip in descriptive asides as half-lines and couples that have little impact on the progression of events but succinctly characterise Sóley as wise, rather than scheming. For example, when Sóley suggests her plan to swap appearances with Öskubuska, she is called ‘sú sem meira hefur vit’ [the one who has more wit] (II.57), and later on we are told that she is ‘hilmis dóttir hosk og klók’ [the king’s daughter,

⁴¹ Hui, p. 4.

⁴² Hui, p. 4.

⁴³ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 52.

wise and clever] (II.61).⁴⁵ These asides are part of the natural rhythm of *rímur*, where they do not distract from the narrative flow but do create an image of Sóley in which she is wise rather than calculating; clever instead of devious. The moral complexity Sóley displays in the saga is flattened out, while Kólur and Öskubuska are painted as inherently villainous due to their social positions.

This idea that both Kólur and Öskubuska were fated for villainy from the start is apparent in both saga and *rímur* cycle, but more pronounced in the latter. As soon as the two become involved in Sóley's schemes, they fall hard and fast, Kólur in particular. His method of killing Úlfur, by stabbing him in his sleep and sealing up the wound so that he dies of internal bleeding, is highly unusual and a far cry from the very public violence that chivalric heroes tend to inflict on their enemies. The obvious point of comparison here is Sóley and Gullbrá's half-brother Hjarrandi, who is portrayed as the flower of chivalry in both the saga and the *rímur* cycle: his approach to violence is to declare that anyone so bold as to talk to his sister without his permission will lose their head; anyone who seeks her as a wife will have to face him publicly in combat, and the unsuccessful will once again lose their heads and have them mounted on a standard. The public nature of both challenge and punishment are stressed: violence carried out in plain view of all is acceptable and even praiseworthy, while violence carried out in the dark and in secrecy is to be despised. While intelligence may be prized for chivalric heroes, subterfuge and schemes are generally presented as the hallmarks of wicked men.

Kólur further compounds his faults in the way he treats the serving women of Sóley's chamber. As the *rímur* poet puts it, in an ironic echo of Sóley's earlier taunt that 'allt mun vaxa í augum þér' [everything seems like a big deal in your eyes] (II.44):⁴⁶

II.65

Ekki honum í augum vex:

ólétt hefur hann fljóðin sex.

Sóley gerir hann sjöndu skil;

*sú mun allvel vinna til.*⁴⁷

Nothing seemed like a big problem in his eyes:

he has made six ladies pregnant.

He makes 'Sóley' the seventh;

she will very much be ready for that.

The saga does not contain this assertion that 'Sóley' (the disguised Öskubuska) was an enthusiastic participant in events, merely stating that, in addition to the six chambermaids, 'kóngsdóttir var og ólétt, og leyndi hver með annari' [the king's daughter was also pregnant, and each of them concealed it from the other].⁴⁸ This again seems to be part of an attempt on the *rímur* poet's part to sharpen the

⁴⁵ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, pp. 52, 53.

⁴⁶ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ Ólafur Halldórsson, *Vilmundar rímur viðutan*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Hui, p. 10.

moral contrast between the ‘good’ characters and the ‘wicked’ ones: if Öskubuska knows what she is agreeing to and enjoys the experience, Sóley’s scheme becomes far less morally reprehensible. Meanwhile, Öskubuska’s enthusiasm for sex, especially sex with a man like Kotur, is another indication that her nature is qualitatively different to that of a noblewoman like Sóley, effectively excluding her from socially valued femininity. In both texts, Kotur’s rapacious sexual appetites combine with his predilection for murder in the dark to mark him out as the shadowy obverse of respectable chivalric masculinity; as discussed in Chapter Three, noble masculinity in these texts is defined by continence and control of one’s desires, while explicit sexual interest is frequently a marker of villainy in both men and women.

Cruel Queens

Two of the most fascinating and developed female antagonists in the medieval *rímur* corpus are found in texts which, unusually, do not have surviving prose antecedents, namely *Mábilur rímur sterku* and *Reinalds rímur og Rósu*.⁴⁹ Both sagas are also unusual by *rímur* standards for the relatively high number of female characters they feature, as well as for the fact that their driving antagonists are neither men nor monsters, but noblewomen. In *Mábilur rímur*, Mábil is the eldest child of King Rúdent, who trains as a knight and is sworn to protect her more conventionally feminine sister Móbil. When their mother dies, their father remarries to the scheming Medía, who attempts to marry off both her daughter and new stepdaughters to various knights as payment for services rendered in her takeover of Rúdent’s kingdom. The sisters are separated by kidnapping, exile, and being entombed alive, but are eventually reunited (at least in the younger redaction of the *rímur*). Meanwhile, *Reinalds rímur* follows the difficulties of childhood sweethearts Reinaldur and Rósa, whose romance is frowned upon by Reinaldur’s royal parents. Reinaldur’s mother Severia arranges to have Rósa kidnapped by raiders, who plan to marry her off to their own lord. Through many battles and various threatened marriages, Reinaldur eventually rescues Rósa and the two are at last able to marry, as they swore to in their childhood. The story appears to be related to that of Floire and Blancheflor, which was translated into Old Norse as *Flóres saga og Blankiflúr* in the thirteenth century as part of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson’s programme of romance translation.⁵⁰ Though the *rímur* cycle does not appear to be directly adapted from *Flóres saga*, but rather from a now-lost *Reinalds saga*, the two narratives have several points in common: the capture of Rósa’s/Blankiflúr’s mother by Reinaldur’s/Flóres’ father

⁴⁹ A later *Mábilur saga*, found in a manuscript from the nineteenth century (Lbs. 1502 8vo), was written based on the *rímur*, but there is no extant saga predating the *rímur*.

⁵⁰ Marianne E. Kalinke and P.M. Mitchell, *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*, Islandica (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), XLIV, p. 41.

while she is still pregnant;⁵¹ the raising of the two children together, leading to their falling in love; the parental disapproval of the match, leading to Rósa/Blankiflúr being abducted and Flóres/Reinaldur undergoing a series of trials to find her again.⁵²

Severia is less involved as an antagonist than many others; she simply provides the initial push that sees Rósa taken away from her home and plunged into danger. Thereafter, Rósa's main threats come from various rival groups of men who see her as the ideal bride for their own leader, and therefore necessary to capture from her current betrothed. Despite this, Severia is the clear originator of Rósa's misfortunes: the one to propose the scheme and the first person to take an active role in separating Rósa from Reinaldur.

It is in the intimacy of the bedchamber that Severia makes her appeal to her husband:

II.29

*Eina nótt fyrir efnin slík
Artus kóngur og drottning rík
lágu undir líni tvö;
ljóst er nú hvað skröfuðu þau.*

One night, regarding this matter,
King Artús and the wealthy queen
lay, the two of them, under a coverlet;
now it is clear what they talked about.

The statement that they lie together under a single coverlet appears elsewhere in the *rímur* corpus as part of the conventional depiction of a wedding night. Though it may not specifically refer to sexual intimacy here, its inclusion does nonetheless nod towards the idea. Given the subject matter of their conversation, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Severia would wish to remind her husband of marriage and all that it entails while she outlines precisely why such a match between Reinaldur and Rósa would be unsuitable. Artús, who has already demonstrated a failure to live up to the 'public displays of violence' part of *rímur* masculinity in his use of 'vél' [tricks, stratagems] to overcome Duke

⁵¹ In *Flóres saga*, this is explicitly the capture of a Christian woman by a Muslim king. This is perhaps implied in *Reinalds rímur* by King Artús being ruler of Spain, parts of which had been under Islamic rule for centuries by the time of the *rímur* cycle's composition, while the pregnant Álúna is the wife of the ruler of the 'Greek peninsulas', most likely a reference to Byzantium, a famous bastion of Christianity in chivalric texts. However, there is no explicit reference to anyone's faith until Reinaldur and Rósa are reunited and turn their joint efforts towards promoting Christianity in their kingdom. Unlike in *Flóres saga*, Reinaldur's mother's objection to the match here comes not from the fact that Rósa is the daughter of a Christian, but that she is 'just' a duke's daughter and, "Son minn liggi fyrri dauður | en það spyrjist um borg og bý | að bindi hann sig við nokkuð þý," ["[I would] sooner my son lie dead than it be rumoured through town and farm that he has bound himself to some kind of slave,"] (II.33).

⁵² Miriam Edlich-Muth, 'A Saint's Romance: Rósa, Rosana, and the Hispano-Scandinavian Links Shaping Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr', in *Medieval Romances Across European Borders*, Medieval Narratives in Transmission (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), I, 57–75.

Vígbald earlier, is now revealed to also be the more passive partner in bed with his wife. While Severia is forthright in her demands, Artús prevaricates, stating that it is a bad idea to go against what Fortune wishes. Severia is the one to make her objections plain, and Severia is the one to develop a plan of action, instructing Artús to take Reinaldur with him to visit his brother Bertolant, while “ég skal ráð fyrir jómfú sjá,” [“I shall see to things for this maiden”] (II.35). Artús acquiesces with no more protest, only a reminder that this plan is meant to avoid their son getting hurt:

II.36

“Þú munt væla um það ráð,
þengill svaraði bauga láð.

“You must make plans about this,”
the prince answered the ground of rings
[WOMAN].

“Sjá þú við því silki-Lín
að son þinn fái enga pín.”

“You see to the Lín of silks [WOMAN]
so that your son may suffer no pain.”

Severia’s actions, however cruel, do at least seem to be motivated by concern towards her son — or at least concern towards her future descendants through her son. Indeed, her statement that Rósa is of ‘trölla kyn’ [trollish stock] (II.41) appears to be simply the logical extrapolation of the depictions of servants like Kotur and Öskubuska in *Vilmundar saga/rímur*: if the lower classes are indeed closer to monsters than humans, then it is only natural that a mere duke’s daughter, when compared to a prince, appears to be of giantish descent. However, Reinaldur’s protests that “Ekki er hún Rósa flögðum lík!” [“My Rósa is nothing like a giantess!”] (II.42) reveal that trollishness is very much in the eye of the beholder: the conflation of certain categories of people with the inhuman Other is shown to be a construction in the minds of the aristocracy, rather than anything rooted in reality.

In Severia’s concern for her son to make a suitable match, there is an argument to be made that she is fulfilling an expected maternal role. Yet within the chivalric *rímur* corpus, this is an unusual position for a woman: where parental input is sought on a marriage, it is almost always the father or brother of the bride-to-be whose approval is sought. Mothers are, in general, rare figures in the chivalric corpus: with the exception of Medía in *Mábilur rímur* and Ólíf in *Landrés rímur*, they are almost invariably either dead or so passive as to form an absence in the narrative.

Much has been written on the role of male kinsmen in securing the success or lack thereof in marriages in the *Íslendingasögur*, stressing the importance of maintaining good relations with one’s extended family in such a small and closely connected community as Settlement Era Iceland.⁵³ In the chivalric romances, the stage is widened beyond the scope of one small island to the entirety of

⁵³ E.g. Bandlien, p. 63.

Christendom and beyond, but many of the same mechanisms are at play in choosing an appropriate match. The reputation of both parties is key, in particular in the popular bridal-quest subgenre of romances, in which the male protagonist seeks out a wife from a distant land based solely on reports of her outstanding beauty, virtue, and, perhaps, intelligence. The approval of male relatives is likewise crucial; given that these matches take place between heirs to kingdoms, the potential consequences of an unwilling match could be disastrous. Yet even with such pressing political weight on the match, there is still a pervading sense that the bride-to-be ought to also agree to the marriage; on the handful of occasions where she does not, or where she agrees only reluctantly and in the face of threats from her suitor, the unions are shown to be troubled.⁵⁴ Notable examples of this include the contested brides in *Geðraunir* and *Sigurðar rímur fóts*, in which the sought-after woman has her preferences overruled by her father, with the result that her two suitors, both presented as worthy matches, end up almost destroying one another and their respective kingdoms in their efforts to ‘win’ their bride from the other. As argued in the section on sworn brothers in Chapter Three, these disputes soon lose their connection to the woman in question: she serves as a catalyst for the two men’s relationship, which inevitably starts out as antagonistic before each realises the other’s worth and they agree to swear brotherhood together.

One particularly developed narrative featuring a reluctant bride is seen in *Mágus saga/rímur jarls*, in which a match is proposed between King Játmundur and Princess Ermengá. Ermengá’s father, King Hrólfur, in response to Játmundur’s initial request, states that, “mín skal dóttir manninn sér | mektug sjálfri kjósa” [“my worthy daughter shall choose her husband for herself,” (I.36).⁵⁵ This is an expected response, but here it heralds a far more considered weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of the match than is usual. Ermengá plainly sees the risks involved in marrying the arrogant King Játmundur: “Metnaður hans og mótgjörð vor | má það yndi spilla,” [“His ambition and our offence may destroy any happiness,” (I.39).⁵⁶ Yet she also sees the threat implicit in Játmundur’s ‘request’:

⁵⁴ With the exception of maiden king narratives, where the entire plot revolves around the woman’s refusal to marry, and her eventual submission to matrimony is presented as a happy ending for both her and her pursuer. However, I would argue that maiden king narratives are approaching marriage from a fundamentally different angle to other bridal-quest romances: maiden kings have no intention of marrying *anyone*, no matter how outstanding a figure, and in their absolute refusal to entertain even the prospect of marriage, they are a threat to a social order in which the bonds created through heterosexual marriage are integral. Princesses who are reluctant to wed in other texts (e.g. Ermengá in *Mágus saga/rímur jarls*) are reluctant not because they are opposed to the idea of marriage in general, but because their proposed suitor is an unsuitable match due to personal flaws.

⁵⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 535.

⁵⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 536.

I.40

“Ef biður þú ekki,” að brúðurin tér,
“buðlung þann að ráða,
hann mun hefndin hyggja þér,
herra faðir minn, bráða.

“If you don’t agree,” the lady says,
“to this king’s plan,
he will soon think up some revenge
on you, my lord father.

I.41

“Heit mig heldur hilmi að fá
og hafna öllum vanda.”
Sigurður fastnar silki-Gná
Saxa gram til handa.⁵⁷

“Rather, promise me to this king
and avoid all troubles.”
Sigurður betroths the Gná of silks [WOMAN]
to the king of the Saxons.

Subsequent efforts to get Játmundur to demonstrate that he will not be a disastrous match for her go poorly: when requested to carve and serve a bird to Ermengá’s family at the wedding feast, a test of both wisdom and humility,⁵⁸ Játmundur takes the request as a mortal insult and, when Ermengá herself appears looking less beautiful than advertised, he sets about proving all her misgivings correct. As Ermengá had predicted, he is a suspicious, proud and jealous husband, refusing to fulfil the expected duties of the wedding night and scorning his new wife in court at every opportunity. When he finally leaves her to wage war elsewhere, it is with the threat of further abuse if she does not fulfil a series of (he believes) impossible challenges before his return. As discussed in Chapter Three, Játmundur’s failure to perform courtly masculinity correctly puts him in the position of being outperformed and outmanoeuvred by his wife; it is only through his humiliation and eventual grudging recognition of Ermengá’s abilities that their marriage reaches anything approaching happiness.

In Severia’s insistence that she knows better than her son what a fitting match for him should be, she is therefore acting against the accepted code of behaviour for the genre, which treats lovers, however young, as the experts on their own marriages.

Medía, of *Mábilur rímur sterku*, is another woman who uses matrimonial manipulation to achieve her goals. She lives up to her classical namesake, displaying a ruthlessness towards her own daughter, stepdaughters, and half-brother that may stop short of the original Medea’s infanticide, but only just. Family members, for Medía, are there to be married off to convenient allies, murdered, framed for that murder, and entombed alive with the victim’s body.

⁵⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 536.

⁵⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ““With mirthful merriment”: Masquerade and Masculinity in *Mágus saga jarls*”, pp. 86–87.

