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Ashley Castelino

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Baugrýgjar: Old Norse ‘Ring Ladies’ and Legal Husband-Killing in *Ynglinga saga*

Ashley Castelino¹

Abstract

Ynglinga saga in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* describes a cycle of three queens responsible for the deaths of their Swedish husbands. Although the nature of the killings and the individuals involved might make it easy to unquestioningly condemn these women, this article explores their means, motivation, and agency within a wider context of established contemporary social and legal principles. It considers how the first two women are responding not just to their husbands leaving them, but to an unfulfilled oath and a broken marriage contract. Meanwhile, the third queen Skjálf, much like Guðrún of *Atlakviða*, is dutybound to kill her husband in order to avenge the death of her father. In fact, all three women may be read as *baugrýgjar*, the ‘ring ladies’ of the *Grágás* law-codes who are expected to perform active roles in feuds and settlements. By thus justifying these acts of husband-killing, the women themselves may be reconfigured as agents of the law, of social order, and of their own lives.

Keywords: *Ynglinga saga*, women, law, marriage, killing

Early in *Ynglinga saga* of Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* is a short cycle of three formidable queens causing the deaths of their Swedish husbands.² The first is

¹ amc246@cam.ac.uk

² This article adopts the convention of using italics for the titles of individual sagas in collections, and of Eddic poems in the Poetic Edda. It also adheres to the widely-held belief that Snorri Sturluson is the author of *Heimskringla*.

Drífa, the daughter of Snjár *inn gamli* of *Finnland*. When her husband King Vanlandi abandons her, she pays the ‘seiðkona’ (‘sorceress’) Hulð ‘at hon skyldi síða Vanlanda til Finnlands eða deyða hann’ (‘so that she would work charms to send Vanlandi to *Finnland* or kill him’).³ Hulð is once again called upon by the (unnamed) wife of Vanlandi’s son Vísburr. Like his father, Vísburr abandons his wife and two sons, Gísl and Qndurr, and refuses to pay the required bride-price. Urged on by their mother and with the help of Hulð, Gísl and Qndurr ‘kómu at Vísbur um nótt á óvart ok brendu hann inni’ (‘came upon Vísburr by surprise at night and burned him inside’).⁴ A crucial element of this story is a ‘gullmen’ (‘gold neck-ring’), part of Vísburr’s bride-price and seemingly cursed by his sons.⁵ This ring later becomes the means by which a third queen, Skjálfr, hangs her husband King Agni to avenge the death of her father Frosti.⁶ The nature of the killings and the individuals involved makes it easy to unquestioningly condemn these three women. However, through an exploration of means, motivation, and agency, within the wider context of medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian social and legal principles of oaths, marriage, and the vengeance ethos, this article will demonstrate that in all three cases, the queens were legally and ethically justified in killing their husbands.

Any discussion of these women must first address two major interrelated concerns: their association with the Sámi (known as *Finnar* in the text⁷) and their association with magic. At least two of them—Drífa and Skjálfr—are clearly of Sámi descent, a group that some scholars have argued is portrayed negatively in the Norse sagas.⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to present a thorough

³ Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 29. All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 31.

⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

⁶ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37–8.

⁷ This article uses the conventional term ‘Sámi’ to refer to the *Finnar* or *Lappir*, used interchangeably in this text. For a survey of Sámi terminology in Old Norse literature, see Hermann Pálsson, ‘The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,’ *Nordlit: Tidsskrift i litteratur og kultur* 3, no. 1 (1999) 30–1.

⁸ See, among others, Hermann Pálsson, ‘The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,’ 29–53; Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, vol. 1 (Sastamala: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2009); Jeremy DeAngelo, ‘The North and the Depiction of the “Finnar” in the Icelandic Sagas,’

critique of this perspective, but suffice it to say that being of Sámi descent does not on its own necessitate a negative portrayal of an individual. Certainly not in *Heimskringla* which depicts a wide range of Sámi characters. This includes respected leaders like Drífa’s own father Snjár *inn gamli* (‘the Old’), and loyal followers of Norse kings like King Hrærekr’s manservant and confidant Finnr *litli*, talented shipbuilders like Sigurðr *slembidjaken*’s joyful drinking companions, and skilled archers like Jarl Eiríkr’s companion Finnr.⁹ Interactions between Norse and Sámi individuals involve trade and taxation, love and war, friendship and murder. Like all these individuals, Drífa and Skjálfr cannot be denounced simply because they are Sámi. Instead, reading their Sámi identity within and alongside the other social and legal institutions discussed in this article might allow for a more nuanced consideration than is sometimes afforded them.

