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The Women of *Ljósvetninga saga*

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Abstract

Studies on gender in *Ljósvetninga saga* have been largely focused on the somewhat larger-than-life figure of Guðmundr *inn ríki* Eyjólfsson. Guðmundr is an impressive, often controversial character, eliciting accusations of effeminacy and homosexuality from his contemporaries and much discussion as to the implications of his characterisation on the part of modern scholars. Such focus on Guðmundr has relegated the female characters of the saga to the scholarly margins—in a saga so concerned with feud and legal proceedings, the scarcity of female portraits can be seen to confirm the idea that the saga has little interest in women. The women of *Ljósvetninga saga*, however, deserve consideration, as they cut some of the most striking portraits of all the women of the family sagas, despite their relative lack of personal power, and their portrayal has much to contribute to the debate about women's roles in saga literature. This article examines the roles of women such as Guðmundr *inn ríki*'s wife Þórlaug Atladóttir, Guðmundr's niece Jórunn Einarsdóttir and the prophetess Þórhildr *Vaðlaekkjja*, demonstrating the complex and varied nature of these characters and the limitations of attempting to classify female characters into tropes such as 'the whetter' or 'the guardian of family honour'.

Keywords: sagas, women, literature, law, social status

The women of *Ljósvetninga saga*, unlike those of the better-known family sagas such as *Laxdala saga* and *Njáls saga*, have received very little scholarly attention.² Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller's extensive introduction to the saga mentions women only briefly, as lesser players in a male-dominated political scene.³ More recent scholarship, such as that by Gísli Sigurðsson and Yoav Tirosh, has similarly focused on the male characters of the saga, particularly on

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² I have based my analysis on the C-redaction of the saga, as edited by Andersson and Miller and the *Íslenske Fornrit* series. The earliest fragments of the C-redaction date to the fifteenth century, while a fragmentary A-redaction parchment survives from the fourteenth century; the C-redaction, however, is longer, and can be reconstructed fully from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts; Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 64-74.

³ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 3-118; in particular 19-22, 61 and 99.

the main rival of the *Ljósvetningar*, Guðmundr Eyjólfsson.⁴ Guðmundr is an impressive, controversial character, who appears in many sagas and elicits varying treatment from different saga authors, and his depiction certainly merits discussion, as it contributes to the debate on Old Norse gender and sexuality.⁵ It has, however, left the women of the saga largely forgotten. Women do not play as prominent a role in *Ljósvetninga saga* as they do in *Laxdæla saga* or *Njáls saga*, as the main focus is on the legal proceedings and political manoeuvrings through which the feud between the *Ljósvetningar* and their rivals takes place, and women are excluded from overt legal or political action. The women of *Ljósvetninga saga* are not often visible, but when they are, they do not always fit into the patterns we expect from other family sagas. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's work on women in Old Norse literature has called attention to the variety of roles available to women in the sagas; building on her approach, I will analyse several female characters who do not fit the traditionally acknowledged roles available to women in the sagas.⁶

Despite the saga's heavy legal and political focus, women are not excluded to the same extent as in *Hrafnkels saga*; although they are secondary players in the game, they are all involved at some level, whether on their own account or on account of their connections with those male characters who are active participants in the disputes.⁷ Guðmundr's wife Þórlaug, for example, cuts a striking figure in the scenes in which she features: at the Bægisá wedding, she makes a concerted effort to defend her husband's honour, providing him with an excuse to leave when the situation becomes very tense. Later, she shows considerable courage and determination when she protects the killer of Þorbjörn *rindill* by refusing to leave his house despite her husband's threats to burn her and their son Halldórr inside it. Þorkell *báker*'s wife Þorgerðr also proves to be more perceptive than her husband in her suspicion of Rindill when he comes to

⁴ Gísli Sigurðsson, 'The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki'; Tirosh, 'The Fabulous Saga' and 'Argg Management'.

⁵ Tirosh, 'The Fabulous saga', 3; Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 86-90.

⁶ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 8. For more discussion on female agency see, for example, McGillivray, 'Gender and Subversion'.