It is Medía's use of marriage bonds as a means of accessing power that I wish to look at more closely in this section. As has been discussed above, the chivalric corpus, with the exception of the maiden king romances, largely follows the pattern set by earlier works, in which both parties' consent to a marriage is key to its success. Within *Mábilur rímur*, there is not a single marriage that takes place in the narrative without some form of coercion or deception being involved, all of it organised by Medía.⁵⁹ The first wedding to take place is that of Medía herself and the recently bereaved King Rúdent, which begins in the typical manner of a bridal quest romance, with King Rúdent hearing a report of his would-be bride's great beauty and virtue, determining that this is a sufficiently excellent woman for him to marry, and despatching a proxy wooer to ask for her hand. However, it is not a description of Medía that so moves him, but one of her daughter, Móbía. Medía is, at this point, already married to the very much alive (for now) Emperor Leobrandus, but is not one to admit impediments to the marriage of true minds (or, more pertinently, the acquisition of another husband's kingdom). When the messenger Sigurður arrives at the emperor's court, he is wined and dined at Medía's orders — the emperor makes no appearance. Later, Sigurður wakes up to find he is not alone in his bed: a woman is there. The two of them enjoy themselves for a time and Sigurður 'spennir að sér sprundið mætt, | spurði hvorki að nafn né ætt' [clasps the woman he encountered to him, asked neither her name nor her lineage] (II.26), which turns out to be a mistake when the woman reveals that 'keisarans hefur þú kvinnu tælt' [you have enticed the emperor's wife] (II.29). Medía goes on to tell Sigurður that she is now deeply in love with him ('vil ég þér mína elsku ljá' (II.29)) and persuades him to tell her his mission, which she then promptly begins to undermine, telling him that the daughter King Rúdent is so set on marrying runs mad every new moon, biting and attacking any who approach, and meanwhile, the emperor is so old and sick that Torment ('Kvalin') is the only woman fit for him to now embrace:

II.33

*"Pínd er þessi hin prúða mæ:
 á prími hverju verður hún ær,
 svo með æði bitur og ber
 bragna hvern eð að henni fer.*

"The worthy maiden is punished in this way:
 on every new moon she becomes mad,
 thus furiously biting and beating
 any man who approaches her.

II.35

"Hrýðir allt um húsið ljóst,

"He clears away everything around the

⁵⁹ King Rúdent's marriage to his first wife Noema takes place before the start of the story and is therefore excluded from this discussion.

<p><i>hripli sá hans þínir brjóst.</i> <i>Kvalin má heita kvinnan sú</i> <i>keisarinn hlýtur að faðma nú.”</i></p>	<p>house, that affliction pains his heart. One may name her Torment, that woman whom the emperor ought to embrace now.”</p>
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Meanwhile, Medía herself would be a suitable match for King Rúdent, she suggests, and furthermore, if Sigurður were to arrange this, when Rúdent became emperor of Medía’s lands, Sigurður would sit at his right hand.

With this seed planted, Medía now begins the task of ridding herself of her current husband. Though it is not explicitly stated that she is behind the ‘nokkur farandi mann’ [some kind of traveller] (II.39) who brings the emperor the magic onion that leads to his death, she is so closely involved in the events that follow, and the timing of the emperor’s death is so convenient, that the *rímur* cycle’s audience would surely have connected the dots. Moreover, Medía has already been referred to as ‘fljóð er svíkja kann’ [a woman skilled in betrayal] (II.32) in reference to her manipulation of Sigurður, so the audience is primed not to give her the benefit of the doubt in subsequent events. The traveller assures the emperor that the onion will ‘heilan vinnur krankdóm þinn’ [heal your illness] (II.41), the same sort of ironic statement that Ásmundur makes in *Hrólfs saga/rímur Gautrekssonar* when he promises an old woman that he can cure her of old age before promptly decapitating her. Certainly, once dead, the emperor is no longer troubled by his sickness.

The precise manner of the emperor’s death shows Medía once again using her skill in manipulating intimacy to achieve her ends. When the onion is produced, she tells the emperor:

<p>II.43 <i>“Bæði skulu við bergja af.”</i> <i>Beit hún á og kóngi gaf.</i> <i>Fylkir þegar hjá falda Gefn</i> <i>fellur niður í dauða svefn.</i></p>	<p>“We should both taste it.” She bit into it and gave it to the king. Immediately, the ruler fell down into a deathlike sleep beside the Gefn of headresses [WOMAN].</p>
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The emperor is put to bed, but when his men come to find him in the morning, they discover that,

<p>II.45 <i>Kóngurinn var þá kaldur og dauður;</i> <i>kominn á brjóstið dílinn rauður.</i></p>	<p>The king was then cold and dead; red spots had appeared on his chest.</p>
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Frú hefur hann í faðminn lagt.

The lady has embraced him.⁶⁰

Fá þeir ekki drottning vakt.

They cannot get the queen to wake up.

It is, I think, hardly coincidental that a woman who has already used the intimacy of the bedchamber to get one man to do her bidding is now found in an intimate embrace with her conveniently dead husband. Medía is skilled at using both sex itself and its associations of intimacy and vulnerability to shape others' perceptions of her. For example, in her interactions with Sigurður, despite the narrative making it clear that Sigurður had no plans to sleep with her until he woke up to find her in bed with him, she pushes the agency for their encounter onto him, saying, 'keisarans hefur þú kvinnu tælt' [you have enticed the emperor's wife] (II.29). She fashions an image of herself as the helpless, lovestruck woman and Sigurður as the active seducer that is not borne out by the surrounding narrative, but which nonetheless convinces Sigurður to go along with her plans. Likewise, in the case of her husband's mysterious death, she arranges a final tableau for the pair of them that emphasises her supposed devotion to the dead man.

Once awoken from her onion-induced slumber, Medía continues to play her role of grief-stricken widow to perfection. 'Í brjósti kalt' [cold in her heart] (II.47), she summons an assembly of nobles wherein Sigurður, following her earlier instructions, requests her hand on behalf of his king. Medía protests: "Ekki er mér á gifting lyst. | Ég stundar það eigi á niðlungs náð | nema það lítist öðrum ráð," ["I am not eager for marriage. I do not care about the king's protection, unless that is the advice of others,"] (II.51). Lest we think that Medía might be sincere in her grief, the poet reminds us that she is 'brúðar [...] er brögðin nam' [the lady who performed tricks] (II.50). The hitherto unmentioned Lord Balan now speaks up, saying that he is happy to look after the country while Medía gets married, and matters end with Medía agreeing to the wedding — all exactly as she has arranged, but with none of the blame for remarrying with unseemly haste attaching to her. Now Sigurður returns home:

II.53

*Og með sárum svikunum þeim
Sigurður kemur í Grikkland heim.
Hrósar því fyrir milding mest,
Mediu hafði hann kóngi fest.*

And with this agonising treachery,
Sigurður comes home to Greece.
He praises Medía so much before the king
that the king ends up engaged to her.

⁶⁰ Grammatically, this could also be, 'He has embraced the lady,' though given the king has apparently entirely lost consciousness before being placed in the bed, the former reading seems more likely.

With her seduction of Sigurður, Medía has successfully secured her position as queen of two kingdoms and, given her new husband's pliable personality, would indeed be de facto ruler of both if it were not for the inconvenient presence of Mábil. Here, Medía's ready command of both female sexuality and supernatural forces combine to ensure her success. Indeed, there are several scenes in which the two blur together, leaving it unclear whether Medía is in fact employing magic in the bedroom, or whether these are examples of more down-to-earth misogyny on the part of the *rímur* poet around the seductive powers of the female form. One such example of this is her wedding night with King Rúdent, where we are told:

III.17

pegar að svaf hjá silki fit

sviptir ofnis láða,

svo var heill að hilmis vit

hún skal öllu ráða.

As soon as the brandisher of the serpent's
lands [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]

slept with the meadow of silk [WOMAN],

so it was that all of the king's wit

became hers to command.

Though the effects certainly read as supernatural to a modern reader, there is no explicit mention of magic being used here, and there are enough concerned polemics over the 'bewitching' effects of women's bodies in both medieval and modern times⁶¹ that we need not necessarily assume any literal enchantment was involved. In either case, Medía's control over her husband is directly linked to their behaviour in the bedroom, as was her manipulation of Sigurður and as will be her command of Sigurður's brother Tenix.

The combination of magic and seduction proves so successful for Medía that she uses it again in one of her most triumphant moves against her rival Mábil. Mábil, as I discuss elsewhere, has been charged with defending her more conventionally feminine sister Móbil, following their mother's death. To this end, Móbil is kept in a strong tower, guarded from outside dangers by Mábil herself. Medía's convoluted plan for getting one over on Mábil involves stealing her sister away from under her nose, and to achieve this, she once again uses the mingled threat and promise of sex to convince a male agent to do her bidding. Sigurður, as we have seen, is already primed to do as Medía instructs, and is

⁶¹ Compare, for example, the popular medieval and post-medieval tale of Phyllis and Aristotle, known from the 13th-century *Lai d'Aristote*, as well as a large number of images and sculptures from across medieval Europe, which depicts the supposedly wise philosopher transformed into the bestial plaything of the seductive Phyllis. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, 'Aristote', in *Twenty-Four Lays from the French Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 130–40.

the first to attempt Medía's kidnapping scheme. When he fails, his brother Tenix is recruited for the cause by Medía's preferred recruitment method:

IV.49

*Þegar hann undir klæðin kemur,
karlmanns lyst með brúði fremur,
vífið svo með vælum semur
visku alla frá honum nemur.*

As soon as he gets under the blanket
and practices a man's desire with the lady,
the woman arranges with stratagems
to take all wisdom from him.

IV.50

Fölsug talaði falda grund:

*“Forsmáð er nú keisarans sprund!
Ég hefur fyrir þinni ljótri lund
lagist með herra systur kund.”*

The ground of headdresses [WOMAN] spoke
falsely:

“You have disgraced the emperor's wife!
Because of your ugly temperament,
I have lain with my lord's nephew.”

This, with only the minor variation of emphasising Tenix's relationship to the king to heighten the impropriety of his actions, is precisely the tactic used with Sigurður when she was married to the previous emperor. In neither case is the man aware of Medía's true identity: with Sigurður, she refuses to reveal her name or family, and with Tenix, she has exchanged places with his usual bedpartner, who has been sent to sleep with the king in Medía's place that night, unbeknownst to either of the men.

To make sure of Tenix's assistance, Medía also arranges his betrothal to Mobía, her own daughter with her previous husband, promising through this match to make him 'öðlings mágur eigi lágur' [the king's son-in-law, not lowly] (V.5). Medía therefore offers sexual access not only to herself but to her daughter as a means of manipulating a man into doing her will. Mobía's approval for the match is never sought, and indeed we soon learn that Mobía is deeply opposed to the arrangement. As she and Tenix lie in bed together on their wedding night:

V.10

*Furðu glaður hinn fríði maður
faðmar lindi hnossa.
Auðþöll grætur og illa lætur
ekki er henni um kossa.*

The handsome man very gladly
embraces the linden of treasures [WOMAN].
The wealth-pine [WOMAN] cries and
struggles:
kissing is not for her.

As she subsequently reveals, she is under a witch's curse that she will die the first time she sleeps with a man, unless that man waits a year while still in love with her. In her exchange with Tenix we see a clear articulation of the balancing act women in these texts perform with their sexual availability. As Tenix says, “Sómir þér að sofa hjá mér,” [“It befits you to sleep with me,”] (V.11); he is her lawful husband, and it is therefore suitable and fitting for the two of them to have sex. As the conditions of the curse make clear, *not* having sex on their wedding night is almost unthinkable; the idea of a man waiting a full year to sleep with his wife is presented as the kind of impossible condition to which such curses are subject. Tenix remarks that this condition is ‘svo hart’ [so difficult] (V.15) to fulfil, but concedes that “Þig vil ég eigi dauða,” [“I don’t want you to die,”] (V.15) and agrees to it. Although the marriage Medía has promised him remains unconsummated, he nonetheless follows through on the plan to kidnap Móbil for the sake of his new mother-in-law. Tenix’s refusal to rape the woman who has been forced to marry him may seem like the bare minimum of decency here, but it is significant in that it shows that he is not an irredeemable monster, but a man capable of both decency and cruelty towards women. This is the case for all of Medía’s puppets, who display a moral ambivalence unusual by the typically black-and-white morality standards of *rímur*, in which antagonists are commonly presented as barely human in their behaviour and appetites. This of course only serves to emphasise the wickedness of Medía herself in the audience’s mind, that she can turn these otherwise decent men into the kind of villains who would kidnap a lady by magic and trickery.

When Tenix fails to steal away Móbil, Medía summons her half-brother Blávus, who is under a curse to appear ‘svartur og leiður’ [black and ugly] (VII.29) until a woman sleeps with him. Despite Blávus’ protests that “Mey skal ég aldrei nauðga festa,” [“I shall never tie a woman to me by rape,”] (VI.24), he does agree to kidnap Móbil and, with the aid of Medía’s wicked fostermother and her magic tent, succeeds. Yet as with Tenix, when it comes to the wedding night itself, his new bride is distraught by proceedings, despite Blávus’ assurance that:

VII.31

*“Viljir þú mér sem verður á próf
veita elskan kæra,
ég skal þegar að úti er hóf
yður til Mábil færa.”*

“If you will, as an ordeal,
offer me dear love,
I shall immediately, beyond measure,
take you to Mábil.”

In the JS 45 4to text, Móbil agrees to this bargain: ‘Lauka skorð með lágri raust | lést það gjarnan vilja’ [the prop of leeks [WOMAN], with a low voice, declared herself willing] (VII.38), though this agreement

does not appear in the *Kollsbók* text. In both, before the arrangement can be consummated, Blávus falls into a magically induced sleep, attributed in the *Kollsbók* text to ‘svikunum brúðar argrar’ [the treachery of the wretched⁶² woman] (VII.32). As he sleeps ‘eitt feikna gagl’ [a horrible goose] (VII.35) flies in through the window and deposits a magical seed in Móbil’s mouth. In a parody of the expected passions of the wedding night, the seed fills Móbil’s heart not with love but with fury: ‘svo varð hennar hjarta blóð | heitt með grimmd og æði’ [thus her heart’s blood grew hot with ferocity and rage] (VII.37). Her fingers find the slender knife Medía has already concealed next the bed for exactly this purpose and she stabs her new husband with it, whereupon the fury leaves her. The next morning, Medía arranges to bring witnesses when she stumbles across the damning scene:

VII.53

*Medía kemur að morgni þar,
mær í tárur flóði.
Saxið nökt hjá svanna var,
sængin flaut í blóði.*

Medía came there in the morning,
the maiden in floods of tears.
The naked blade was next to the woman,
the bed awash with blood.

Móbil is condemned to be entombed alive alongside her dead husband until she starves to death beside him, although she survives thanks to Blávus’ intervention.

Blávus’ death is inextricably intertwined in the conversations the poem is having about race and gender. Even before the goose and its fury-inducing seeds appear on the scene, Blávus’ half-black appearance terrifies Móbil:

VII.29

*þegar að horskur hjörva meiður
hallar sér á koddá,
sýndist henni svartur og leiður
sveigir stæltra brodda.*

As soon as the wise tree of swords [MAN]
reclines on the pillow,
the brandisher of steel points [MAN]
seemed black and ugly to her.

VII.30

Blávus vildi bauga þöll

Blávus wanted to bring the fir-tree of rings
[WOMAN]

⁶² Women are rarely called *argur* (or *örg* in the feminine) in medieval Icelandic texts; more often, the term connotes improper performances of masculinity by men, including cowardice and passivity in sexual encounters. In this instance, though the context differs, the implications of improper sexuality seem appropriate, given Medía’s interference in her half-brother’s wedding night.

<i>blíðka á sínum armi;</i>	joy in his arms;
<i>hún forðast hann sem feikna tröll</i>	she shunned him like a malicious troll,
<i>fljóð af grimnum harmi.</i>	the lady, out of terrible sorrow.