The other major concern about these women, very often associated with the Sámi, is their use of magic. Both Drífa and the mother of Gísl and Qndurr engage with some form of supernatural power, either themselves or through other agents like the *seiðkona* Hulð. Once again, however, the use of magic is not in itself damning. Nicolas Meylan explains that

Icelanders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries committed to vellum an alternative definition of magic. Unlike the mainstream one, it did not imply a condemnation. On the contrary, to possess magic was to master a morally neutral instrument; it meant being possessed of great knowledge, skill, and power.¹⁰

For instance, a form of magic that appears particularly malevolent is the *mara* (translated variously as ‘nightmare’, ‘demon’, or ‘incubus’) summoned by the *seiðkona* Hulð to trample Drífa’s husband to death. However, even with the *mara*, Catharina Raudvere has clarified that there ‘are no moral judgements, no

Scandinavian Studies 82, no. 3 (2010): 257–86; and Nicolas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

⁹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29. Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 2, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1945) 120. Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1951) 311–12. Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 362–63.

¹⁰ Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland*, 122.

declaration that shape-shifting is either good or evil. It is the purpose of the act that determines which, although most act for personal gain.¹¹ Magic, therefore, is simply a neutral means to an end; its morality is to be judged according to the specific end it is used to achieve.

Considering then that the precise means of the killings may be neutral, one must look at the motivations behind them to judge their righteousness. Drífa's motivations are clear: she employs Hulð to bring her husband back to her or to kill him, in retribution for abandoning her and their child. The issue here is not merely that Vanlandi left, but even more so that 'hét hann at koma apr' ('he promised to come back').¹² From a legal point of view, the framing of the issue in this way is critical—Vanlandi having promised and failed to return implies that Drífa is not simply avenging a broken heart but, more importantly, a broken oath. Oath-breaking is one of the most severe sins in Old Norse society. In *Völuspá*, for instance, the gods breaking an oath to the giants is a major harbinger of *Ragnarök* itself, while 'menn meinsvara' ('perjured men') are named first among the mortal damned.¹³ In this context, Drífa's response seems not only perfectly reasonable, but even expected. Making it even more reasonable is the fact that Vanlandi is first given an opportunity to return—the slightly awkward addition of the clause 'at ǫðrum kosti' ('as the other alternative') makes it clear that to Drífa, killing Vanlandi is a final resort.¹⁴ When he refuses to return and fulfil his oath, Drífa is left with no other option.

The ensuing story of Vísburrr follows much of the same pattern. This time, Vísburrr's young sons Gísl and Ǫndurr, abandoned by their father, track him down in order to 'heimtu mund móður sinnar, en hann vildi eigi gjalda' ('claim their mother's bride-price, but he would not pay it').¹⁵ The use of the verb 'gjalda' ('pay') frames the bride-price, and indeed the marriage itself, as a kind of

¹¹ Catharina Raudvere, 'Now You See Her, Now You Don't: Some Notes on the Conception of Female Shape-Shifters in Scandinavian Tradition,' in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996) 47.

¹² Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29.

¹³ *Völuspá (Konungsbók)*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) 301, st. 38.

¹⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29.

¹⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

contractual agreement that Vísurr is refusing to fulfil, justifying the consequences that follow. Non-payment of *mundr* is a serious matter, the bride-price being an obligatory payment on the bridegroom’s side in a marriage. In the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, for instance, the giant Þrymr’s bride-price (*brúðfé*, literally ‘bride-fee’) to Freyja is key to Þórr retrieving his hammer and therefore maintaining the social cosmological order.¹⁶

On the other hand, an incident towards the end of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* provides an example of the consequences of breaking such a marriage contract. A dispute between King Sveinn of Denmark and King Búrizláfr of Vinðland is resolved through a double marriage—Sveinn is to marry Búrizláfr’s daughter Gunnhildr, and Búrizláfr is to marry Sveinn’s sister Þyri, with certain territories exchanged as bride-price.¹⁷ However, things go wrong when Þyri refuses to marry the ‘heathen’ Búrizláfr.¹⁸ *Fagrskinna* much more clearly puts bride-price at the root of this conflict:

Sveinn Danakonungr þóttisk missa mikilla eigna, þeira er vera skyldu í tilgjöf Gunnhildar konu hans [...]. En Búrizleifr þóttisk þá mjök svikinn, þó at hann hefði tilgjöf þá er Þyri skyldi hafa, því at konan kom eigi til hans.