⁷ The only women who feature in this saga are servants; Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 149.

their house to spy. There are a few women who are involved in legal disputes directly, and to varying degrees; Ólvir's daughter, who in the saga's first chapter is subject to unwanted visits from Sölmundur, has neither a name nor a voice, and her case is discussed solely through the men who take an active part in it, but not all of *Ljósvetninga saga's* legal cases proceed in this way. Friðgerðr, who becomes pregnant, initially tries to appeal on her own behalf to her employer Þorkell, and only when he refuses to help her does she return home to her father, who takes over her case. There is even a case of a woman—Einarr of Þverá's daughter Jórunn—arbitrating a feud.⁸ The behaviour of Þórhildr *Vaðlaekkeja*, a sorceress whom Guðmundr consults, is also worth discussion; she is one of very few women in the sagas who are depicted wearing trousers, and the saga author has no qualms about describing the pagan ritual she performs to ascertain the future for Guðmundr.

I do not argue that women in *Ljósvetninga saga* are particularly unusual, or that they transgress social norms established by other sagas; given the degree to which these norms are subjective to individual authors and subject to change over time, such an assessment would be close to meaningless. Unlike Andersson and Miller, who believe that 'one of the fortunate side benefits of the sagas... is the abundance of social and cultural information preserved in them,' I do not seek to ground my argument with reference to social or cultural norms in medieval Iceland, or to generalise the evidence of the sagas in order to construct a model for wider Icelandic or even Germanic perceptions of women.⁹ Instead, I treat the sagas as literary works, operating on the assumption that each saga author's construction of women and femininity differs, but that constructions of gender across the sagas, sharing a common culture and time period, are broadly comparable.¹⁰ It is, therefore, productive to compare the depiction of women in *Ljósvetninga saga* with depictions of women in other Icelandic sagas, in

⁸ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 139.

⁹ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 3. Some scholars, such as Jochens, in *Old Norse Images*, 10, argue that a common Germanic culture can be accessed through the sagas.

¹⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', 227.

order to place them in context and to broaden our understanding of how women in the sagas can function as characters within the narrative context.¹¹

The argument is sometimes made that the only option for women in the sagas who wish to influence the course of a feud is to goad their male relatives into action.¹² Jenny Jochens estimates that 48% of the women in *Njáls saga* goad male relatives to action, and Ármann Jakobsson also argues that women in *Njáls saga* are quick to anger and urge their sons and husbands to avenge every insult.¹³ Other family sagas such as *Laxdæla saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar* also feature several prominent female characters, such as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Þórdís Þorbjörnsdóttir, who achieve their ends by goading men into action. A close examination of women in *Ljósvetninga saga*, however, suggests that women's involvement in feuds can vary in both nature and degree, and depends on multiple factors, such as the source of the dispute, the possible courses of action, the woman's relationship to the men who are involved, her social status, and her personality. The women of *Ljósvetninga saga* are very rarely depicted as goading their husbands and relatives. The only exception to this is Guðrún, the daughter of Þorkell hákr, who is killed by Guðmundr's men in retaliation for spreading rumours of Guðmundr's effeminacy.¹⁴ Many years after her father's death, as the dispute over Friðgerðr's case escalates and both sides gather men to fight, her husband Ótryggr protests that he is not ready to join the battle as he is washing his hair; she retorts “*satt var þat, at Þorkell hákr var mér skyldr, en eigi þér, enda skal ek ok fara*” (“it is true that Þorkell hákr was related to me, and not to you, and so I will go”).¹⁵

This method of goading, where a woman threatens to take her husband's place in seeking vengeance, is unusual in the sagas; even women like Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*, who accompanies her sons when they avenge Kjartan on Bolli, worried that they would fail to carry out her instructions if left to their

¹¹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 3.

¹² Andersson and Miller in *Law and Literature*, 32; see also Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 8-15.

¹³ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Masculinity and Politics’, 191.

¹⁴ Þorkell hákr is killed when Guðrún is four years old; *Ljósvetninga saga*, 51.