As the discussion of male antagonists in Chapter Three demonstrates, the comparison to a troll here is hardly unracialized. Moreover, when sleep overcomes Blávus, he ends up sleeping on his side so that his black half is uppermost:

VII.33	
<i>þegar að kenndi kotta kinn</i>	As soon as the king's cheek
<i>konungs hörundið bjarta</i>	of bright skin touched the pillow,
<i>höfginn rann í hjartað inn:</i>	drowsiness ran into his heart:
<i>horfir upp hið svarta.</i>	the black [side] faces upwards.

The fact that Blávus' half-black appearance is mentioned so often and repeatedly stressed as the part of him that is visible to Móbil at all times during this scene suggests that it plays a role in what follows. The chivalric romances operate on a genre-wide understanding that black bodies are a threat — physically, to white men, and sexually, to white women. Is Móbil's murderous rage in this scene solely the result of Medía's enchantments, or do the origins of it lie in her cultural conditioning to see black male bodies as an implicit threat, even when they lie there sleeping? Whatever the case, Blávus' death removes the threat and, not incidentally, removes his blackness. As he dies, he advises Móbil on how to survive the torment Medía has planned for her and Móbil at last embraces him, breaking the curse as he dies:

VII.49	
<i>þegar að fögur falda lofn</i>	As soon as the Lofn of headdresses [WOMAN]
<i>faðmar holdið bleika</i>	embraces the pale body,
<i>sígur af honum sortinn allur</i>	all the blackness seeps away
<i>svo er hann fagur sem leika.</i>	so that he is fair as a doll.

In his death, Blávus turns from threat to helper; it is not, I think, coincidental that he also turns from black to white.

So many of *Mábilur rímur*'s pivotal scenes take place in the bedchamber, and yet almost none of them depict a socially sanctioned form of sexual behaviour. Even Medía and Rúdent's wedding night, the most acceptable venue for (hetero)sexuality to take place, involves her stealing her husband's wits. In the other scenes in which sexual encounters take place, the participants are unmarried (or at least, not married to one another; Medía is of course married to someone else in both encounters) and in both cases the men are deceived into sex which leaves them subservient to a woman's control, as was the case with Rúdent. In the other two significant sexually charged scenes, namely Móbía and Móbil's respective wedding nights, the expectation of sex is once again confounded through the presence of magic: in Móbía's case, the curse that will kill her if she sleeps with a man before a year has passed, and in Móbil's case, the spell that puts Blávus to sleep before anything can occur. In this, as in many other aspects, *Mábilur rímur* plays with and subverts the generic expectations of chivalric romances, in which the pattern for heterosexual encounters is so inscribed as to not need spelling out: a poet can simply state that two characters were led to the same bed and allow the audience to draw their own conclusions about what occurred. In *Mábilur rímur*, however, as we have seen, characters repeatedly share a bed without sexual contact occurring and this, together with the impropriety of the sexual encounters which do occur, leads to a text which questions the inevitability of heterosexuality — indeed, of allosexuality in general.⁶³

Medía's use of sexuality in these scenes also serves to villainise her in the audience's eyes, her ready promiscuity a stark contrast to the reluctance of her daughter and stepdaughter to engage in the unions Medía has orchestrated for them. While women in chivalric *rímur* can hardly help but be aware of their position as sexual objects, given how often they are sought after, claimed and threatened with sexual violence, it is acceptable for them to play the object position in a way that it never would be for them to make *active* use of their own sexuality in the ways that Medía does here. In this, Medía also stands in contrast to her rival Mábil, who, while not explicitly stated to be a virgin warrior along the same lines as the shieldmaidens described in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*,⁶⁴ nonetheless remains conspicuously free of romantic or sexual entanglements, at least in the older redaction of the *rímur* cycle. As discussed in the penultimate section of this chapter, this is one of several aspects to Mábil's characterisation which complicates her gender in the text.

⁶³ 'Allosexual' — experiencing sexual desire and/or attraction — is the complementary term to 'asexual' — not experiencing sexual desire and/or attraction. Many chivalric romances operate on the assumption that the ideal model of love incorporates both heteroromantic and heterosexual desire between partners; as discussed elsewhere, sexual desire without romantic attraction is portrayed as synonymous with sexual violence and treated as characteristic of villains; for example, Príamus in *Geirarðs rímur*.

⁶⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum. The History of the Danes*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 1, pp. 474–77.

Though the two women’s rivalry is directed against one another — as is evident from the vitriolic letters the two of them exchange — Medía’s schemes are worked through the men over whom she has a claim: first the two she has seduced, Sigurður and Tenix, and finally her own half-brother. Meanwhile, Mábil operates entirely under her own extraordinary power; there is no intermediary force on which she can call to defend herself from Medía’s attacks, and so she rides out to meet them herself. In the two rivals, we see two very different models by which women access power in these texts. Mábil follows in the footsteps of characters from earlier text such as Hervör/Hervarður from *Hervarar saga* and Þornbjörg/Þórbergur from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, adopting the essentially masculine role of warrior and exercising control over events by physical violence.⁶⁵ Medía, meanwhile, finds power in words, inciting others to fight on her behalf, a malicious variant on the ‘wise queen’ archetype seen in the romances.⁶⁶ There is a stark contrast between the two of them, Medía directing events from afar in her castle, while Mábil is down in the muck and gore of the battlefield, a contrast only emphasised by the *rímur*-poet’s genre-typical delight in gruesome battle scenes. In one such scene, we are told:

VI.61

<i>Svanninn jungur sveipar til með sverði</i>	The young lady struck out with a bright
<i>glæstu,</i>	sword,
<i>hálsinn mætti höggi stærstu.</i>	met the neck with the mightiest blow.
<i>Höfuðið fauk yfir tvo hina næstu.</i>	The head flew over the nearest two
	[warriors].

Just two stanzas earlier, the poet informs us that the fate of a man who declared Mábil to be “Tröll en ekki kvinna,” [“A troll and not a woman,”] (VI.58) is that ‘sverðið tók hann sundur í miðju’ [a sword split him apart down the middle] (VI.59). Such descriptions are not uncommon in *rímur* battle scenes, which take great joy in bisected corpses and enough blood to rival any modern action film. In *Geirðarðs rímur*, for example, the eponymous protagonist butchers his enemy as follows:

VI.34

<i>Klæði bæði og kóngsins hand</i>	Both clothing and the king’s arm
<i>klýfur og skýfir hvössum brand,</i>	he cleaves and thrusts with the sharp

⁶⁵ Although unlike Hervarður and Þórbergur, Mábil does not present herself as a male warrior at any point before her exile.

⁶⁶ For a fuller discussion of the power of female speech in medieval Icelandic texts, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, pp. 15–46.

	sword,
<i>síðu sniður og fótinn frá:</i>	he slices his side and takes off the leg:
<i>fallinn kall ég Baldvina þá.⁶⁷</i>	I declare Baldvin fallen then.

What is unusual is seeing these acts of grotesque violence being performed by a woman, with the poet making no attempts to downplay the viciousness of the combat whatsoever. Indeed, Mábil's capacity for causing pain is a central theme of her interactions with Medía. When she eventually defeats Sigurður and his men, she not only executes Sigurður, but also removes the eyes and ears of every member of his army: *fanginn varð hinn girski her; | eyrað missti og augað hver* [the Greek army was captured; each of them lost their ears and eyes] (IV.32). When she sends compensation to Medía for the death of Sigurður, the purse it arrives in also contains the severed ears of the rest of the army, something which the poet terms her an *'ágætt fljóð'* [great woman] (IV.34) for doing. (Medía is less impressed.) Tenix's second wave of attackers fare even worse:

V.41	
<i>Maðurinn hver að með honum fer</i>	Every man who travelled with him
<i>með mikilli grimd og æði</i>	with great hatred and fury
<i>úr söðli feldur og síðan geldur</i>	was knocked from his saddle and then
	gelded
<i>og sett af eyrun bæði.</i>	and had his ears cut off.

Once again, the body parts in question are sent to Medía: *'nýrun öll fann nistils þöll | neðst í hverjum sjóði'* [the fir-tree of brooches [WOMAN = Medía] found all the testicles⁶⁸ at the bottom of each purse] (V.47). Medía, furious, declares to her followers that *"Þér hafið misst fyrir menja Rist / manndóms alla prýði,"* ["Because of the Rist of necklaces [WOMAN = Mábil], you have lost all the glory of manhood,"] (V.48). This may well be the case, but the same sentiment could equally belong in Mábil's mouth: surely the message implicit in her gift is that if Medía wishes to lead men around by the genitals, this is the outcome both she and they must expect. The gender dynamics at play here are hardly subtle — why bother *implying* a man is emasculated through his defeat at a woman's hands when you could have her outright castrate him? — but what is fascinating is that the poet has chosen to have them play out in a feud between two women, an event otherwise almost unheard of in the *rímur* corpus.

⁶⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, II, p. 512.

⁶⁸ *Nýra* more usually means 'kidney', but given the context of the earlier gelding incident, 'testicles' seems more likely here.

As mentioned at the start of this section, both *Reinalds rímur* and *Mábilár rímur* stand out in the medieval *rímur* corpus for their portrayal of multiple female characters, in particular those who subvert the expected role for women in *rímur* as passively desired objects who serve as the focal point around which the relationships between male characters revolve. As discussed in Chapter Two, *rímur* poets and their audiences seem to have had little taste for female antagonists, preferring tales in which bold knights rescue women from outside threats, rather than stories in which the women themselves are the threat. Even in *Reinalds rímur*, for all that Severia is unquestionably the originating agent behind the various disasters that befall Rósa, the poet devotes far more time to Reinaldur's glorious battles against other men than to relationships between women. In this respect, *Mábilár rímur* is truly unique in the medieval chivalric *rímur* corpus, portraying relationships between sisters, friends, and enemies, as well as a wider range of possibilities for relationships between men and women than is typically seen in *rímur* (for example, Medía's control over Sigurður, Tenix and Rúdent, but also Tenix's unexpected concern for his wife's wellbeing, and Blávus's care for Móbil on his deathbed).

While it is tempting to dismiss *Mábilár rímur* as an outlier and thus not reflective of the more general attitudes of *rímur*-poets and their audiences towards women, it is nonetheless a text that is firmly embedded in the medieval *rímur* tradition. It appears in *Kollsbók* (Cod. Guelf. 42.7 4to) alongside seventeen other *rímur* cycles (at least, as the manuscript originally existed; several texts are now lost to lacunae), as well as in *Hólsbók* (AM 603 4to), although here most of the text has been lost apart from the final six stanzas of the ninth *ríma*. Two medieval witnesses are more than many other *rímur* cycles can boast of, and the fact that it was copied multiple times into post-medieval paper manuscripts, as well as having an additional tenth *ríma* composed at some point in its history, in addition to the saga based on the *rímur* which is preserved in the nineteenth-century Lbs. 1502 8vo, all testify to its enduring popularity over the centuries.⁶⁹ Moreover, Björn K. Þórólfsson suggests that the poet, who declares himself to be blind in the cycle's first *mansöngur* (l.3), may well be the same poet as that of *Reinalds rímur*, possibly Sigurður *blindur*, who was known for owning and composing *rímur* cycles in the early sixteenth century.⁷⁰ So, despite its unusual level of investment in female characters, *Mábilár rímur* does not seem to have been treated as a work of niche interest by its earliest audiences. Indeed, the very fact that it portrays such remarkable women as Mábil and Medía allows the text to engage with the same conversations about gender and sexuality that other *rímur* cycles also touch upon, but from a new angle. In Móbil and Móbia, we see women in their conventional *rímur*

⁶⁹ Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 427.

⁷⁰ Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, pp. 433–40. Although see Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Homer of the North' on the doubtfulness of assigning works to named poets from this period.

role as sought-after prizes, objects to be traded for connections — indeed women’s fungibility is made clear in Rúdent’s ready acceptance of Medía as a wife in place of the daughter he had originally intended to woo — but the *rímur* cycle also shows that men can be subject to the same treatment. Rúdent may think that he is the one bargaining for a wife, but the audience is well aware that he is acting exactly in accordance with Medía’s plans; their marriage is simply her means to acquiring a second kingdom to go with that of her first husband. If Móbil and Móbía are callously traded into marriage, their husbands are not much better off: both parties simply links in Medía’s chain of influence. While the narrative is hardly positive regarding female sexuality, it levels a similar criticism at the men who so readily commit adultery with Medía and thus fall under her sway.

A third, and very different, example of a female antagonist in *rímur* is that of Seditiana in *Sigurðar saga/rímur þöglá*, a maiden king who enacts agonising torments on those who try to ask for her hand in marriage. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, medieval *rímur* poets do not show nearly as much interest in the maiden king *topos* as their saga-writing counterparts: in *Dínus rímur*, Philotemía’s role is significantly reduced, *Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar* only covers the latter part of the saga, after the maiden king has been safely married off, and Elínborg of *Geirarðs rímur* was never a particularly pronounced version of the form to begin with. Seditiana, then, is the only fully developed example of a cruel and vengeful maiden king in the medieval *rímur* corpus. Unlike Severia and Medía, who, as discussed above, use their sexuality and the intimacy of the bedchamber to influence their husbands and lovers to do their bidding, Seditiana does no such thing. Instead, as with most maiden kings, her initial position of power in the narrative seems to derive precisely from her refusal to engage with (hetero)sexuality. In a rather obvious metaphor, she inhabits a castle whose walls are not only impregnable, but are also rendered unnaturally distant from the rest of the world due to being raised up on columns, and within this enclosure, her rule is absolute.

As the rest of the narrative goes on to demonstrate, this attempt to opt out of society is untenable and doomed to failure. From the moment Seditiana is introduced, it is in the context of the attempts by various would-be suitors to gain access to her castle and her person:

I.40

*Þó kóngar og jarlar kæmi þá,
og keisara fólk með greinum,
engi mátti svanna sjá
er sat hún í kastala hreinum.*

Though kings and earls may come there,
and the emperor’s people with distinction,
no one could see the lady
when she sat in her bright castle.

This section is missing from the shorter redaction of the saga on which the *rímur* cycle is based,⁷¹ so it is difficult to make a direct comparison in order to determine which changes are due to the *rímur* poet and which to the saga's redactor. In the longer redaction, Seditiana's⁷² seclusion is explicitly attributed to arrogance and pride in a way that it is not, at this point, in the *rímur*: 'Pá tók hennar metnaður og ofsi að þrutna, svo hún forsmáði nálíga allar tígnar frúr og tíginna manna sonu' [then her ambition and tyranny began to swell, so that she scorned nearly all the sons of honourable men and women].⁷³ The *rímur* cycle withholds judgment on Seditiana's actions for now, and even goes so far as to praise her as a 'kurteis mey' [courtly maiden] (I.35) when she declares herself king of her father's kingdom. The first of Seditiana's suitors whose attempts we see is Hálfðan, one of Sigurður's older brothers. His declaration that he wants to acquire Seditiana as a bride comes hot on the heels of his and his other brother Vilhjálms adventures raiding in the Baltic, and the supposed marriage quest is framed explicitly in terms of conquest, both of Seditiana and her lands:

IV.7

"Öllum skulum við illsku kindum
eyða stáli,
finna síðan frúna ríka
er fyrðar kalla enga slíka.

"We will break steel on all kinds of evil
creatures,
then find a rich lady
whom men declare to have no like.

IV.8

"Seditiana seggir kalla svanna fríðan.
Hana skal ég með yndi fanga
elligar bíða dauðann stranga.

"Men call this handsome woman Seditiana.
I shall embrace her in joy
or else await harsh death.

IV.9

"Þetta er okkur ei við of," kvað
eyðir sverða,
"ef Frakkar vilja frúnni halda
fremja skulum við stríðið kallda.

"It's not too much for us," said the
destroyer of swords [WARRIOR],
"that if the lady wants to hold on to France
we will make cold war [on her].