(Sveinn, king of the Danes, thought he had lost much property which should have been in his wife Gunnhildr’s bride-price [...]. And Búrizláfr then thought himself greatly cheated, although he had the bride-price which Þyri should have, because the woman did not come to him.)¹⁹

One party thus receives a bride but no bride-price, while the other receives a bride-price but no bride; in neither case is the marriage contract considered fulfilled and action must therefore be taken. Both versions of the text come to the same fatal conclusion. Þyri flees and instead ends up marrying King Óláfr Tryggvason against the will of her brother Sveinn. This further flouting of the marriage contract sparks a series of events that quite swiftly leads to the death of King Óláfr himself. While Þyri seems to have little agency to make her own

¹⁶ *Þrymskviða*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 427, sts. 29.3, 32.3.

¹⁷ Snorri, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 273.

¹⁸ Snorri, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 341.

¹⁹ *Fagrskinna: Noregs konunga tal*, in *Ágrip af noregskonunga sögum, Fagrskinna*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, Íslensk fornrit 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985) 146.

choices within this system, it is these same social and legal codes that allow both Drífa and the mother of Gísl and Qndurr to take action when their own marriage contracts are broken.

A crucial element of Vísburr's story is the introduction of the *gullmen*. This neck-ring is part of the bride-price Vísburr owed his wife and when he refuses to pay it, his sons Gísl and Qndurr 'mæltu [...] at gullmenit skyldi verða at bana inum bezta manni í ætt hans' ('said that the gold neck-ring would kill the best man in his family').²⁰ This turns out to be a potent curse, as the same *gullmen* later reappears in the possession of King Agni and becomes the physical means by which he is hanged by his wife Drífa.²¹ A ring in Old Norse society—and indeed much of the medieval Germanic world—is frequently invoked as a symbol of reciprocity. The kenning 'hringdrifi' ('distributor of rings') is thus often employed to mean a king or a lord, as in the poem *Atlakviða*.²² In such cases, the *bring* becomes a symbol of the lord's patronage in return for the loyalty of his men. Oaths may be sworn on rings too, as Guðrún reminds Atli in *Atlakviða*:

Svá gangi þér, Atli,
sem þú við Gunnar áttir
eiða oft of svarða
ok ár of nefnda,
[...] at hringi Ullar.

(So it will go with you, Atli, according to the oaths you often swore to Gunnar and declared long ago [...] by the ring of Ullr.)²³

Conversely, just as a ring can be a symbol of a promise made, so too can it become a symbol of a promise broken. Thus, the section of the Icelandic law-codes *Grágás* dealing with *wergild* ('man-price') is titled 'Baugatal' (in the

²⁰ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

²¹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

²² *Atlakviða*, in *Eddukvæði II: Heiðskvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) 379, st. 33.11.

²³ *Atlakviða*, 379, st. 31. On the swearing of oaths on rings, see Irene Anne Riisøy, 'Performing Oaths in Eddic Poetry: Viking Age Fact or Medieval Fiction?' *Journal of the North Atlantic* 8 (2016) 141–56.

standardized spelling), ‘enumeration of rings.’²⁴ The *Baugatal* crucially permits a woman to carry out *wergild* functions in certain circumstances (the specific circumstances will be discussed later). This so-called *baugrýgr* (‘ring-lady’) would, according to Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘provide a fruitful basis for fantasy in Old Norse literature as she is a woman, classified as a male and acting as a male in special circumstances.’²⁵ Within this system, the element of the *gullmen* in *Ynglinga saga* can be read as signalling that Vísburr’s wife is to take on this role of ‘ring-lady,’ as is Skjálfr later in the saga. The implication, consequently, is that the actions of these two women might not just be ethically warranted, but legally warranted as well.

The case of Skjálfr is much more directly tied to the demands of *wergild*, for she kills her husband Agni in order to avenge his killing of her father Frosti. The context for her act thus lies in a culture centred around honour, as framed by several scholars. For instance, in a book introducing the Icelandic sagas, Peter Hallberg named honour as ‘ethically the key concept in the world of the Icelandic saga. This was not an abstract idea, but a deep and passionate experience, a condition of life as basic and essential as one’s daily bread.’²⁶ Similarly, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij sees Guðrún’s vengeance in the Poetic Edda as following ‘the ethics of the society where this heroic legend and the lays based on it were popular. Since the greater the sacrifices a vengeance requires the more heroic it is, Guðrún’s vengeance for her brothers no doubt seemed an unexampled heroic deed.’²⁷ Under such ‘ethics,’ therefore, taking someone’s life is an insult to their family’s honour, and recompense must be sought by the family to maintain their honour at any cost.