¹⁵ At this time, her husband Ótryggr is ‘gamall’ (old), and they have an adult son; *Ljósvetninga saga* 77. Translations are mine.

own devices, do not go as far as suggesting that they would replace their male relatives in taking revenge.¹⁶ Guðrún's taunt is also unlike the infrequent cases in which women, such as Auðr in *Laxdæla saga*, actually attempt to take revenge themselves. Auðr has no close male relatives, and none of her more distant relatives are willing to attack her ex-husband Þórðr, while Guðrún has a husband and adult son, both of whom seem reasonably eager to join the fight. The issues at stake are also different: Auðr has recently been insulted and divorced by her husband, while the fight between the Ljósvetningar and the sons of Guðmundr has come about due to the escalation of a relatively inconsequential case. Ótryggr's main motivation to fight is his obligation to support his family, and it seems almost out of place for Guðrún to bring up an incident that happened decades ago, except to remind her husband of the depth and history of the feud between the two factions. Ótryggr is described by the saga narrator as *'inn vaskasti'* (the most valiant of men), and immediately answers Guðrún's taunt with a curt "*mér sómir fjörin, enda skal ek ok fara*" ("it is honourable for me to go and I so will go"), offering no further protest against joining the fight.¹⁷

It seems as though Ótryggr, despite being past fighting-age, barely needs goading at all before agreeing to fight, so the strength of Guðrún's taunt is curious; why would she bring up an old, irrelevant issue to shame a husband who intends to fight anyway? If it is intended to persuade Ótryggr to take revenge, it would be somewhat out of place. If, instead, her main aim is to tease him for not being ready to go yet, it makes rather more sense; he protests that he is washing his hair—a mundane, household activity—so it would make sense for Guðrún to needle him about his lack of heroism, questioning his masculinity by suggesting that she is the man in their marriage and he the woman. Instead of painting a classic whetting scene, therefore, the saga plays with the idea of goading and the gender relations it implies, while exposing the limits of women's power over the actions of men. Guðrún is not depicted as trying to change her husband's intentions, although her words do have some effect: they are a

¹⁶ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 194.

¹⁷ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 77.

challenge, and they increase the urgency of Ótryggr's departure, as Guðrún has called his masculinity into question and further delay would only exacerbate the situation.

There has been much debate over whether the literary trope of the whetting woman had any basis in reality. Jochens argues for this trope as a literary device, given its near absence in the contemporary sagas on one hand and its frequency in several of the family sagas on the other, while Carol Clover maintains that the prominence of whetting in other bloodfeud cultures, such as those of ancient Greece and Albania, suggests a corresponding role for women in early Iceland.¹⁸ Whether or not the whetting woman is a literary motif, however, the absence of this image in *Ljósvetninga saga* suggests that the depiction of women in the family sagas is more varied than a narrow focus on the whetting woman allows.

Several women are directly involved in legal cases in *Ljósvetninga saga*, but their involvement takes different forms each time. The case of Qlvir's daughter shows little concern for her character at all; in the opening scene of the saga, a man called Sölmundr pays some unsolicited visits to Qlvir's daughter against her father's wishes. Unable to do anything about the situation, Qlvir asks Ófeigr Jarngerðarson for help, which enables the saga author to demonstrate Ófeigr's good character in protecting an innocent girl and driving off her would-be kidnappers as they are about to abduct her. As demonstrated by his reliance on Ófeigr's help, it is clear that Qlvir is not an influential figure, and the saga author seems little interested in him or his daughter, choosing to focus instead on the righteousness of Ófeigr, who later in the saga ousts Guðmundr himself from a high seat at a feast after threatening to beat him up.¹⁹ Andersson and Miller argue that the lack of interest in Qlvir is due to the author's preoccupation with the upper stratum of society; Qlvir is reasonably wealthy but unable to command respect, and is thus considered weak, while Ófeigr acts as 'a corrective to Qlvir's

¹⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 194; Clover, 'Hildigunnr's lament', pp. 30-6.