⁷¹ See *Sigurðar saga þögla. The shorter redaction. Edited from AM 586 4to*, ed. by Matthew James Driscoll (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1992), p. lxxxii–lxxxii. The shorter redaction only survives in fragments.

⁷² Here called 'Seditiana', but I use the name from the shorter redaction and *rímur* for clarity.

⁷³ 'Sigurðar saga þögla', in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances II. Saulus saga og Nikanors. Sigurðar saga þögla*, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagæðæ B, 21 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), pp. 93–259 (p. 100).

IV.10

“*Borgina skulum við brenna upp að
bragna ráði
eyða svo með elldi og brandi
að ekki standi kvikt í landi.*”

“We will burn the stronghold on men’s
advice,
and destroy it with fire and sword
so that nothing stands living in the land.

IV.11

“*Verði þetta unnið allt að okkrum vilja
vaxa mun þá vegur að líku;
valld og heiður fylgir slíku.*”

If that is all done according to our will
our renown will grow all the same;
power and honour follow such things.”

Again, this section is lost from the shorter redaction of the saga, so a direct comparison is not possible, but in the longer redaction, though Hálfðan speaks at length of how winning Seditiana will increase his honour, and certainly implies that he looks forward to ruling her kingdom (‘konu vilda ég mér biðja og staðfesta ráð með ríkdómi og ríkisstjórn’ [I want to seek a wife and shore up my rule with a kingdom and governance]),⁷⁴ there is no passage to match his explicit threats to take her kingdom by force of arms as there is in the *rímur*.

Hálfðan has thus far, in both saga and *rímur*, been characterised as the hot-tempered and impulsive brother; his over-readiness for violence has already got him in trouble once in the narrative, when he angrily threw a rock at a dwarf’s child and ended up cursed for his actions. His eagerness to burn Seditiana’s kingdom down around her, if she will not agree to his suit, is therefore unsurprising, and nor are his needling remarks that his brother is unmanly for urging caution in this endeavour. In the *rímur*, Vilhjálmm retorts that Hálfðan’s words are ‘bernslig’ [childish] (IV.17), and in both prose and verse, the brothers’ father concurs that the quest for Seditiana is a foolish one and wonders at Vilhjálmm (called a ‘vitran mann’ [wise man] in the saga⁷⁵ and ‘hygginn maður og horskur’ [a thoughtful and clever man] (IV.22) in the *rímur*) undertaking it. Vilhjálmm says that though he agrees the journey is ill-conceived, he would sooner die than part from his brother (IV.24), and the king reluctantly agrees to fund the expedition, promising Hálfðan a third of his kingdom if he returns successfully.

Hálfðan’s quest to woo Seditiana is thus presented as a foolish endeavour from the start. Her practice of humiliating her suitors is well-established in both saga and *rímur*, and Vilhjálmm, consistently presented as the wiser of the two brothers, takes it as read that Hálfðan will also be humiliated at her

⁷⁴ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 121.

⁷⁵ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 122.

hands. This makes it all the more interesting that, when confronted with the reality of Seditiana, it is *Vilhjálmm*, rather than Hálfdan, who is outraged by her behaviour — behaviour which he himself predicted, but which seems to go so far beyond the bounds of the acceptable as to shock even him.

Seditiana’s humiliation of the brothers begins with relative subtlety, in her refusal to acknowledge the pair of them as suitors of rank come courting. In response to the valuables offered by the brothers as a token of their own standing as suitors, Seditiana retorts that she will not accept any of it unless the brothers accept some of her own wealth in return:

V.13

“Þigg ég eigi þetta gull,”

þorngrund ansar bragða full,

“nema þú eignist aftur í gegn

annað fé, minn góði þegn.”

“I will not accept this gold,”

the ground of brooches [WOMAN] answers,
full of tricks,

“unless you in return accept

some other valuables, my good man.”

Seditiana is sometimes characterised as having her greed outweigh her intelligence,⁷⁶ and certainly her later attitude towards the disguised Sigurður and his carpet of precious items does not display the most good sense, but here she shows a shrewd awareness of what the gold she is offered signifies, and how to avoid the obligation it entails. Though it is never stated outright, the fact that the gold and silks are offered as part of Vilhjálmm’s courting strategy clearly demonstrates the strings that come attached to them. To accept Vilhjálmm’s gifts implies an acceptance of his brother’s proposal; even though this proposal has not yet been formally announced, Seditiana is presumably well aware of why men make such efforts to visit her inaccessible castle.

Seditiana not only refuses the gifts, but finds a way of doing so that humiliates the brothers for even presenting them. By offering to essentially purchase the goods, she turns a gesture of ostentatious largesse into a purely mercantile transaction, reframing the brothers as merchants presenting goods for her inspection and herself as a wealthy patron whose approval needs to be sought. In so doing, she also makes it clear that she recognises the transactional nature of marriage itself: the brothers certainly do want repayment for the valuables they offer, but they want it in the form of Seditiana herself and her lands, not in the form of cold, hard cash that leaves them with no power over Seditiana. Her address of Vilhjálmm in the *rímur* as ‘minn góði þegn’ [my good man] (V.13) is wonderfully condescending; in the saga, her statement that she is ‘yfrið rík’ [rich enough] again positions her as the wealthy patron deigning to indulge these visitors, while her subsequent offer to

⁷⁶ Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 98–99.

exchange the offered goods for money which will ‘betur henta’ [better suit] the brothers only reinforces the image.⁷⁷ Vilhjálmm certainly realises the insulting implications of her offer, retorting that he is ‘kóngsson en eigi kaupmaður’ [a king’s son and not a merchant]⁷⁸ and, “Kann ég enga kaupmanns stétt,” [“I don’t recognise any merchant’s position,”] (V.14). The exchange forces Vilhjálmm to speak openly of his errand, to put forward his brother’s suit in terms Seditiana can plainly respond to — and, perhaps, gives the brothers one last chance to reconsider their actions in courting a woman known for humiliating her suitors and withdraw before Seditiana makes her displeasure known.

When it becomes clear that there is no side-stepping the brothers’ marriage proposal, Seditiana grows furious, both at the proposal itself and at the fact that the brothers have gained access to her court under false pretences:

V.23

*“Þú bauðst í fyrstu gjafirnar fram
og gjörðir það sem stoltar mann
enn nú kemur til forsmán full:
falsað verði ykkar gull.”*

“At first you offered up gifts
and did so like a proud man,
but now all the disgrace comes out:
your gold proves false.”

Only a fragment of this scene is preserved in the shorter redaction, but given the content of the *rímur*, it is likely it contained a similar sentiment to that of the longer redaction, in which Seditiana exclaims, “Þú, Vilhjálmmur,” segir hún, “lést hér kominn þess erindis að gera oss nockurn heiður svo sem með presentum gulls og gersima, en þú hefir nú birt þig sjálfum, að þú vildir að oss færa skömm til sannrar svívirðingar!” [“You, Vilhjálmmur,” she says, “behave as though you have come here on this errand to do us some sort of honour like this, with presents of gold and gems, but you have now revealed yourself: that you want to bring us to shame and true disgrace!”].⁷⁹ In both redactions of the saga, she refers to the brothers’ expedition as ‘erendi þessa falsara’ [this liar’s errand],⁸⁰ and a good portion of her anger does seem to stem from the fact that the brothers gained access to her by deception, hardly the action of an honourable future husband.

The rest of it seems to come from Seditiana’s sense of her own superiority. This is most plainly laid out in the longer redaction of the saga, in which Seditiana declares at length that she would rather marry one of her own slaves than Hálfdan; that she would not even employ Hálfdan as a servant; and that her honour demands that she refuse even the noblest princes who have come seeking her hand.

⁷⁷ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 125.

⁷⁸ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 125.

⁷⁹ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 126.

⁸⁰ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, p. 61; Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 126.

Only the last of these three appears in the *rímur*, leaving the impression that it is not so much Hálfðan's inferiority that matters to Seditiana, but her own peerlessness, at least in her own valuation. Is such a self-assessment accurate? It is certainly a motif that recurs again and again in bridal quest narratives, where the king in search of a bride will declare that he knows of no woman in this half of the world to match him (or, more modestly, will wonder if there can possibly be a woman suitable for him);⁸¹ indeed, in the saga, Hálfðan himself announces that his reason for choosing Seditiana as a would-be bride is that “Þær eru flestar kóngadætur á norðurlöndum er mér þykkir lítill sæmdar auki í að fá,” [“Most of the [other] princesses in the northern hemisphere seem to me that they would little increase my honour to win,”],⁸² while in the *rímur*, he specifies that his future wife must be one ‘er fyrðar kalla enga slíka’ [whom men declare to have no match] (IV.7). In these cases it is very clear that equality of accomplishments, rank and beauty are deemed essential for a successful marriage. Moreover, it is presented as perfectly reasonable for the potential groom to demand high standards of his future bride. Is Seditiana's case any different?

I would argue that within the confines of the genre's narrative expectations, it is indeed perfectly reasonable for Seditiana to reject Hálfðan's suit: what we have seen thus far of Hálfðan shows him to be sharp-tempered and immoderately violent, as well as sufficiently thoughtless for both his father and brother to remark on it. He has chosen Seditiana as the object of his affections because she is without equal among women; why *should* she accept such a flawed suitor, who is clearly not her match? Where Seditiana's problem lies is that she is correspondingly immoderate in her rejections: not only does she reject the demonstrably unsuitable proposal of Hálfðan, but also those of every single other man to approach her. We are not made aware of their respective qualities, but as the *rímur* cycle stresses, her refusals have more to do with her sense of her own self-worth than anything lacking in the men themselves.

Moreover, her method of rejection is similarly lacking in proportion. When she realises that Hálfðan and Vilhjálmm are only there to win her hand, Seditiana summons her knights and has the two brothers subjected to a series of gruesome tortures before expelling them from the castle, as detailed in the section ‘The Vanishing Maiden King’ (pp. 55–6).

The preceding scene, in which the brothers have their hair cut off by Seditiana herself, which appears in both redactions of the saga, and its sequel, in which the brothers are coated with tar,⁸³ which only appears in the longer saga redaction,⁸⁴ do not appear at all in the *rímur*. This may be simple

⁸¹ See, for example, *Mágus saga jarls* and *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns*.

⁸² Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 121.

⁸³ A punishment highly reminiscent of that meted out by Queen Ólöf to her would-be suitor Helgi in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In both cases, the women in question are subjected to sexually violent reprisals.

⁸⁴ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, pp. 61–62; Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 127.

oversight on the poet's part, or an eagerness to hurry ahead to the gorier parts of the punishment, but I would instead argue that these parts were deliberately left out because they are the kind of humiliating punishment that the sufferers cannot improve their reputation by manfully enduring. Putting up with a haircut does not say anything about one's ability to resist pain, and instead demonstrates an inability to defend one's bodily integrity, resulting in a very visible marker of that failure. Likewise, the tarring offers no opportunity to demonstrate an appropriately warrior-like fortitude, only admission that one could not prevent this lengthy process of humiliation. Though this effect is not dwelt on in the saga, the tarring also invites comparisons between the two brothers and the *blámen*n seen elsewhere in the corpus of Icelandic chivalric texts, whose bodies are frequently likened to 'bík' or 'tjör' [pitch, tar].⁸⁵ The hair-cutting and tarring therefore combine to humiliate the brothers in a way that symbolically removes them from the category of 'aristocratic men'; they are no longer able to maintain the appearances expected of men in their position, a position whose beauty standards are, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, rooted in access to whiteness.⁸⁶

That the *rímur* poet was perhaps unwilling to present the brothers in quite such abject straits as the saga is borne out by the way the *rímur* cycle treats the rest of the punishment scene, which includes the addition of asides to the audience to reinforce their disapproval of Seditiana's actions: 'Þessi leikur er eigi góður' [this game is not good] (V.31); 'eigi er þetta sæmdar ferð' [this is not honourable behaviour] (V.33). Neither of these appear in the saga narration, and though we may take them simply as line-fillers to round out their respective stanzas, it is also clear that the poet wanted to leave their audience in no doubt as to the impropriety of Seditiana's actions. Though Hálfðan may not be the suitor of Seditiana's dreams, her response is excessive and unacceptable. Where previously Hálfðan's shortcomings have been pointed out at some length by both his father and brother, now that he is the wronged party, the poet feels free to remind us of his bravery: 'hvorgi brá sér kappinn við' [the champion did not flinch at it] (V.35), a statement that presumably applies to both brothers, despite the grammatical singular in use here. This testament to the brothers' literally unflinching bravery is not present in either saga redaction, both of which simply state that the brothers were very badly burned before Seditiana had the bowl removed.

⁸⁵ For example: 'heathen' enemies in *Bærings rímur* are described as 'miklu dekkri en tjara eður bík' [much darker than tar or pitch] (VIII.18), while Kastor in *Filippó rímur* has a body 'sem þar væri borið á bík' [as if it were placed in pitch] (III.37). Wisén, p. 21.

⁸⁶ On the importance of men's hair as a marker of social status, see Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in *Sex in the Middle Ages. A Book of Essays*, ed. by Joyce E. Salisbury (London: Garland Publishing, 1991), pp. 3–29. Tarring and shaving as a marker of shame and reduced social status is a popular trope in medieval Icelandic literature; see M.F. Thomas, 'The Briar and the Vine: Tristan Goes North', *Arthurian Literature*, 3 (1983), 53–90 (pp. 57–58).

The longer redaction now contains an extended passage in which Seditiana mocks the brothers, saying that it would be fitting for her to make them swear an oath not to seek revenge for their treatment, “En því geri ég það ekki, að ég veit að þið verðið ekki nema örkvisar einir og lítilmenni” [“But I will not do this, because I know that you will end up nothing but pathetic and wretched weaklings,”],⁸⁷ but this is missing from both the shorter redaction and the *rímur*, which is in general more closely related to the shorter redaction than the longer. The shorter redaction has Seditiana point to the brothers’ lack of good fortune as the reason she feels no need to make them swear an oath: “Og víst er ykkur hamingja þrotin að hefna þessarar svívirðingar,” [“And certainly your fortune has run out for avenging these betrayals,”].⁸⁸ In the *rímur* cycle, Seditiana thinks her own treatment of the men will be what dissuades their vengeance:

V.41

“Sóbúið hafa nú seggir slíkt,”
 svaraði þannveg sprundið ríkt,
 “aldrei kemur af ýtum hefnd,
 þó örva drífa verði stefnd.”

“The men have been dealt with in such a way,”
 the powerful lady thus replies,
 “[that] vengeance will never come from them,
 though the snowstorm of arrows [BATTLE] may be
 arranged.”

These differences are in keeping with the differences between the various versions of the punishment scene: in both cases, the longer redaction subjects the brothers to a treatment that focuses more on psychological humiliation than physical suffering, while the shorter redaction and *rímur* allow the brothers to retain some dignity by making it clear that their inability to take revenge is not due to any inherent failing on their part.

The scenes discussed above show Seditiana at the height of her power, secure in her fortress and surrounded by knights who will do as she commands. As this is a maiden king narrative, however, she does not last long in such a state; as many scholars have discussed, the maiden king trope takes the potentially destabilising and threatening idea of the lone female ruler, who refuses to acknowledge any man as her equal, let alone her superior, and systematically breaks her pride until she is forced to agree to marriage as the least bad alternative on offer to her.⁸⁹ Such is the case with Seditiana, who is subjected to a long and cruel revenge plot at the hands of the third brother, the eponymous Sigurður þögli.

⁸⁷ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þögla’, p. 127.

⁸⁸ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, p. 62.

⁸⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘From Heroic Legend’; Kalinke, ‘Clári saga’; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, ‘Meykóngahefðin’.