That said, the question of an Old Norse ethos of vengeance is a complicated one, particularly after the spread of Christianity throughout medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. Whether or not thirteenth-century texts like

²⁴ *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, vol. 1, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974) 193–207.

²⁵ *Grágás*, 201. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society, Volume 1: The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994) 121.

²⁶ Peter Hallborg, *The Icelandic Saga*, transl. Paul Schach (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1962) 99.

²⁷ M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, ‘Valkyries and Heroes,’ *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 97 (1982) 86.

Heimskringla idealise or denounce this ethos has been a question of great debate. David Clark hence argues instead that characters like Guðrún, representative of this ideal in heroic poetry, are ‘simultaneously also vehicles through which the poet can explore the dilemmas of heroic society; [...] it is arguable that the ‘heroic ideal’ is not (and should not be) applicable to the present.’²⁸ Clark posits that this effect is achieved in Eddic poems by observing the heroic ‘from a distanced perspective.’²⁹ While perhaps true of Eddic poetry, such a distancing effect is not so valid in a text like *Heimskringla* that seeks to situate the ancestry and legitimacy of Christian kings within the heroic heathen past. In order to do so, *Heimskringla* works precisely through a synthesis of the heroic past and Christian present.

Regardless, as convincingly as Clark might dismiss the persistence of an ideal of revenge, the notion of atonement for a killing is very much enshrined in law-codes like the *Grágás*. The *Baugatal* section of these ‘Grey Goose Laws’ enumerates the *laugbaugar* (translated by Dennis, Foote, and Perkins as ‘wergild rings fixed by law’³⁰) that must be paid, according to the relation of the kin member who claims retribution.³¹ It is true that such Icelandic law codes establish legal monetary frameworks as in the *Baugatal* precisely to avoid cycles of violence. However, in Snorri’s textual world, a world characterised by violence and vengeance, the taking of a life would be the heroic equivalent to *Grágás*’ material *wergild*.

This article refers chiefly to the Icelandic *Grágás* among the various law-codes of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, for it is a reasonable assumption that Snorri’s own understanding of Icelandic law would have been along similar lines. *Grágás* refers not to a ‘unified corpus of law, shaped and finite’ but to a more haphazard collection of the ‘laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth that we know in sources originating before the 1262–64 contract of submission to the

²⁸ David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 20.

²⁹ Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 18.

³⁰ *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, ed. and transl. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980, repr. 2006) 175.

³¹ *Grágás*, 193.

Norwegian crown.³² The site for the establishment and enforcement of these laws in Iceland would be the *Alþingi*, of which Snorri himself was *lǫgsǫgumaðr* ('lawspeaker'), between 1215 and 1218, and later between 1222 and 1231.³³ With such an extensive legal career, Snorri would have had a good understanding of Iceland's laws, which very likely influenced his writing as well. Thus, although one cannot assume that the substance of these thirteenth-century legal frameworks exist at all within the almost self-contained textual world created in *Heimskringla*, one would still find the ethos, the spirit of the law within its pages. Key to both these legal and heroic frameworks is the necessity of atonement for a killing.

Skjálf's killing of Agni does, however, present two main difficulties under this legal framework. The first is the question of whether Agni's killing of her father Frosti is an act that warrants atonement in the first place—Agni is, after all, a king, and the killing took place within a larger context of warfare. This battle, however, is clearly described in the text as unilaterally provoked by Agni when he 'gekk [á Finnland] upp ok herjaði' ('went up to *Finnland* and went harrying').³⁴ Importantly, *Heimskringla* is a kind of founding story for the Scandinavian kingdoms and presenting the Sámi as subjects within larger unified Scandinavian kingdoms is key to the project. Accordingly, *Ynglinga saga* merely gives Frosti the title of 'hǫfðingi' (non-specific 'chief' or 'leader') of the *Finnar*, even though he is named in other texts like *Orkneyinga saga* in a line of mythical 'konungar' ('kings') of *Finnland* and *Kvenland*.³⁵ Under these circumstances, it is unacceptable for a king to carry out unprovoked 'harrying' on his own subjects. Since the parliamentary Iceland had no king, we might look outside for specifics on prevailing kingly ethics. *Konungs skuggsjá* ('King's mirror'), a Norwegian moral-political educational text from around 1250 (shortly after Snorri's time), lays out the appropriate behaviour for a king:

³² *Laws of Early Iceland*, 9.