¹⁹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 58-9.

fecklessness'.²⁰ Qlvir's daughter is not named, and does not speak. The focus on Ófeigr and the other men involved in the incident suggests that she, as an individual, is of little interest to the saga author, and is little more than a pawn in a political game in which she holds no sway.

Not all the women in *Ljósvetninga saga* share the fate of Qlvir's daughter, however. Friðgerðr Ísólfsdóttir is also of somewhat low status, and we hear of her father's wealth depleting as she returns home after falling pregnant.²¹ Although she is eventually forgotten amid the larger feud between the Ljósvetningar and the sons of Guðmundr, she initially tries to settle her own case, taking up the matter with her landlord, Þorkell Hallgilsson. Friðgerðr is described in positive terms by the narrator; she '*þótti vera kona sæmilig ok allmikill gleðimaðr ok samði sík mjök í háttum með ungum mQnnum ok var verkmaðr mikill ok umsýslumaðr*' (was thought to be an honourable and very cheerful woman and she fitted in well among the young people; she was active and a very hard worker).²² Despite her promiscuity, she is described as an honourable woman; although her father does make an effort to move her to a farm where she would not be subject to advances from young men, when she comes home pregnant he simply notes that "*Eigi hefir vel orðit, enda var eigi góðu ráði til at bregða*" ("It has not turned out well, and yet there was no good way to solve this").²³ The absence of judgement for Friðgerðr's actions suggests that the author takes a reasonably lax attitude to extra-marital sex, and there is little association between chastity and moral character within the saga, at least in relation to unmarried women. Friðgerðr seeks support once it becomes difficult for her to work, but one gets the sense that it is financial support she needs to help her bring up her child rather than compensation for a damaged reputation. The description of her implies that honour, in her case, has less to do with sex than with her character and her actions: she is valued for her hard work and high spirits, though she ends up

²⁰ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 99.

²¹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 64-7.

²² *Ljósvetninga saga*, 65.

²³ When her father Ísólfr asks Þorkell to pay compensation, he retorts "*Er dóttir þín kona eigi fálýnd ok eigi einn líkligri en annarr til þokka með henni*" ("Your daughter is not faithful and no-one is more likely than another to have been with her"); *Ljósvetninga saga*, 66.

paying for following her high spirits too far. Obedience is another character trait which is conspicuously absent in Friðgerðr; she has a mind of her own, disregarding the advice of Þorvarðr at Fornastaðir to return home because of bad weather after her father sends her away to remove her from the attentions of a young man from Grímsey. Her father intends for her to go to Eyjólfur Guðmundarson, but she is determined instead to go to Draflastaðir. Higher-status women in her position might be expected to be subject to their fathers' authority, but Friðgerðr shows a remarkable degree of autonomy and receives little censure for her actions—the saga rather implies that her fault lies in enjoying herself a little too much.

It is possible to interpret Friðgerðr's story as a moral tale, demonstrating the consequences of female independence, but if this is the case then it would make little sense for the narrator to hold her in such high esteem. The argument might be made that Friðgerðr is treated like a man by the saga author, as she attempts to settle her case by herself, confronting her host Þorkell when she falls pregnant in an attempt to gain compensation. There is, however, no indication within the text that she is masculine in any way, nor any indication that Friðgerðr is unusual in her behaviour. Miller and Andersson analyse her case thus:

The woman is displaced by her father. This is hardly surprising. Women are disabled from prosecuting their own suits, and Þorkel's refusal to negotiate with Friðgerðr informally means that she, as a woman, has no other alternative for direct public involvement in the dispute.²⁴

Yet Ísólfr is just as unsuccessful at prosecuting Friðgerðr's case as she is, and her case is treated just like many others which involve lower-status farmers: it is passed up the social ladder in an attempt to get someone more powerful to settle her case (she goes first to her father, who passes the case to Eyjólfur Guðmundarson). In the first place, it is her status, rather than her gender, which prevents Friðgerðr from acting on her own behalf. Friðgerðr's case suggests that even relatively low-status women in the Icelandic sagas could have a great deal of control over the course of their own lives, and the fact that the author of a saga very much focused on legal and political manoeuvrings devotes several

²⁴ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 32.

chapters to her case suggests a significant degree of interest in this strong female character, as well as interest in the affairs of people who do not belong to the upper stratum of society—an attitude which is relatively unusual in the family sagas.