Though the humiliation of the maiden king was a popular trope in *riddarasögur*, this is the only developed example of it in the medieval *rímur* corpus, largely due to the fact that relatively few maiden king sagas were adapted into *rímur* in this period, and those that do exist are often only partial adaptations, which either do not feature the maiden king at all (e.g. *Blávuss rímur og Viktors*) or end before reaching the humiliation sequence (e.g. *Dínus rímur drambláta*). Yet as with *Mábilur rímur*, being an atypical example of the genre does not seem to have affected *Sigurðar rímur þöglá*'s popularity: it is found in AM 603 4to, AM 604 4to and Holm. perg. 23 4to, a very respectable number of medieval manuscripts for a *rímur* cycle.

Sigurður's revenge is carefully calculated to be damaging specifically to Seditiana and the things she prides herself on, and involves a systematic stripping away of her layers of protection, both physical and mental. The first blow comes when Sigurður uses his magic ring to assume the appearance of a wonderfully handsome man, whom Seditiana cannot help but fall madly in love with.⁹⁰ Given her steadfast refusal of all men thus far, by beginning like this, Sigurður removes a foundational aspect of Seditiana's character with his first move. Sigurður's trick has the practical effect of drawing Seditiana out of the protective walls of her castle, when she attempts to pursue the handsome man, and also reframing her early misogamy as something petty and shallow, rather than a considered position: would her earlier objections have melted away if Hálfðan, with all his other flaws, had also been just a little more attractive?

Similarly, Sigurður's later sexual humiliation of Seditiana plays a complicated game with consent and the illusion of consent. Once Seditiana has been tricked into leaving her stronghold, she is lured into pursuing the supposedly handsome 'Amas' over hill and dale until she is too far from her castle to return safely in the dark. Worse, a storm springs up, and the maiden king, having not paused to dress for the outdoors before chasing after Amas, is forced to seek shelter in a cave. There she lies, shivering and thinking she will surely die of cold, until a swineherd and his herd of pigs happen upon her. Though the result of the following sequence of events is largely the same, namely that Seditiana sleeps with the swineherd in exchange for his promise to help her, and that she finds the experience more enjoyable than expected, the exchange beforehand is presented quite differently in the saga to the *rímur*.

In the first place, the presentation of the swineherd differs considerably between texts. In the saga, he is presented as somewhat simple-minded, or at least naïve, asking Seditiana, "Hvort er þetta maður eða nokkur skynsöm skepna," ["Whether this is a person or some sort of rational creature,"], to which Seditiana explains that she is a woman, and one rich enough to reward him well if he helps

⁹⁰ The name Sigurður adopts for this disguise, Amas, is extremely apposite, being the 2nd person singular present indicative form of the Latin verb *amo*: 'you love'.

her.⁹¹ In the *rímur*, he shows no such confusion over Seditiana’s humanity, but instead asks, “Því er þín ambátt úti um nætur,” [“Why are you, a maidservant, out at night?”] (XII.4), prompting Seditiana to retort, “Ég er ein drottning dýr og rík,” [“I am a queen, rich and powerful,”] (XII.5). In both cases, the swineherd’s words serve to remind Seditiana of her own wretched condition and appearance: in the saga, so bad that she appears barely human; in the *rímur*, merely poor enough to resemble one of her maids. It is also of note that the saga nowhere describes the swineherd as ugly; Seditiana’s objection to his proposal therefore seems based more in her general antipathy towards relationships with men in general, heightened perhaps by her objection to the swineherd’s low status, though this is not mentioned by Seditiana when she objects that “Það væri eilíf skamm og vist væri betra miklu lífið að láta en sjá svívirðing felli oss til handa,” [“That would be an eternal shame and certainly it would be much better to lose my life than to see such disgrace befall us,”].⁹² As I have already discussed regarding Öskubuska in *Vilmundar rímur*, however, there seems to have been a compulsion among *rímur* poets to tie together every possible trait they perceived as undesirable. In the *rímur*, therefore, the swineherd is introduced from the start as a ‘svartur [...] þræll’ [black slave] (XII.2), and also as ‘harðla svartur og háðuligur, | henni leist hann býsna digur’ [very black and disgraceful, he seemed very stout to her (Seditiana)] (XII.3). When she later refuses his demand that they sleep together, she explicitly frames it as unfitting for a man of his appearance and low status to have access to the attractive body of a queen: “Svartur þræll sé fyrri dauður | heldur en fríðust falda gátt | faðmi þig um eina nátt,” [“May you, black slave, sooner die than embrace the most handsome doorpost of headdresses [WOMAN] for a night,”] (XII.8). The audience, aware of Sigurður’s magic ring and also the conventions of the maiden king genre, if not the precise story of *Sigurður saga þögla*, would presumably have been well aware that the supposed swineherd was none other than Sigurður himself, and the contrast the *rímur* poet thus creates between the dark swineherd, whom the queen refuses to touch, and the ‘einkar bjart’ [especially bright] (XI.32) appearance of Amas, whom the queen pursues in a lovesick frenzy, again serves to emphasise Seditiana’s shallowness in the *rímur*.

Secondly, in the saga (both redactions offer a very similar account of this encounter), Seditiana and the swineherd have an exchange of dialogue in which the swineherd uses his apparent naivety to convince Seditiana that sleeping with him is her best option for survival. When she initially refuses his proposal, he exclaims, “Hversu má ég þér þá hjálpa [...] því að eigi hefir ég klæði til að hjálpa þér með og ekki annað en þér mættið fá hita af mínu holdi,” [“How can I help you, then, because I don’t have any clothes with which to aid you, nor anything other than that you could get heat from my body,”], going on to reassure her that “Hvert lýti þér í þessu verða ef engi veit nema þú og ég?” [“What

⁹¹ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, pp. 27–28.

⁹² Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, p. 28.

disgrace will there be for you in this, if no one knows other than you and I?"].⁹³ Seditiana takes some time to weigh up her options, before deciding, “Heldur vil ég á það hætta hvart ég get varð mig fyrir lýtum við þig en missa lífið að sinni,” [“I would rather risk becoming disgraced with you than lose my life at this time,”].⁹⁴ None of this exchange is present in the *rímur*, where, after Seditiana’s first refusal, ‘sætu leggur hann sér á arm; | svanna mun það auka harm’ [He places the lady on his arm; this will increase sorrow for the lady] (XII.9) and then two stanzas later, we hear that:

XII.11

<i>Vífið missti meydóm ríkt;</i>	The woman lost her mighty maidenhead;
<i>mörgum þótti um undur slíkt.</i>	many considered this a marvel.
<i>Heiðarlegri hringa Ná</i>	It is sorrowful to tell of
<i>hörmulegt er að segja í frá.</i>	the honourable Ná of rings [WOMAN].

There is no indication that Seditiana has in any way consented to this, not even the coerced consent that the saga offers, although in both saga and *rímur*, the narrative assures us that Seditiana enjoys the encounter. The *rímur* tells us that as soon as Seditiana reaches out and touches the silk shirt of the ‘swineherd’, ‘svanninn tók að gleðjast þá’ [the lady began to enjoy herself then] (XII.10), and in the saga, ‘undraðist hún það geysimjög hversu hans líkami var gleðilegur viðkvámu og svo hversu sterklega hún var höndluð’ [she wondered very much at how enjoyable his body was to the touch and likewise how powerfully she was handled].⁹⁵ In the *rímur*, in particular, the statement that Seditiana enjoyed herself sits oddly, sandwiched as it is between two stanzas expressing sorrow at the event; rather than a sincere reflection of Seditiana’s feelings here, it reads more as a half-hearted justification for Sigurður’s actions, which have themselves been made more cruel in the *rímur* by the poet’s emphasis on the swineherd’s supposedly hideous appearance and the lack of even the veneer of consent to the scene. That said, the *rímur* cycle does at least acknowledge that the experience was not wholly pleasant for Seditiana, which is in some ways preferable to the saga’s disingenuous insistence that, having reluctantly consented, Seditiana now gets to discover what she has been missing by preserving her chastity all these years.

When Seditiana awakens, the swineherd has vanished and the sun is shining. In the saga, she looks around and realises she cannot tell the way to get back to her castle; even if she knew the way, she has travelled so far that she would not make it back before nightfall. There is no indication that

⁹³ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, pp. 28–29.

⁹⁴ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, p. 29.

⁹⁵ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, p. 29.

she understands her suffering the night before to be anything other than pure misfortune. However, in the *rímur*, she quickly realises that she has been tricked deliberately:

XII.13

Hún stóð upp og hreysti sig.

She stood up and shook herself.

“Hver mun svo hafa gabbað mig?

“Who has made a fool of me like this?

Aldrei heyrði ég undur slík

Never have I heard of such a thing,

eða önnur fyrri þessum lík.”

nor anything like it before.”

As she looks around, she sees Amas riding in the distance and she calls out to him asking him to speak with her. In the saga, this is framed as pitiful begging: “Hinn elskuligi herra Amas, kom hér og tala með mig,” [“Beloved Sir Amas, come here and speak with me,”],⁹⁶ whereas in the *rímur*, she seems almost more annoyed by his behaviour than lovestruck: “Kannt þú ekki að tala við sprund?” [“Don’t you know how to speak to a lady?”]. Seditiana’s comparative sharpness in the *rímur* continues: having pursued Amas all day until night once again falls and the storm returns, she exclaims,

XII.18

“Sannliga hafa mig töfra tröll

“Truly, magical trolls have lured

teygt í burtu frá minni höll.

me away from my hall.

Horfin er mér heiður og dáð;

Honour and virtue are gone from me;

hvergi get ég nú byggðum náð.”

I can’t find shelter anywhere.”

In most respects, the *rímur* poet cuts down on Seditiana’s dialogue, which in the saga is very verbose, especially when appealing for help, and full of distancing conditionals. For example, her attempt to bribe the swineherd into taking her home in the saga is phrased as, “Því þarftu ekki að óttast að ég megi þér ekki fullu ömbuna ína viðhjálp,” [“Thus you need not fear that I would be unable to fully reward you for your assistance,”],⁹⁷ whereas in the *rímur*, the phrasing is much more straightforward: “Gefa skal ég þér gull og seim | ef getur þú mig flutta heim,” [“I will give you gold and riches if you can bring me home,”] (XII.6). The fact that the poet seems to have *added* dialogue in order for Seditiana to express her conviction that she is being tricked is therefore significant.

This image of a more pragmatic Seditiana is also apparent in her next night-time encounter, this time with a dwarf. Again, in both saga and *rímur*, she offers him gold to help her which, like the

⁹⁶ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, p. 70.

⁹⁷ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, p. 28.

swineherd, he refuses, saying the only repayment he will accept is to sleep with her. In the saga, Seditiana protests, “‘Heldur vil ég miklu deyja,’” [“I would far rather die,”],⁹⁸ and is only convinced to agree to the dwarf’s demands by his assertion that it is always wrong for someone to choose death when they have the opportunity to live. In the *rímur*, no such agonising takes place: Seditiana offers the gold, the dwarf laughs at the idea that he would want anything other than the queen herself, and Seditiana says,

XII.26

“Hver mun verða að leysa líf,”

listugt talaði þannin víf.

“Það hjálpar nú,” kvað hringa Bil,

“að hér veit ekki fólkíð til.”

“Everyone ought to preserve their life,”

the skilful woman spoke thus.

“It helps now,” said the Bil of rings [WOMAN],

“that people won’t know about [what happens] here.”

Not only is there no prevarication, only a pragmatic acceptance of the price she will have to pay for the dwarf’s help, there is also not the same insistence as in the saga that the experience is an enjoyable one for Seditiana. The *rímur* narration only tells us that the dwarf embraces her throughout the night; no indication is given as to how Seditiana feels about this. In the saga, events are depicted in more detail, specifying that the dwarf:

tekur [...] nú þegar til hennar með miklu afli svo hún mátti enga mót stöðu veita og hefir hann með henni alla sína skemmtan og það undraðist hún að henni kenndist hann mannligur maður og nátturligur í öllum þeirra viðskiptum.⁹⁹

[Now immediately reaches towards her with great strength so that she can offer no resistance, and has all his fun with her, and she wondered at this, that she perceived him to be a manly man and proper one in all of their exchanges.]

Undraðist is also used of her encounter with the swineherd, and her later interaction with a giant (missing from the shorter redaction due to a lacuna) also features a similar indication of pleasant surprise: ‘eigi þótti henni hann svo hræðilegur viðkvámu sem hann var illur að sjá’ [he did not seem to her so dreadful to the touch as he was bad to look at].¹⁰⁰ None of these attempts to present the

⁹⁸ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þogla*, p. 31.

⁹⁹ Driscoll, *Sigurðar saga þogla*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Loth, ‘*Sigurðar saga þogla*’, p. 209.

experience as pleasurable are to be found in the *rímur*, with the exception of the first ‘svanninn tók að gleðjast þá’ (XII.10) in regard to the swineherd. In particular, with the giant, Seditiana is repeatedly described as fearful, weeping and unhappy: ‘Geysi hrædd var drottning þá’ [the queen was then very afraid] (XII.40); ‘Setur nú að henni sáran grát; | seima þöll var eigi kát’ [Now bitter weeping overcomes her; | the fir-tree of gold [WOMAN] was not cheerful] (XII.43); ‘Ekki kunni hún mæla á mót’ [she was not able to protest it] (XII.43). Though the saga features similar expressions of unhappiness at the start of these encounters (for example, Seditiana asks that the giant kill her rather than rape her (“Þess biður ég að þú, jötunn, veitir mér heldur skjótan dauða,”)),¹⁰¹ these are always overturned by a statement to the effect that once Seditiana perceives the handsome Sigurður beneath these hideous disguises (unaware, of course, that that is what is happening), this hitherto traumatic experience becomes enjoyable. The implication in the saga, therefore, is that Seditiana is perfectly justified in wanting to avoid sex with these obviously unsuitable partners — one too poor, the others too inhuman — but her more general antipathy towards relationships with men is a foolish one, borne of her own arrogance and self-delusion. In actuality, the saga seems to say, being forced into these encounters is for Seditiana’s own good. Sigurður’s revenge, therefore, not only leaves Seditiana humiliated and physically violated (as well as pregnant, so that she is unable to conceal what has been done to her), but also overturns a central tenet of her personality, leaving her far less able to object to her eventual marriage at the end of the saga.

The fact that the *rímur* does not stress Seditiana’s eventual enjoyment of her assault and instead emphasises the grief and fear she experiences in each of these encounters is significant, altering the emotional tone of the narrative entirely. Instead of being invited to find amusement in the suggestion that Seditiana’s protests and attempts to bribe her way out of danger are only for show, as is the case in the saga, the audience of the *rímur* are left with a grimmer, but perhaps more cathartic scene. This can perhaps be attributed to the shifting audience of the *rímur* compared to the *riddarasögur*. The maiden king sagas, in particular, have been argued to be produced by and for a clerical audience, offering obvious moral lessons about the problematic nature of female pride and the necessity of bringing such women under the yoke of Church-sanctioned monogamous heterosexuality.¹⁰² From what we know of the production and performance of early *rímur* (see Chapter Two for more details), they were more divorced from this clerical context, being written by secular poets like the lawman Einar Gilsson and, judging by their own *mansöngvar*, performed in mixed-gender spaces like dances and the *kvöldvaka*. There seems little doubt that those who

¹⁰¹ Loth, ‘Sigurðar saga þogla’, p. 209.

¹⁰² Geraldine Barnes, ‘Riddarasögur. 2: Translated’, in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 531–33.

composed the *riddarasögur* were educated in both the Latin and vernacular traditions, exemplified in broad strokes by their extensive use of encyclopaedic material and in smaller details such as their occasional use of a Latin feminine accusative instead of a Norse one (*Seditianam* rather than *Seditiönu*, for example).¹⁰³ However, it is unclear to what extent *rímur* poets were directly familiar with the Latin learning that underpins their *riddarasaga* sources; the poet of *Dínus rímur*, for example, certainly seems less interested in detailing Dínus' and Philotemía's educational prowess than the saga author (see the discussion in Chapters Two and Three).