³³ Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 12.

³⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37.

³⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37. *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnboði Guðmundsson, Íslensk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965) 3.

Nu skal konongr hogga hværn utan awunnd mæð rettri ræfsing. En hværn er hann dræpr firi awunndar sacar þa er þat manndrap oc a hann at swara manndraps soc firi guði.

(Now a king should always strike out not in hatred but for righteous punishment. But if he slays any one out of hatred, it is murder, and he will have to answer for it as murder before God.)³⁶

Agni's raiding certainly does not qualify as 'righteous punishment.' Under a Christian ethos then, his acts fall under the behaviour of a bad king and are punishable. Meanwhile, under a legal-heroic ethos of vengeance, the respective positions of Agni and Frosti are irrelevant to kinship responsibilities and Frosti's *male* relatives are obliged to claim retribution for his death.

This is where the second significant problem arises, that of agency. As a woman, Skjálfr's options for vengeance are rather more limited. The *Baugatal* section of *Grágás* does allow a woman to accept compensation for the killing of her father, but only under certain conditions:

Su er oc kona ein er bæðe scal bavg beta oc bavg taca ef hon er einberne en su kona heitir bavgrygr. En hon er dottir ens davða enda se eigi scappigiande til höfuð bavg en betendr life þa scal hon taca þrimerking sem sonr. ef hon toc eigi full sætte at vigs bótom til þess er hon er gipt. endá scola frændr a lengr taca.

(There is also one woman who shall both pay the *wergild* ring and take the *wergild* ring, if she is an only child and that woman is called *baugrygr*. And she who is the daughter of the dead man, if no other lawful receiver of the main ring exists, shall take the three-mark ring like a son, if she has not taken full settlement as compensation for the manslaughter, and until she is married, then her kinsman shall take it.)³⁷

Carol J. Clover describes this *baugrygr* as a 'surrogate son,' a situation where 'in the genealogical breach, a woman becomes a functional son, not only in the transaction of *wergild*, but also in the matter of inheritance and also, at least in

³⁶ *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Norrøne tekster 1* (Oslo: Kjedeskrikkfondet, 1983) 124.

³⁷ *Grágás*, 200–01.

principle, in the actual prosecution of feud.³⁸ Assuming the required conditions are met, Skjálfr as *baugrýgr* thus takes on the duties of Frosti’s legal heir, which includes avenging his death.

Having said that, does Skjálfr actually meet the required conditions? According to the above quoted passage, the avenging daughter must be unmarried, and the deceased must have no other direct male relatives, outlined earlier in the text as ‘faðir, oc sonr, oc broðir’ (‘father, and son, and brother’).³⁹ Skjálfr’s marriage is rendered irrelevant by the fact that she is married to her father’s killer. *Atlakviða*’s Guðrún is evidence that blood ties take precedence over ties of marriage—in order to avenge the deaths of her brothers Gunnar and Högni, Guðrún can, and indeed must, kill her husband Atli, a man whom, according to the poem *Atlakviða*, she ‘lint skyldu / optarr um faðmask’ (‘would often softly embrace’).⁴⁰

A key difference is that the deaths of Guðrún’s brothers—and the deaths of her sons by her own hands—leave Guðrún no immediate male relatives to take action on her behalf. In comparison, matters are complicated by the existence of Skjálfr’s brother Logi, captured along with her. There are two possible explanations, however. The first is that it is possible that Logi did not survive to see Skjálfr avenge their father. It is curious that he is only mentioned once at the time of his capture, then disappears from the narrative entirely. This raises the possibility that he too is killed soon after capture, leaving Skjálfr with the responsibility to avenge both father and brother. A second, perhaps more convincing, explanation is that Logi could be one among the unnamed men helping Skjálfr hang Agni from the tree.⁴¹ This interpretation is further suggested by the stanza chosen by Snorri to conclude the chapter, in which Skjálfr is specifically named ‘Loga dís’ (‘Logi’s sister’) when she ‘þás gæding / með gullmeni / [...] / at lopti hóf’ (‘raised aloft the nobleman with gold neck-ring’).⁴²

³⁸ Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,’ in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1993) 68.