Friðgerðr is not the only woman in *Ljósvetninga saga* who is actively involved in a legal case: Jórunn, the daughter of Einarr of Þverá and therefore Guðmundr Eyjólfsson's niece, is described thus by the narrator after she is married to Þorkell Geitisson:

Jórunn var inn mesti kvenskörungr, sem átt hennar var til. Hon kom ok því til leiðar, sem engi hafði áðr komit, at þeir sættusk frændrnir, Þorkell Geitisson ok Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, ok heldu þá sætt vel ok drengliga síðan.

(Jórunn was an exceptional woman, as was appropriate to her lineage. She also found a way to reconcile the kinsmen Þorkell Geitisson and Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, which no-one had been able to do before, and afterwards they observed the terms faithfully and honourably).²⁵

The passage is designed in part to humiliate Guðmundr, who has been forced to settle with Þorkell Geitisson after the betrothal; a little earlier Bjarni Brodd-Helgason had said to him that:

“Svá sýnisk mér, Guðmundr, sem þú hafir þurft báðar hendr við Þorkell frænda minn, ok hafir þó ekki af veitt um. Ok man ek enn þat, Guðmundr, er ek bað þik, at þú skyldir sætta okker Þorkel, ok svaraði engi ódrengiligar en þú ok sagðir hann eigi vera mundu meira en annarrar bandar mann gilds manns ok kvazt hann hafa hálfhynnu eina í hendi, en mik hoggspjót gilt á hávu skapti. En ek em nú minni höfðingi en þú, ok sýnisk mér sem hann muni eigi þar lengi gengit hafa skaptamuninn.”

(“It seems to me, Guðmundr, that you have needed to use both hands against my kinsman Þorkell, and yet you were not successful. And I still remember that, Guðmundr, when I asked you to reconcile me with Þorkell, and nobody gave a more unmanly answer than you; you said he was not worth more than half a man and you said he had a small axe in his hand while I had a proper halberd on a long shaft. But I am a lesser chieftain than you, and it seems to me that he did not take long making up the difference”).²⁶

The incident could be passed over as yet another dig at Guðmundr's masculinity, since a woman is able to settle a case he refuses because it is too difficult. The saga, however, states that nobody has been able to reconcile Þorkell and Bjarni, not just that Guðmundr was unable to reconcile them, implying that the case

²⁵ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 139.

²⁶ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 138.

was genuinely difficult and suggesting that others had tried to take it up and failed. Jórunn's achievement is greater than mere humiliation of Guðmundr; she is instrumental in settling a case that no man has been able or willing to resolve. It is true that she acts on the legal margins—she only seems to get the opportunity to be involved in the case after several men have failed and is not otherwise said to be legally active. Her situation, like Friðgerðr's, elicits no comment from the narrator and there is nothing to indicate that it transgresses cultural norms.

There are other women in the family sagas who play a key part in settling feuds, such as Jórunn's namesake, the wife of Hǫskuldr in *Laxdæla saga* who persuades him to refrain from attacking his brother Hrútr and seek arbitration instead. The treatment of Jórunn Einarasdóttir suggests that women's involvement in legal cases, while perhaps unusual, does not constitute a transgression of gender norms—it is mentioned in conjunction with her wedding, an event which serves to reinforce gender roles and in which she had very little say, as it was arranged by her father and Ófeigr Jarngerðarson in order to prevent hostilities from breaking out between Þorkell Geitisson and Guðmundr.²⁷ The fact that Jórunn has no say in the arrangement of marriage but soon after is involved in the arbitration of a difficult legal case is ironic, but can be explained by the fact that Jórunn's marriage was arranged during a district *þing*, a space from which women are generally excluded, while the legal settlement she arbitrates was most likely concluded elsewhere. This suggests that while the assembly or law court was a strongly gendered space, the law itself was not necessarily so, and that there was perhaps more flexibility in attitudes towards women's involvement in legal disputes than recent scholarship has allowed.