Elsewhere in this thesis, I have noted the tendency of *rímur* poets to paint their narrative in bold strokes, exaggerating both wickedness and goodness in their characters and playing up the horrors characters both endure and inflict; a tendency, that is, towards entertainment over didacticism. This, I think, is what we see not only in *Sigurðar rímur þöglá* but in the broader lack of maiden king narratives among the medieval *rímur* corpus. The fact that *rímur* adaptations like *Blávuss rímur og Viktors*, *Dínus rímur drambláta* and *Hrólfs rímur Gautrekssonar* only adapt the part of the saga that does not concern the maiden king's downfall means that their poets do not have to recount scenes of fairly graphic sexual assault to the women who (according to the *mansöngvar*) requested these poems in the first place. This is not to say that sexual violence has never been used in entertainment media aimed at audiences of all genders; far from it. But it is still an undeniable fact that *Sigurðar rímur þöglá* is the only medieval *rímur* example of the humiliation-through-sexual-assault trope that was popular in the *riddarasögur*.

WOMEN'S WISDOM

As discussed at the start of this chapter, wisdom is a conventional part of women's introductions in *rímur*. The following section looks at Mátthildur from *Konráðs saga/rímur keisarasonar*, a particularly notable example of female wisdom in the corpus.¹⁰⁴ The precise nature of her education is left

¹⁰³ For a fuller discussion of the encyclopaedic tradition in the *riddarasögur*, see Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*. Evidence regarding the nature of secular education in medieval Iceland is scarce, with most surviving material relating to the education of the clergy and those in religious orders. Ryder Patzuk-Russell, *The Development of Education in Medieval Iceland* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), pp. 73, 82. This perhaps lends weight to Geraldine Barnes' argument for clerical authorship of the self-consciously learned *riddarasögur*, although there are certainly enough examples of secular literary figures – the abovementioned Einar Gilsson for one – to make this far from a certainty. As evidenced in Chapter Two of this thesis, there is very little concrete information known about the earliest *rímur* poets, but an exploration of their use of learned material compared with that in their source texts would be a fascinating potential avenue for future study.

¹⁰⁴ There are two main redactions of *Konráðs saga*, the older being found in Holm. perg. 7 4to, a manuscript from the early fourteenth century, and edited by Gustaf Cederschiöld in his *Fornsögur Suðrlanda*.

unspecified, as is the case for many women in these texts, but the depth of her learning and the fact that she *has* been educated (rather than, or in addition to it being an intrinsic part of her personality) is made clear in both saga and *rímur*:

Hún var kvenna vænst og stórkostligust, snyrtiligust og siðlátust. Allra þeirra spekinga, er á Grikkland voru, þó þótti hún fyrir hafa speki og brjóstvit; því að aldrei voru þau vandræði uppbörin fyrir hana, að ekki mundi hún þau áðan veg leyst geta, sem viturligast þótti. Henni hafði og snemmindis mjög til náms haldið verið; því að konungur hafði sent þangað í lönd, er hann vissi mesta fræðimenn vera, og lét þá til sín fara og kenna henni allan fróðleik, er þeir kunnu að kenna. Hún hafði og sér af því svo mikið nýtt, að ekki fannst né ein hennar jafningi að vitru og fróðleik í Grikkja ríki og víðara annars staðar.¹⁰⁵

[She was the most beautiful of women and the most generous, the most elegant and the most moral. Of all those wise people who were in Greece [= Byzantium], she still seemed to surpass them for wisdom and natural wit; because there was never a problem brought before her that she could not solve in the wisest fashion. She had also been inclined to learning from early on; because the king had sent messages to those lands where he knew the most learned men to be, and he had them travel to him and teach her all the wisdom that they knew how to impart. She benefitted so greatly from this that none could be found to equal her for wisdom and learning in the Greek kingdom or more widely in other lands.]

The *rímur* cycle is less effusive about her wisdom, which in the saga is dwelt on to the point where it eclipses all her other good qualities, these instead being relegated to a rather perfunctory list ('vænst og stórkostligust', etc.). The *rímur* poet presents her learning as just one part of her accomplishments as a worthy noblewoman, devoting no more time to it than the rather vague 'veraldar list' [worldly skills] (II.20) with which she is also endowed:

II.18

*Dóttur átti dögling þá
dýra, er Mátthildur heitir;*

The king had a worthy daughter
who was called Mátthildur;

Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga'. The younger redaction is found in AM 179 fol., a seventeenth-century paper manuscript, and edited by Gunnlaugur Þórðarson. *Konráðs saga keisarasonar, er fór til Ormalands*, ed. by Gunnlaugur Þórðarson (Copenhagen: Páll Sveinsson, 1859). According to Björn K. Þórolfsson, *hefur texti rímnaskáldsons verið nokkurn veginn mitt á milli gerðanna, eins og vjer þekkjum þær* ('the *rímur*-poet's text was in some way between the redactions, as we now know them'). Björn K. Þórolfsson, ix, pp. 395–96.

¹⁰⁵ Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga', p. 50. Unless the saga redactions differ greatly with regard to the quoted section, I will default to citing the older redaction here.

*görpum veitti hún grettis snjá
og gladdi lýða sveitir.* she offered the serpent's snow [GOLD] to men
and gladdened groups of people.

II.19

*Líkams fegurð með list og skraut,
lund og málið snjalla,
bar sú foldar linna laut
langt yfir svanna alla.* For bodily beauty, along with skill and ornament,
temperament and eloquent speech,
this hollow of the serpent's ground [GOLD > WOMAN]
far surpassed all other ladies.

II.20

*Varla mátti í heimsins höll
hennar líka bíða,
veraldar lýtur listin öll
lindi Fáfnis hlíða.* In the hall of the world, one could scarcely
await her like,
all the skills of the world were allotted
to the linden of Fáfnir's hillside [GOLD > WOMAN].

II.21

*Missti hún engra mennta þá,
sem meistarar hafa og fræði;
bragna hverr, er brúði sá,
bregður sorg og mæði.¹⁰⁶* She was not lacking for any learning
or knowledge which scholars have;
every man who saw the lady
was relieved of sorrow and weariness.

Here, her learning is presented in a mere half-stanza, a stark contrast to the many-line encomium the saga offers. Moreover, the poet's framing of this wisdom as 'missti hún engra mennta' [she was not lacking for any learning] (II.21) diminishes the remarkable quality of her wisdom as it is presented in the saga. In the saga, her brilliance is framed in superlatives: she seems to surpass all the learned people of the kingdom; she solves problems in the wisest way possible; she has no equal for wisdom in all the kingdom and the lands beyond. She has been taught by clever men, yes, but she has also *used* ('nýtt') this teaching to the fullest and thus has no equal, even among the wise. Meanwhile, in the *rímur*, she is simply 'not lacking' [missti hún engra] in learning. Litotes is a technique that appears across the entire medieval Icelandic corpus and we may therefore infer that Mátthildur is very learned indeed, but this is still some way short of her matchless intelligence as it is presented in the saga.

In both saga and *rímur*, Mátthildur's insight is key to the plot: while her father is deceived when Roðbert passes himself off as the emperor's son and Konráður as his retainer, on Mátthildur's

¹⁰⁶ Wisén, p. 105.

first meeting with Roðbert, she perceives that he bears ‘skuggi nokkur’ [some kind of shadow],¹⁰⁷ or ‘skugga dökkvan’ [a dark shadow] II.49),¹⁰⁸ despite his handsome appearance. This handsomeness, she comments, is also more of the level she would expect from ‘arfi einhvers jarls’ [the son of some earl] (II.50) rather than that of an emperor’s son: “‘Þætti mér allvel, ef hann væri jarls son eða hann væri son nokkurs fylkiskonungs. En nú þykki mér hann eigi vera jafn yfirbragðsmikill, sem mér þætti vera eiga, ef hann er hins göfgasta keisarason,’” [“He would seem very well to me, if he were the son of an earl or if he were the son of some sort of petty king. But now he seems to me not to be as greatly handsome as I think he ought to be, if he is the son of the noblest emperor,”].¹⁰⁹

When Konráður eventually makes his way to Mátthildur’s chamber, she instantly recognises that this man is an improvement on the ‘Konráður’ who came to her before:

III.9

*Dóttir stillis drenginn sá,
döglings arfa hún horfir á;
liljan skoðar þann laufa rjóð,
langt ber þessi af allri þjóð.*

The king’s daughter saw the man,
she watches the ruler’s son;
the lily [WOMAN] looks at this reddener of
leaves [SWORDS > WARRIOR],
this one far surpasses all other people.

III.10

*Seggi tvo lét seima Ná
sæti annað báða fá;
drepur þar hendi dýnu viður,
döglings arfi sest þar niður.*

The Ná of gold [WOMAN] made two men
both find another seat;
she taps her hand against the cushion,
the king’s son sits down there.

The saga recounts this somewhat more simply: ‘En er Mátthildur gat þann mann að líta, er af öllum bar, þeim er hún hafði séð, þá lítast hún um, og tók upp hið næsta sér tvo men og fékk þeim annað sæti’ [And when Mátthildur could see this man, who surpassed all others whom she had seen before, then she looked around and made the two men nearest her get up and found them another seat].¹¹⁰ In both texts, Konráður is granted the privilege of sitting next to Mátthildur, rather than receiving the less honourable seat in front of her throne that Roðbert did on his visit. Mátthildur’s treatment of her respective visitors displays a shrewd awareness of court etiquette and how to manipulate it to ensure

¹⁰⁷ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Wisén, p. 109.

¹⁰⁹ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 53.

¹¹⁰ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 57.

that she remains ascendent over Roðbert, situating him in a position to be inspected and judged by her, while Konráður is treated as an equal, to be seated at her side.

The *rímur* initially makes far more of Mátthildur's visual perception of Konráður, using three 'seeing' verbs in three lines to emphasise how close her attention is. The saga is not quite so focused on this, but does state that once Konráður has taken his seat at Mátthildur's side, 'Mátthildur horfði löngum á hann' [Mátthildur looked at him for a long time].¹¹¹ This emphasis on seeing feeds into two popular motifs of the chivalric romances and indeed Norse texts more generally. In the first place, Mátthildur's keenness of vision is another indicator of her intelligence: particularly in the kings' sagas, the ability of a ruler to see through visual deceptions is a relatively common trope.¹¹² Although it is more frequently applied to men, Mátthildur's earlier ability to perceive the 'shadow' on Roðbert that has gone unremarked by her father suggests that she is indeed possessed of an uncommonly discerning eye. In the second place, the chivalric romances make frequent use of a theme that appears in courtly literature from across Western Europe: the idea that love/desire/attraction enters a person through the eye.¹¹³ Though the saga does not yet make mention of any romantic feelings between the couple, an audience even passingly familiar with other romances would have been well aware what this constant scrutiny foreshadowed.

Mátthildur's intelligence continues to be crucial to the development of the narrative as the saga progresses. It is she who eventually figures out a way to communicate with Konráður, by producing a book which has seventy pages written in seventy different languages (or seventy-two, according to the *rímur* (III.21)). By looking through this book, they are able to find a language that both of them can speak. In the saga, this language is left unspecified — 'litur hann á blöðin og finnur þar eina þá tungu, er þau kunnu bæði' [he looks at the pages and finds a language there that both of them can speak]¹¹⁴ — but in the *rímur*, somewhat bizarrely, we are told that 'Girkumálið tömdu tvau' [the two of them had mastered the Greek language] (III.22). It is unclear what language the Byzantine court — most commonly referred to as the Greek court in chivalric romances — has been speaking all this time that Konráður can speak Greek and yet not understand them.

Once they have established a means of communicating, Mátthildur wastes no time in asking Konráður who he is and, upon learning his name, wryly comments that this name must be very popular in his country:

¹¹¹ Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga', p. 57.

¹¹² Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2003), pp. 17–18.

¹¹³ James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 18.

¹¹⁴ Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga', p. 59.

III.25

Brúðurin svarar og brosti við:

“Beint skil ég þenna yðvarn sið

(ágætt nafn er þetta þó),

að þér vilið allir heiti svo.”

The lady replies, smiling:

“Now I understand your custom

(though it is a great name),

that you all want to be called this.”

In the *rímur*, she makes careful use of these wry statements, to which Konráður responds in bewilderment, replying that he does not know any other man in his retinue with the same name as him, and, when he is told that there is indeed a man at court calling himself Konráður, that a man must indeed be a fool if he does not know his own name. In the saga, she draws out the truth she already suspects with careful questioning, asking, “Hvort eru þeir einir menn á því landi, er Konráður heiti og eru Ríkharðs synir?” [“Are there many men in that country who are called Konráður and are the sons of Ríkharður?”] and “Eru fleiri keisarar á því landi en einn?” [“Are there more emperors than one in this land?”], before explaining that she asks because she has met another Konráður *keisarason*, but “Ég hefi grunað hann, hvort hann mundi vera Konráður eða ekki,” [“I have been suspicious of whether he is Konráður or not,”].¹¹⁵ In this way, she allows Konráður to come to his own conclusions, a far more convincing way of revealing Roðbert’s guilt than simply announcing it to Konráður directly.

The narrative having spent a considerable amount of time dwelling on Konráður’s flaws (namely his gullibility and lack of linguistic skill), it now moves to a dazzling display of his talents at jousting, battling wild beasts, and other physical pursuits. Finally, the question of who is the real Konráður comes to a head, with Konráður demanding to undertake a dangerous quest in order to prove his identity. This quest, to retrieve a magical emerald from the clutches of a terrifying dragon, is one that he is aided on by Mátthildur’s knowledge and preparations. When he learns what he has to do, his first action is to go to Mátthildur and tell her the news.

These conversations go somewhat differently in the *rímur* cycle and the saga. In both the older redaction and the *rímur*, Mátthildur produces a magical emerald for Konráður to take with him, in the saga because, “Það er mælt, að ekki mun orma högg granda þeim manni, er þenna stein hefir með sér,” [“It is said that serpents’ blows cannot harm the man who has this stone with him,”],¹¹⁶ while in the *rímur*, it is because the stone protects against ‘bál eða eitur’ [fire or poison] (IV.64). As Marianne Kalinke has shown, Mátthildur’s advice at this point draws on information contained in medieval lapidaries and bestiaries, as well as the sort of encyclopaedic writings gathered in manuscripts like the

¹¹⁵ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 59.

¹¹⁶ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 69.

fourteenth-century AM 194 8vo.¹¹⁷ The *rímur* cycle shows an even closer connection to the information contained in AM 194 8vo: while the saga only notes the emerald’s ability to protect against ‘orma högg’ (whose poisonous nature may be inferred but is not stated outright), the *rímur* cycle explicitly notes the stone’s efficacy against ‘bál eða eitur’, comparable to AM 194 8vo’s statement that emeralds are ‘góður við eitri’ [good against poison] if worn around the neck.¹¹⁸ However, what the *rímur* cycle lacks, but which is contained in both saga redactions in varying forms, is Mátthildur’s extensive description of the lands through which Konráður will have to travel on his quest. In the *rímur* cycle, Mátthildur only notes that Konráður will begin his journey by travelling to ‘Blálandseyjar’ — “Frækið lið skal fara þér við | fyrst til Blálandseyja,” [The valiant troop will accompany you first to Blálandseyjar] (IV.65) — but does not go on to relate where he will travel after that, though the *fyrst* does imply that this is to be the start of a longer list. Meanwhile, in the saga redactions, Mátthildur once again displays her impressive learning, explaining that Konráður will need to take along a cockerel and two pigs because he will encounter ‘óörgu dýr’ [fearless beasts], unspecified in the older redaction, but said to be lions in the younger, and ‘þeim dýrum, er fílar heita’ [those beasts who are called elephants], who fear nothing except the sound of a cock crowing or pigs squealing.¹¹⁹ She tells him how he will come to a stone bridge surrounded by serpents, but how, on Whitsunday, these serpents will all lie in a trance and he will be able to pass among them safely. She even describes the interior of the hall he will find, where the emerald is kept. In the older redaction, the source of her knowledge is never specified, but in the younger, she says that, “Svo vísa bækur til, að faðir minn muni hafa sent þig á Serkland hið mikla, í borg Babilonem,” [“My books indicate that my father must have ordered you to Serkland the Great, to the city of Babylon,”].¹²⁰ The bookishness of her knowledge is further emphasised by her statement that Babylon has since been destroyed and is now the home of serpents and other poisonous creatures, a description extremely similar to that found in AM 194 8vo.¹²¹

Throughout its narrative, *Konráðs saga* plays with the distinction between speech and truth, and the reliability of second-hand information. We see this from the start, in the way the narration encourages the audience, like Konráður, to trust the clever, courteous Roðbert; he is easy to trust when all his initial treachery takes place off-screen and we only find out about his seduction of Silvia after the fact. The theme continues when the two men reach the Byzantine court and Roðbert baldly

¹¹⁷ Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words*, p. 128.