³⁹ *Grágás*, 195.

⁴⁰ *Atlakviða*, 381, st. 42.6–7.

⁴¹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

⁴² Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

In fact, in the preceding prose, Skjálfr merely fastens the rope to Agni's neck-ring; it is these other men who actually pull it to carry out the hanging. Skjálfr's hands would thus be technically clean of the actual deed, having incited other men to enact her vengeance.

Either way, Skjálfr hence fulfils her responsibility—as inciter if Logi is alive, or as 'surrogate son' if not. The female inciter is considered a perfectly acceptable role for women, and a very common trope in Old Norse literature. Susan Clark summarised that 'a bloody family feud is not complete without a ruthlessly determined woman urging her kin to retaliation and revenge,' a sentiment tempered by Sarah Anderson, who uses an example from *Njáls saga* to explain that 'as lamenters and as whetters to revenge, women [...] are engaging in one of the few speech acts represented by the literature as open to them, and they are speaking on behalf of the customs of their society—not in monstrous aberration from them.'⁴³ This is a very important point to be noted when considering both women and Sámi individuals like Skjálfr. When the Sámi population are reduced to absolute outsiders, an archetypal Other, it becomes tempting to read an act like that of Skjálfr as a 'monstrous aberration' against Scandinavian custom. In reality, however, as this analysis demonstrates, the women of *Ynglinga saga* very much act within the norms of Scandinavian society.

It is perhaps most telling that all three women go entirely unpunished in the saga. There is no mention in the text of any attempt to hold any of these women accountable for their actions. No-one seeks to avenge the fallen kings. Vanlandi, Vísurr and Agni each have at least one surviving male heir, yet there is no thought of vengeance. It is perhaps understandable that Vísurr, Vanlandi's son, would have no cause to confront his own mother for killing the father who abandoned him. Meanwhile, Vísurr himself died at the hands of his own sons, Gísl and Qndurr. Surely, however, Vísurr's other son Dómaldi would want to

⁴³ Susan Clark, 'Cold are the Counsels of Women: The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas,' in *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages: An Anthology of Feminist Approaches to Middle High German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991) 6. Sarah M. Anderson, 'Introduction: "og eru köld kvenna ráð"', in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002) xii-xiii.

seek retribution from the woman who is said to have ‘lét síða at honum ógæfu’ (‘brought misfortune on him through magic’) and from her sons who killed his father, but he takes no steps to do so.⁴⁴ In fact, Agni’s story ends with a stanza quoting the poet Þjóðólfr’s surprise that ‘Agná her / Skjálfar ráð / at sköpum þóttu’ (‘Agni’s men thought Skjálfr’s plans *sköpum*’).⁴⁵ Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes have translated ‘sköpum’ as ‘acceptable,’ likely based on the root ‘skap’ which might denote something right or lawful.⁴⁶ Alternatively, it is possible to interpret ‘sköpum’ as meaning ‘fated.’ Either meaning suggests that Agni’s men did not attempt to avenge their king because Skjálfr’s actions could not be faulted. The fact that these women are not held accountable is extremely important. Acts of vengeance in any form of Old Norse literature are rarely isolated incidents; on the contrary, they are usually part of what David Clark describes as ‘a cycle of endless future vengeance.’⁴⁷ The acts of these three women are violent, yes, but they do not contribute to the vicious cycle of violence and vengeful killings. Rather, each of these acts actually manages to bring the cycle of violence to an end.

Theodore Andersson has made the argument that (family) sagas, despite all the heroic modes and gestures borrowed from tradition, portray a normal society. They tell the stories of strong individuals who disrupt the social fabric, but despite the respect paid many of these strong personalities, the sagas are ultimately opposed to social disruption.⁴⁸

At first glance, strong women like the three discussed in this article might appear to be the ‘individuals who disrupt the social fabric’ of the world within *Ynglinga saga*. However, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is actually kings like Vanlandi, Vísurr, and Agni who bear responsibility for social disruption. Thus, the saga seeks to restore the social order by having them killed. Whether as

⁴⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

⁴⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

⁴⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Volume I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, ed. and trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011) 22.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 88.

⁴⁸ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,’ *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (1970) 593.

agents of the law, fate, society, or of their own lives, the three women of *Ynglinga saga* are therefore fully justified in killing their husbands.

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