The sorceress Þórhildr presents a clearer case of transgression of gender norms; she is '*gyrð í brækr ok hafði hjálm á höfði ok ax í hendi*' (dressed in breeches and had a helmet on her head and an axe in her hand), when Guðmundr comes

²⁷ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 137-9.

to visit her.²⁸ She elicits no comment from the narrator—positive or negative—and differs from sorceresses such as Þuríðr in *Grettis saga* in that she does not use her powers to harm people but only to see the future (Guðmundr wants to know whether he or his sons will suffer vengeance for the killing of Þorkell háker). Þórhildr is an unusual character: the narrator refrains from passing any comment upon either her character or actions, and she is simply described as ‘*forn í lund*’ (heathen in mind).²⁹ The pagan ritual she carries out to determine the future is described in detail—she wades out into a lake and strikes her axe into it, and when the water turns bloody it means that vengeance for Þorkell háker will affect Guðmundr’s sons. Her actions have no impact on the course of events; after she finishes, ‘*fór Guðmundr heim ok sat í virðingu sinni*’ (Guðmundr returned home and continued to be held in high esteem), and the next we hear of Guðmundr are the events leading up to his death.³⁰ She is not simply intended as a device to reflect badly upon Guðmundr—if this were the case, one might expect that Þórhildr would be more harshly judged; Þorbjörg *rindill*, by contrast, is hardly spared from disdain. The saga author seems to be interested in her as a character in her own right, and accords her some respect. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir argues that magic in the sagas is not an unambiguously good or evil force and can be deployed for harmful or beneficial purposes; Þórhildr seems to be an example of neutral use, without discernible consequences.³¹ This attitude to Þórhildr’s use of magic is only one among many found in the sagas; Þuríðr in *Grettis saga*, for example, is responsible for orchestrating the death of Grettir, while Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga rauða* brings an encouraging prophecy to the hungry Greenlanders.

Þórhildr’s wearing of trousers might be compared to *Laxdæla saga*’s Auðr, who takes vengeance on her husband Þórðr for divorcing her. He bases his divorce suit on the claim that Auðr dressed in trousers like a man, but like Þórhildr, she also receives no direct censure. She deals Þórðr a serious wound

²⁸ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 59.

²⁹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 59; an alternative translation might be ‘having an ancient sensibility’.

³⁰ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 60.

³¹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 48.

which makes it difficult for him to work, which I would argue counts as success on her part. Having failed to persuade her male relatives to take revenge on Þórðr for her, Auðr temporarily takes on a male role in seeking revenge for herself, and her trousers might be seen as an element of this role. In 'Before the Male Gaze', Jochens argues that women's trousers existed in saga society, but were cut differently from men's trousers, which had a triangular insert sewn in; it is not clear whether Auðr's trousers are of a male or female cut, but the author's remark that '*var hon þá at vísu í brókum*' (she was certainly wearing breeches then) reminds us of the accusation of masculinity which Þórðr used as an excuse to divorce her, and suggests that her current actions justify the accusation to some extent.³² Wearing armour, however, is an even stronger indication of masculinity, and is exceedingly rare for women in the family sagas, since it implies a need for physical protection and the expectation of attack, something from which the women of the family sagas are generally immune. For both women, therefore, their clothing reflects the special roles they play; Auðr's breeches symbolise her taking on a masculine role, and in Þórhildr's case the armour appears to be of ritual significance, highlighting the preternatural nature of her actions. Perhaps it is because she is a sorceress that she invites no comment from the narrator; her access to magic excludes her from traditional expectations of gender expression, unlike Auðr, for whom the saga has considerable sympathy while offering mild disapproval.