¹¹⁸ *Alfræði Íslensk. Íslensk encyklopædisk litteratur. I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*, ed. by Kr. Kålund, 3 vols (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1908), I, p. 78.

¹¹⁹ Cederschiöld, ‘Konráðs saga’, p. 69.

¹²⁰ Gunnlaugur Þórðarson, p. 28.

¹²¹ Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words*, p. 128; Kålund, I, p. 9.

narrates the misdeeds he himself committed to end up exiled here, now attributed to the man he is calling 'Roðbert' but who is in fact the innocent Konráður. Finally, we see it again with Mátthildur's account of what Konráður's quest will entail, in which Mátthildur recounts the many wonders he will encounter and the narration then describes Konráður's adventures in a way that leaves the audience in no doubt that Mátthildur's information was accurate. Indeed, the narration of Konráður's quest occasionally includes explicit references to Mátthildur's advice; for example, 'sem honum hafði til vísað Mátthildur drottning' [as Queen Mátthildur had directed him to]; 'sem honum hafði sagt Mátthildur drottning' [as Queen Mátthildur had told him].¹²²

In this way, the saga establishes Mátthildur as a kind of anti-Roðbert. At the start of the saga, Roðbert is set up as the companion on whom Konráður should be able to rely and the person whose skills complement Konráður's own. The ideal sworn-brother relationship is subverted by Roðbert's subsequent treachery, and while Konráður does not have anyone on whom he can rely, he is left vulnerable at the emperor's court. However, as soon as he meets Mátthildur and is able to establish communication with her, he is once again able to demonstrate the areas in which he *is* skilled. Mátthildur and Roðbert are also both paralleled and contrasted in their use of speech: Roðbert in his false account of the events in Saxland that led to his exile, and Mátthildur in the high degree of accuracy with which she predicts Konráður's adventures. The ways in which Roðbert demonstrates himself to be deceitful and unhelpful are precisely the ways in which Mátthildur shows her trustworthiness and usefulness. Konráður starts the saga with a partner he wrongly believes he can rely on for life, and ends it with a new partner in whom he truly can trust.

Though Marianne Kalinke has argued that the gaps in both men's education, especially Konráður's dismissal of language-learning, are treated as flaws by the narrative,¹²³ I would argue that the saga is just as invested in showing the ways in which Konráður can be highly successful and competent when working together with someone who genuinely wishes to help him rather than undermine him. In fact, the saga is uncommonly interested in presenting the marriage that is the end-point of so many chivalric romances as being a union that is strengthened by the skills both parties bring to it: we have no indication that Mátthildur is trained in combat in order to fight her own way through lions and elephants and dragons to retrieve the healing emerald, but equally, Konráður would be unlikely to succeed without her instructions regarding the weaknesses of the creatures he will face. As I have discussed elsewhere, marriage in the chivalric romances is often treated as the accomplishment that will make a king truly perfect, with the bride's skills and beauty largely presented as outstanding simply in order to make her a worthy match for an outstanding man. *Konráðs saga* is

¹²² Cederschiöld, 'Konráðs saga', pp. 72, 75.

¹²³ Kalinke, 'The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance', pp. 860–61.

unusual in that Mátthildur's learning goes far beyond a mere convention of the genre to become a character trait that is integral to the plot.

The *rímur* poet, on the other hand, is less interested in the tension between events as they happen and events as they are described, or perhaps simply thought it not very entertaining to convey the same information twice. Unlike the saga redactors, the poet instead chooses to summarise Mátthildur's advice to Konráður as: 'Ráðin öll gaf refla þöll | rekk af vísdóm sínum' [The fir-tree of ribbons [WOMAN] gave the man all the advice [she could] from her wisdom] (IV.67). Her advice to take along a cockerel and a pig on the journey here seems bizarre without the accompanying explanation that the lions and elephants Konráður will encounter fear only the sound of these particular creatures. Though the main essentials of Mátthildur's characterisation as wise are retained in the *rímur* cycle, the lack of specifics leaves her wisdom feeling superficial, leaving her less the ideal complement to Konráður's deficiencies and more just another worthy bride who, by the conventions of the genre, must be superlative without detail.

FEMALE MASCULINITY IN *MÁBILAR RÍMUR*

From the sword-wielding Breeches-Auður to the recent furore surrounding the genomic sexing of Birka grave Bj. 581, the idea of the female warrior has long exerted a fascination over its audiences. The literature of medieval Iceland is peculiarly rich in such figures, especially in the *fornaldarsögur*, where we encounter figures such as Hervör/Hervarður, who disguises herself as a male warrior to seek her birthright of her father's magical sword; or Þornbjörg/Þórbergur, who rules as king and goes into battle against the would-be suitor Hrólfur. Figures such as Þornbjörg/Þórbergur have been seen as stepping stones on the way to the development of the maiden king motif which is prevalent in the chivalric romances of the later Middle Ages, although these later figures only occasionally take up arms in defence of their kingdoms.¹²⁴

As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, despite their prominence in other genres, warrior women play a reduced role in medieval *rímur*. While poets do occasionally adapt the maiden king sagas that feature such characters, the majority of these adaptations do not cover the maiden king part of the narrative, focusing instead on the heroic deeds of their male characters. The notable exception to this is *Mábilur rímur*, also known as *Rímur af Mábil sterku*, 'The *rímur* of Mábil the Strong'. As the name suggests, the story (whose prose source text is no longer extant) revolves around the efforts of the warrior princess Mábil and her attempts to thwart the machinations of her stepmother Medía. Medía's performance of a specifically female form of villainy has been discussed earlier in this chapter;

¹²⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend'.

in this section, I will look at Mábil herself, as a figure who complicates the borders of gender which, in *rímur*, are usually so clear-cut.

Mábil *rímur* is possibly unique in the corpus of medieval Icelandic texts for featuring a woman who fights on the battlefield, and defeats male would-be suitors, without being vilified for it. Moreover, in defiance of the usual maiden king storyline, she remains unmarried, even by the end of the younger ‘happy ending’ redaction of the *rímur*, ending the narrative in the company of her sister, with the male companion she has acquired during her adventures largely ignored. Although the later saga based on the *rímur* cycle has Mábil marrying Kallíus before eventually dying of exhaustion and fury on the battlefield,¹²⁵ this is not even hinted at within the *rímur* cycle itself.¹²⁶ This is a startling twist on the usual fate of independent women in medieval Icelandic literature, who, even if they are not presented as the antagonist of the narrative, are almost inevitably married off by the end of the story, usually being demoted from ruling monarch to consort along the way.¹²⁷

Mábil’s happy ending is all the more surprising given the complexity of her gendered portrayal in the *rímur*. In this respect, she shares a number of traits with other maiden kings or female warriors seen in *fornaldar*- and *riddarasögur*.¹²⁸ While plenty of figures characterised as ‘maiden kings’ never have their womanhood called into question, and some do not even adopt the male title of ‘king’, others occupy a more complicated space. Characters such as Hervör/Hervarður and Þórbergur/Þornbjörg actively adopt male personas, living and being treated as men both by the narrative and by those around them. Likewise, Mábil adopts the persona of a male knight when she is forced from her kingdom, but, unlike characters like Hervör and Þornbjörg/Þórbergur, who are inevitably persuaded or forced back into womanhood and marriage, the *rímur* cycle ends while Mábil is still in her masculine disguise, meaning that the ambiguities of Mábil’s gender are never fully resolved.

Even before her birth, Mábil defies a strict gender binary. While pregnant, her mother dreams that her child — *jóð*, an ungendered term — will rule a kingdom. Such prophetic dreams of greatness for an unborn child are especially prominent in the kings’ sagas, where they always foretell the birth

¹²⁵ Björn K. Þórólfsson, ix, p. 430.

¹²⁶ At most, a reader familiar with romance genre conventions could foresee a future husband in Kallíus, the only knight able to defeat Mábil.

¹²⁷ Examples of maiden kings who are not vilified by their narratives are few and far between. The most prominent example is perhaps Nítíða, who notably does not *refuse* marriage, but instead seeks to choose the worthiest suitor for herself. *Nítíða saga* spawned at least three *rímur* cycles, although none of these appear to be earlier than the seventeenth century. Sheryl McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland: The Women, Worldviews, and Manuscript Witnesses of Nítíða Saga*, Crossing Boundaries: Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 5 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

¹²⁸ There are only two maiden kings portrayed at length in medieval *rímur* so the majority of comparison in this section is necessarily between *Mábil* *rímur* and prose texts.

of a great man.¹²⁹ Mábil's father comments that he will throw a feast to celebrate the birth of a son, but if the child turns out to be a girl, Fortune must be mocking him, since he cares little for women (*Kollsbók*, I.17–18).¹³⁰ The subsequent birth of Mábil is called a *dæmisaga* (a story with a moral message) by the narrator, and indeed Rúdent's remarks may be understood ironically in light of the subsequent events of the *rímur*: Mábil, the daughter the king did not want, becomes the sole defender of his lands, while Rúdent himself is easily tricked and manipulated into actions that harm both his children and his kingdom by Medía.

Mábil's potential for masculinity continues to be demonstrated throughout her life, in part through her contrast with other female characters in the *rímur*. Her sister Móbil, as her name suggests, functions as a kind of obverse of Mábil, demonstrating the skills and aptitudes expected of a good *rímur* woman. Her introduction focuses on her beauty — 'má hana kalla fríða' [one may call her beautiful] (I.21) — and her ability at traditional women's craftwork — 'sætan lærði að sauma brátt' [the lady learnt to sew quickly] (I.22). Mábil's introduction, on the other hand, is both more elaborate and less conventional. She possesses many of the attributes associated with maiden king figures, notably her learning — her master Sedulus teaches her 'listir allra bóka' [the arts of all books] (I.24) and she is also a polyglot ('mælti hún tungur allar' [she speaks all tongues] (I.25)). She is also courteous ('Mábil heilsar mest með kurt' [Mábil greets most politely] (I.26), and attractive ('vænni hverju fljóði' [fairer than any woman] (I.23)), all characteristic of maiden kings in both prose sagas and their rare appearances in *rímur*.¹³¹ Praise for a woman's courtesy and beauty are particularly conventional descriptors in medieval *rímur*, as discussed at the start of this chapter. Yet at the same time, we are told that 'var hún á vöxt sem væri menn' [in height she was like men] (I. 23), and she insists that Sedulus teach her knightly skills as well as book-learning, dismissing the prospect of learning embroidery as 'sauma drafl' [sewing nonsense] (I.28). Her teacher is at first reluctant, but concedes when Mábil points out that it seems to be the will of Fate that she is physically suited for such training: "Vili mér hamingjan veita afl," ["Fortune wants to grant me strength,"] (I.28).

In her nightly knightly training (Sedulus refuses to teach her by daylight), Mábil learns to shoot a bow and fight with a spear and shield. Eventually, she becomes so strong and skilful that she can unhorse her former master:

¹²⁹ Examples include Haraldr *hárfagri's* mother's dream of a blood-soaked tree, foretelling her unborn son's future prowess as a warrior, recounted in *Heimskringla*. 'Hálfðanar saga svarta', in *Heimskringla I*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit, 26, 4th edn (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), pp. 84–94 (p. 90).

¹³⁰ All quotations and stanza numbers refer to the *Kollsbók* witness of the text unless otherwise stated.

¹³¹ On the learnedness of maiden kings, see Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 89–92.

I.31

*Það kom afl í jungfrúr líf –
undur er slíkt að heyra –
meistara sinn hið mæta víf
mátti úr söðli keyra*

Such strength came into the maiden's life –
it's wondrous to hear of such a thing –
that the worthy woman was able
to drive her own master from the saddle.

This will set a pattern for Mábil's subsequent engagements with male warriors throughout the rest of the *rímur*: with the exception of the later, additional tenth *ríma*, Mábil never meets a man who is her match, dispatching would-be challengers with an ease and brutality that any *rímur* hero would envy. Yet despite the occasional comparison to men, Mábil is regularly gendered as female throughout her training and subsequent battles, with the exception of the period she spends actually disguised as a man. The *jungfrú* and *mæta víf* of the stanza quoted above are typical; in the next stanza she is also called 'silki dúka Hildi' [the Hild of silk cloths [WOMAN]] and 'auðgrund' (a contraction of 'auðar grund' [ground of wealth [WOMAN]] (I.32)), both extremely conventional ways of referring to women in *rímur*.

The following two stanzas are even more interesting:

*Nema það kvennligt klæða mein
kemur að höndum vífi;
þá er hún blautt sem jungfrú ein
og jafnan krönk í lífi.*

Unless that womanly harm of cloths
[MENSTRUATION]
befell the woman;
then she is delicate¹³² as a maiden
and ever sick in life.

*Nistils bar það Naumu til
nær á hverju þrími
mátti ekki menja Bil
mektug þá við stími
(Kollsbók, I.33–34)*

It happened to the Nauma of the brooch
[WOMAN]
almost every new moon
that the Bil of necklaces [WOMAN] could not
be mighty in battle.

While menstruation is not objectively an inherent marker of womanhood, it is often treated as one in the popular consciousness, and its inclusion at this particular point in the text, juxtaposed with the masculine martiality of Mábil's combat training, is significant. Mábil's one weakness becomes a major

¹³² The gendered nature of the adjective *blauðr* is discussed at length in Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations*, 44, 1993, 1–28.

plot point later, as it is her inability to fight during this time that allows Blávus and his men to abduct her sister. It should also be noted that, according to the editor of *Mábilar rímur*, Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, these are the only known reference to menstruation in a medieval Icelandic text, outside of medical manuals.¹³³ Mábil's chastity is also vital to her characterisation, and in this she is, unsurprisingly given the name of the *topos*, following in the footsteps of other maiden king figures, whose power is implicitly linked to their virginity. Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir argues that maiden kings should be seen as an inverse character type to the virgin martyrs, with the martyrs retaining the spiritual power granted to them by their faith which is symbolised in their virginity, whilst the maiden kings' material power, i.e. their independent rule, is only possible through their lack of a husband.¹³⁴ When the maiden king is raped or otherwise sexually humiliated, as is the turning point for many of these narratives, not only are they stripped of power in that moment, but they do not ever regain their independence, most often ending the narrative married to a man they have previously both egregiously harmed and been harmed by.

Mábil is repeatedly referred to as *jomfrú*, *jungfrú* and *mey(ja)* [maiden, virgin] throughout the *rímur* cycle. While all of these are relatively conventional epithets used to refer to any unmarried woman in *rímur*, they are given weight in Mábil's case by the fact that she ends the narrative — even the later redaction, in which the potential husband-figure of Karellíus is introduced — unmarried; indeed the idea of her marrying is never even suggested. Her continence is emphasised through contrast with her nemesis and stepmother Medía, who uses the lure of sexuality — both her own and that of her unwilling daughter — to manipulate male characters into doing her bidding. Medía and Mábil never directly oppose one another, communicating instead through a series of intermediaries (most of whom Mábil kills or mutilates after they attack her) and vicious letters. Whereas Medía wields power *through* men, Mábil successfully adopts the defining characteristic of the admirable *rímur* man, battle prowess, in order to hold her own in their struggle. Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir argues that, like both virgin saints and maiden kings, Mábil's power is reliant on both her virginity and chastity,¹³⁵ to which I would add that for Mábil, as for the maiden kings, her inviolate person is both a symbol and the result of her ability to defend herself.