The saga author demonstrates the perils of disregarding women's advice in Þorkell *bákr's* death scene: Þorkell's wife Þorgerðr is suspicious of Þorbjörn Rindill when he comes to their house to spy on them and re-latches a door Rindill has left open for Guðmundr's men to enter, but Þorkell refuses to listen to her and pays with his life. Her portrayal is not entirely positive: although she is more perceptive and intelligent than her husband, she comes across as somewhat heartless compared to him, as he takes the shivering man in from the bad weather and offers him hospitality. When he refuses to force Rindill to leave

³² Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 12; Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson eds., *Laxdaela Saga*, 97 and 127.

the house, ‘*var hon allæf í orðum við hann. En Rindill svaraði henni illa*’ (she threw angry words at him, but Rindill answered her spitefully).³³ Although she makes a scene, she is ultimately powerless to stop Guðmundr’s attack, very much like the wives of Gunnarr and Högni in *Atlamál in Grænlezku*, whose husbands refuse to take their advice and fall prey to Atli. Þorgerðr’s function within the narrative thus differs again from the women discussed previously; Friðgerðr and Qlvir’s daughter are at the centre of the action, while Jórunn is an active participant in it and Þórhildr is removed from it, serving only to prophesy future events. Þorgerðr, however, is a witness to the progress of a feud in which she has no direct part and which she is powerless to stop. Her characterisation is also different from that of the other women; her personality comes through in her dialogue with Þorkell, and in her actions of arguing with Rindill and checking to see if the door was latched. Friðgerðr is also a character whom we get to know primarily through her actions, though she comes across as rather less argumentative. Þórhildr has both dialogue and narrative description, but the saga author provides us with very little information that might enable us to form an opinion of her. Jórunn is characterised only by her actions, and never speaks, while Qlvir’s daughter neither speaks nor acts. The female characters of *Ljósvetninga saga*, though few and somewhat far between, strike one as rich and varied figures, worthy of discussion in their own right, not only as characters of little significance who are occasionally involved in the men’s legal and political games.

The most prominent woman of *Ljósvetninga saga*, however, is not introduced until well into the saga: Guðmundr’s wife Þórlaug only appears on a few occasions, but when she does she comes across as an exceptionally strong, determined woman, loyal to her husband until his death despite a troubled relationship. We first see Þórlaug in action at the wedding of one of Guðmundr’s *þingmenn* at Bægisá, when she has a terse exchange with Geirlaug, the wife of

³³ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 50-1.

Þórir Helgason, who along with Þorkell *háker* had been spreading rumours of Guðmundr's effeminacy.³⁴ Geirlaug says,

“Hefir þú metnað til at vera mest metin; hefi ek engan blut til jafns við þik nema gjaforð”
Þórlaug svarar: “Víst hygg ek þik vel gefna. En nú er þar komit, at ek veit eigi aðra framar
gípta en mik.” Geirlaug svarar: “Þá værir þú vel gefin, ef þar væri einmælt um, at bóndi þinn
væri vel hugaðr eða snjallr.”

(“It is right for you to be the most honoured; I am in no way equal to you except in marriage.” Þórlaug answered: “Indeed I think you are well married. But now it comes to it, I do not know of any marriage better than mine.” Geirlaug answered: “You might be well married, if everyone thought that your husband was bold and courageous.”)³⁵

Tirosh argues that this scene is intended to contrast the ‘worthy’ marriage of Þorsteinn and Guðrún (at whose wedding the exchange takes place) with the problematic relationship between Guðmundr and Þórlaug, and that ‘by finishing the conversation... Þórlaug is in a way acceding to Geirlaug’s superior honour.’³⁶ Andersson and Miller interpret this as a cloaked but very deliberate insult by Geirlaug, which forms the catalyst for the ensuing feud that leads to Þorkell *háker*’s death.³⁷ I interpret her response differently: Þórlaug may concede defeat in the short term, but she is not bested. She first ascertains from Geirlaug who was responsible for spreading the rumours, before abruptly cutting off the conversation in order to prevent the situation from escalating. As a guest at a wedding in enemy territory, this seems a prudent course of action, as does her subsequent feigning of illness and insistence that Guðmundr accompany her home. Tirosh argues that Guðmundr’s reluctance to attend the wedding in the first place suggests that he already knows or suspects that rumours are being spread about him, and soon after setting out home from Bægisá Guðmundr makes it clear that he knows Þórlaug is not ill.³⁸ He grumbles that leaving the feast may confirm rumours of his unmanliness, but quickly turns his attention to how he can benefit from the situation, which suggests that he is not particularly upset about Þórlaug’s actions. In my view, therefore, Þórlaug’s

³⁴ Which, according to Meulengracht Sørensen, also implies his cowardice, making this a very serious insult; *The Unmanly Man*, 11.

³⁵ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 18.

³⁶ Tirosh, ‘*The Fabulous Saga’, 17.

³⁷ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 61.

³⁸ Tirosh, ‘Argg Management’, 249.

political skill shows through in this incident, as she successfully contrives an excuse to extract Guðmundr from a potentially dangerous situation into which he has gotten himself through poor judgement, as well as finding out the names of the main offenders to provide Guðmundr with targets for future revenge.³⁹

Another situation in which Þórlaug demonstrates her strength of character is when Guðmundr threatens to set fire to Gnupufell, the farm at which Rindill's killer Eilífr is hiding. Tirosh argues that this is a very poor political move on Guðmundr's part, as Rindill is not much liked and has little social standing, while Bruni, the farmer at Gnupufell, is hosting several people in his house (including Þórlaug and Halldórr, her son with Guðmundr). The number of dead if the house were burned would far exceed the appropriate degree of revenge Rindill's death is worth, and Guðmundr's determination to carry it out, according to Tirosh, demonstrates Guðmundr's lack of moderation and poor relationship with his family.⁴⁰ Þórlaug, however, steps in again to defuse the situation, refusing to leave the house, and Halldórr follows suit, warning Guðmundr that “*eigi þarftu þess mik at eggja, því at þér skal engi verri en ek, ef móðir mín brennr hér inni.*” (“you do not need to incite me, because there will be no greater danger to you than me, if my mother is burnt inside here”).⁴¹ Þórlaug risks her own life in order to prevent Guðmundr from committing what the public opinion of the saga terms a *‘mikla óbæf’* (terrible crime), causing Guðmundr short-term embarrassment but averting long-term damage to his reputation in the district.⁴² She demonstrates her loyalty by standing up to her husband and forcing him to take the better political choice in the face of his enraged determination to seek revenge for Rindill. Þórlaug is able to influence the course of events in both cases, through both words and actions, without ever playing the role of whetter.

The female characters of *Ljósvetninga saga* are, therefore, a diverse cast; their roles are not particularly prominent in the main narrative, but neither are they mere caricatures or stereotypes. They are each unique; they shape the course of

³⁹ In ‘*The Fabulous Saga’, 20, Tirosh argues that Þorsteinn persuades a reluctant Guðmundr to attend the wedding through flattery.

⁴⁰ Tirosh, ‘Argg Management’, 254; Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘*The Immanent Saga’, 216.

⁴¹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, 57.

⁴² *Ljósvetninga saga*, 57.

the narrative in different ways, and ought not to be ignored simply because of the saga's concern with law and politics. Judith Jesch has observed that 'many of the female characters in the sagas are thoroughly unpleasant', but such an estimation does not apply to *Ljósvetninga saga*: even Þórhildr, who practises pagan magic, receives no negative judgement from the narrator or saga characters.⁴³ The marginal position of women in the saga does not prevent them from being accorded respect by the author, and their achievements are not insignificant. This is demonstrated by the brief description of Jórunn Einarsdóttir, indicating that she achieves a reconciliation that none of the saga's accomplished male lawyers were able to arrange, and by the account of Þórlaug's actions, which repeatedly protect her husband's political standing. The female characters of *Ljósvetninga saga* are in many ways similar to their counterparts in other family sagas, and yet there are notable differences, such as the absence of whetting, and this diversity of female characterisation ought to be acknowledged in wider discussions concerning the role of women in the sagas, which too often attempt to find patterns which are ultimately reductive or archetypes among female figures which oversimplify the complexity of social representations in the family sagas.

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⁴³ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 182.

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