Male chastity (or lack thereof) is also a major theme of the *rímur*. King Rúdent's envoy Sigurður unwittingly sets the disastrous events of the story in motion when his desire to marry Móbía, Medía's

¹³³ Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd', p. 43. Arguably, the reference in II.33 to Móbía becoming *ær* ('crazed, furious') every new moon is also a reference to menstruation, although given that this condition manifests itself as her trying to bite any man brought near her, this seems medically implausible, and is one of the reasons Valgerður suggests the *rímur* cycle was most probably written by a male poet.

¹³⁴ Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd', p. 9.

¹³⁵ Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfsdóttir, 'Meyjar og völd', p. 9.

daughter, outweighs his duty as proxy wooer for his king. Beguiled by Medía, Sigurður agrees that she, rather than her daughter, should be the one to wed King Rúdent following the suspiciously convenient death of her previous husband. Yet although Sigurður rapidly becomes Medía's pawn, rather than Rúdent's, he remains the master of his sexuality. On the night of his wedding to Móbía, he learns, apparently for the first time, that Móbía was far from eager to wed him, and she is in fact cursed to die if she ever loses her virginity, but that the curse can be lifted if her husband will wait a year. Upon hearing this, Sigurður declares that he does not want his new wife to die, and spreads a cloth between them, symbolically guaranteeing that, though they may share a bed, Móbía will be in no danger from him. This scene is vividly brought to life over the course of 7 stanzas in the *Kollsbók* text, with both third-person description by the narrator and direct speech from both parties. With the exception of a similar scene later in the same *rímur*, it is the only example from an Icelandic romance, either verse or prose, in which consent is so explicitly negotiated. The second such scene occurs in the JS 45 4to text, once Blávus has successfully abducted Móbil from her sister's care and married her. When Móbil begins to cry at the prospect of their wedding night, Blávus, who desperately needs a woman to love him in order to break the curse that he is under, declares, “Móbil skal ég, á mína dygð, | meydóm þína hlífa.” [“Móbil, I shall, on my faith, protect your virginity,”] (JS 45 4to, VII.36) While male virginity is not given any of the weight that female virginity is given in the text, control of one's sexual desires is presented as a virtue all should aspire to, regardless of gender.

When she is celebrated by the narrative for the same traits valued in its male characters, Mábíl's gender becomes complicated. Though she spends a portion of the narrative disguised as a man, unlike the examples of Hervör and Þornbjörg/Þórbergur, this is not undertaken especially willingly; rather, it is a pragmatic step to help her win back her sister and her kingdom when she has been driven out by Blávus. Her disguise is also complicated by the fact that the key components of a male disguise, in a variety of texts from *Sigrdrífumál* to *Snjáskvæði*, are the warrior accoutrements of helmet, mailcoat and weapons. Mábíl, however, has worn and wielded all of these while being firmly counted as female, e.g. when she rides out against the false Sigurður: ‘Mábíl klæðast einum serk; | brandinn grípur brúðurin sterk’ [Mábíl dresses in a shirt; the strong woman grips the sword] (IV.25), or in the following stanza, ‘Brúðurin upp á Búskant sté; | brynjan frá ég til reiðu sé’ [The woman mounted up on Búskant; | I heard a mailcoat was at the ready] (IV.26). Jack Halberstam has discussed the concept of ‘female masculinity’ in his book of the same name, arguing that masculinity is more visible when practised by people other than cisgender men.¹³⁶ I would argue that a masculinity that does not require maleness is precisely what we see in Mábíl, a character repeatedly presented to the

¹³⁶ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

audience as a woman, even while performing the form of masculinity most valued by *rímur* poets, namely a warrior masculinity.

Valgerður Brynjólfssdóttir has argued that the portrait we see in *Mábilur rímur* of a female warrior who outshines every man she fights would have been seen as an amusing parody by the *rímur*'s original audience.¹³⁷ It is true that *Mábilur rímur* upends many of the conventions of medieval *rímur*, with its multiple female characters and a maiden king figure who ends the story as independent as she started it. Yet while the poem is undoubtedly entertaining, I cannot agree that it is intended primarily as a parody, or that the audience are not meant to sympathise with Mábil, Móbil and Móbía, the three wronged women of the story. Despite the excessively gory battle scenes (which are in many ways no worse than those of any number of *rímur* in which male protagonists literally carve a swathe through the enemy ranks), *Mábilur rímur* also features deftly described emotional scenes, such as Medía becoming red in the cheeks in her rage and Móbil's confusion and grief upon awakening from sleep to find she has been stolen away in the night. The story's outlandish elements — Móbil entombed alongside her dead husband, Villiká and Medía's gruesome enchantments, the curses various characters are under — are if anything tamer than those found in many other *rímur* and *riddarasögur*. The only major divergence seems to be that the author, apparently male judging by his description in the first *mansöngur* of 'blindir menn' [blind men] bringing women poetry (*Kollsbók*, I.3), was capable of writing interesting and sympathetic female characters.

CONCLUSION

Despite the relative lack of detailed portraits of women compared to those of men in *rímur*, women still play a variety of roles in these texts, from Mátthildur's wise councillor in *Konráðs saga/rímur*, to Medía's scheming seductress in *Mábilur rímur*. Yet of all the roles on offer, the one most commonly performed is that of the wise queen who strengthens her husband's rule. A common criticism of attempts to theorise gender is that such attempts end up being fundamentally relational: masculinity is defined as the inverse or obverse of femininity and vice versa, with little scope in the system for non-binary genders.¹³⁸ As I have already discussed in the conclusion to the previous chapter, a relational system is precisely what we see in *rímur*, but the relationality is not so much inter-gender as intra-gender. Men in *rímur* show none of the same anxieties around being feminised that men in the *Íslendingasögur* do; instead, they are concerned to distinguish themselves on the basis of class

¹³⁷ Valgerður Kr. Brynjólfssdóttir, 'Meyjar Og Völd. Rímurnar Af Mábil Sterku' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Iceland, 2004), p. 8.

¹³⁸ E.g. Mimi Schippers, 'Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony', *Theory and Society*, 36 (2007), 85–102 (p. 100).

and race. So it is for women too in these texts: apart from Sedulus' easily ignored complaint, no one in *Mábilur rímur* seems concerned that Mábil is adopting masculine characteristics,¹³⁹ and she is instead contrasted, in her inviolate chastity, with another woman, the sexually licentious Medía. Similarly, in scenes like those in *Geðraunir* and *Vilmundar saga/rímur viðutans*, in which an aristocratic woman attempts to trade in the body of a lower-class woman in order to avoid an unwanted marriage, the power dynamics run between the two women, rather than between them and the unwanted man in question; the latter dynamic is presented as established and inevitable.

The idealised form of femininity in these texts is intrinsically bound up with the idealised form of masculinity. For any gender, this form is inherently aristocratic, white, well-educated, and attractive, elements which recur again and again in character introductions. Women who are the fairest and most skilful in all the world complement their husbands, who are in turn the most accomplished in knightly pursuits. Because women almost never appear in *rímur* unless they are the desired love interest of a male protagonist (*Mábilur rímur* excepted), it is almost impossible to construct a model of femininity in these texts that is not tied to the masculinity of their would-be husbands. Women in *rímur* simply do not exist outside the strictures of a patriarchal framework; even in the exceptional *Mábilur rímur*, the threat of marriage is constant. This is not unique to the *rímur*, which largely build on the patterns of the prose *riddarasögur*, but, in *rímur* poets' choice to focus on the glorious battles of male protagonists and to gloss over the exceptional qualities of women as they are presented in the sagas (e.g. Philotemía and Mátthildur), the matter becomes more pronounced.

¹³⁹ Though the conceptualisation of masculinity as inherently desirable means that it is almost always more acceptable for women to perform masculinity than for men to perform femininity.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore the ways in which medieval *rímur* poets conceptualised and discussed gender in their texts, with a particular focus on the corpus of chivalric *rímur* from this period. Throughout this work, gender has been conceptualised as a social construct, something with no material reality or fixed form outside of human creation and discourse. As discussed in Chapter One, ‘Approaching Gender in Medieval Icelandic Texts’, such an understanding allows for gender to be analysed within culturally and historically contingent scenarios, granting more specificity and nuance to our understanding of gendered figures within these texts. The masculinity of a ninth-century Icelandic settler is not presented in the same way as that of a temporally non-specific knight in a *riddarasaga*. Though both depictions were popular with audiences in medieval Iceland, looking at the transmission of these texts — adaption into *rímur* being a very significant part of this transmission — permits a more granular examination of the ways in which masculinities, femininities, and other less quantifiable forms of gender performance were being discussed in late medieval Icelandic society.

Following the establishment of my methodological approach in Chapter One, Chapter Two examined the *mansöngur* stanzas which come to form such an integral part of *rímur*. In particular, this first section focused on the ways in which poets used these stanzas to craft a rather fixed idea of what a poet ought to be, displaying an ongoing fascination with the myth of the mead of poetry and the role of poet as master craftsman — a gendered term I use deliberately. Though we know of at least one female *rímur* poet from the medieval period, the poetic self-image revealed in the *mansöngvar* is specifically male, but a masculinity distanced from the romantic heroes whose stories the poets narrate by the focus on the poets’ abject lack of success in love. This study of the *mansöngvar* also revealed *rímur* poets’ preoccupation with martial masculinity, with several poets explicitly stating that they plan to turn away from composing poetry about women to instead recount the deeds of brave men. In the latter part of this chapter, I explored the connection between statements of this kind and the relative lack of maiden king narratives in medieval *rímur*, concluding that this development was due in part to poets’ preoccupation with valiant men, and in part to an increasing focus on the entertainment value of *rímur*, above the didactic moral messages of many maiden king sagas.

The main body of this thesis (Chapters Three and Four) analysed case studies grouped around popular themes in order to explore both the commonalities of these tropes and their differences in various texts. Due to the nature of *rímur* as adaptations of pre-existing texts, these case studies also looked at the sagas on which the *rímur* were based. As there have been relatively few examinations of *riddarasögur* that specifically explore gender — and most of these have focussed on the maiden king trope, which is far rarer in the *rímur* corpus — these case studies also discuss gender in the source-sagas as well as in their *rímur* adaptations. In some cases, there was very little difference between *rímur*

and saga in either the narration of events or the portrayal of characters. This in itself was deemed to be significant, in that the *rímur* poet clearly felt the saga was suitable for their purposes unaltered. In other cases, for example Seditiana's repeated assault in *Sigurðar saga/rímur þöglá*, the poet's alterations substantially altered the tone of the narrative and the audience's impression of certain characters. The case studies, therefore, are for the most part a comparative study between source text and *rímur* in order to determine which elements are the result of the *rímur* poet's process of adaptation and which were already present in the text.

The medieval chivalric *rímur* corpus is a varied body of work, and no single model of gender can be said to perfectly apply to every text. Unsurprisingly, the variety of masculinities and femininities visible in chivalric *rímur* are closely related to those seen in chivalric sagas, though with some variation, as will be discussed later in this section. The *riddarasögur* in turn show influence both from other saga traditions (such as the *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur*) and from the continental chivalric romances that reached the Norse-speaking world through King Hákon Hákonarson's translation programme in the early thirteenth century. It has been argued that *riddarasögur* played an important role in at first modelling new modes of behaviour for the Norwegian and Icelandic aristocracy,¹ and then disseminating and popularising those models throughout the Norse-speaking world.

Rímur, coming later, had no need to introduce new behavioural models, but instead adjusted existing ones in line with the demands of the form's role as popular entertainment. A particularly fascinating aspect of this process is the stark distinction made between the poetic masculinity of *rímur* performers and that of their male protagonists. Warrior-poets of earlier Icelandic literature prided themselves on martial accomplishments yet were rarely romantically successful. *Rímur* poets retain this aspect of their poetic ancestry, with the abject and rejected poet becoming an essential component of the *rímur* form's introductory *mansöngur* stanzas, while at the same time distancing themselves from the role of warrior. The poetic sensibilities seen in *mansöngvar* are therefore both a continuation of an earlier, established model of poethood, and at the same time a development of the model. Men of military achievement are confined to the fictional narratives *rímur* poets recount; the fact that these narratives do not contain any poets also heightens the distance between the muscular, stoic protagonists of *rímur* and their sad, sensitive composers.²

In contrast to the pseudo-biographical suffering of the *rímur* poet, the triumphs of *rímur* protagonists come to seem increasingly fantastical, in keeping with the poets' promises to entertain their audiences. This is also apparent in the exaggeration of character types in the genre. As the study

¹ Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence'; Larrington, 'Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?'

² There is one medieval *rímur* cycle which features a poet-protagonist, *Skáld-Helga rímur*. Helgi resembles other warrior-poets in character, both unlucky in love and a competent warrior.

of *rímur* antagonists in Chapter Four demonstrated, these characters are often racialised in ways they are not in their source texts, as well as forced to fit an increasingly narrow mould that pairs their foreignness with sexual rapaciousness and ignoble violence. Likewise, in the increasingly formulaic introductions of protagonists, *rímur* poets seem bound by the weight of audience expectations, as well as the demands of form. While no one could accuse a *rímur* poet of conciseness, there is an eagerness to get to the action that leads to many of the interesting and unique elements of a character's introduction being elided (for example, Philotemía's learning and arrogance in *Dínus rímur*) in favour of the more formulaic introductions discussed at the start of Chapters Three and Four. This leads to a fossilising of character types and an accretion of conventional characteristics such that male protagonists become virtually indistinguishable from one another, and likewise for their female love interests. The ideal man in *rímur* is proficient in battle and knightly skills, well-educated, eloquent, generous and fair; the ideal woman is well-dressed, skilful, wise and also fair. With such visions of perfection as the leads, difficulties in these narratives rarely stem from the inner flaws of these characters, but rather from external forces: the invading berserker, the fearsome dragon, etc. These external threats mean that questions of identity in these texts often revolve around defining the in-group against outsiders, meaning that, while there are distinct roles and characteristics for men and women, there is also considerable overlap in the features which define specifically *aristocratic* gender. This is most apparent in the very similar descriptions of beauty seen, for example, in *Dámusta rímur* and *Dínus rímur* for both male and female characters, but is also evident in the insistence that all protagonists be well-educated, an option only available to the elite at this time. Lower-class characters, such as Öskubuska and Kolur in *Vilmundar saga/rímur viðútans*, are distinguished from the aristocratic protagonists in their looks, behaviour, and morals, aligning them more closely with the racialised antagonists of the genre.

Ultimately, the chivalric *rímur* corpus is interested in showing the ways in which men and women complement one another: Mátthildur's wisdom combining with Konráður's skill at arms to see him through his most dangerous challenge; Ermengá's patient planning counterbalancing her husband's rash displays of emotion. In the romantic plotlines of these stories, there is an unchallenged assumption that the ideal marriage is one that matches the fairest, most skilful maiden with the bravest, most accomplished knight, each of these figures demonstrating hegemonic models of femininity and masculinity respectively. As a result, women in these texts operate entirely within a patriarchal framework which offers marriage to the best man around as the prize for the best performance of aristocratic femininity. The chivalric *rímur* present an idealised world in which inherited power is deserved by virtue of one's personal qualities, and good rulership can only be strengthened by the acquisition of a complementary partner in life. The fact that this occurs in the

highly fictionalised landscape of the romances, and is notably absent from the pseudo-realistic *mansöngvar*, offers unflattering commentary on contemporary society.

There is far more that could be said about the gender system at work in *rímur* than space allows in this thesis. Even within the relatively small corpus of medieval chivalric *rímur*, topics such as piety, chastity, and the gendering of supernatural creatures deserve much greater attention than they have received here. I hope that future work in this area can shed more light on these and other aspects of these fascinating and underexamined texts.

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