

Herdís & Ólína: The Poetry of Everyday Life

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Abstract: The twin sisters Herdís Andrésdóttir and Ólína Andrésdóttir were born on the island Flatey in Breiðafjörður, western Iceland, in 1858. Following the death of their father at sea three years later, the family was dispersed and the sisters did not see each other until half a century later, when they were reunited in Reykjavík. In the intervening years both sisters had become well known as capable verse-makers in the traditional style, but it had never, it seems, occurred to them to write any of their poems down, let alone publish them. They were encouraged by friends to do so, and in 1924 they brought out a collection of their verse, entitled simply *Ljóðmali* (Poems). Their poetry was highly traditional both in its form, which principally made use of *rímur* and ballad metres, and in terms of its subject matter, dealing with nature, reflections on life's joys and sorrows and so on. Ólína, like her cousin Theodóra Thoroddsen, also contributed to the revival of the *pula*, a form of poetry traditionally associated with children. The book sold well, and a second edition, with some additional poems, came out in 1930. A third edition was brought out in 1976, long after their deaths, containing much new material; this edition has since been reprinted twice. Critical reception was overwhelmingly favourable, both in the learned and more popular press. Though somewhat at odds with the literary establishment of the day, they nevertheless had several powerful supporters among the literary and intellectual élite, foremost among them professor Sigurður Nordal. Despite having been “world-famous in Iceland” in their old age, Herdís and Ólína are little known today, and their work – much of it very fine indeed – has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves.

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1. Introduction

Herdís Andrésdóttir and her twin sister Ólína were born on 13 June 1858 on the island Flatey in Breiðafjörður, western Iceland, daughters of Andrés Andrésón, a crofter and fisherman, and his wife, Sesselja Jónsdóttir. In December 1861, when Herdís and Ólína were just three, their father perished at sea along with eleven other men, all but one local, when the shark fishing boat Snarfari went down with all on board. There were six children, all daughters, and a seventh on the way.¹ With no means of support, their mother had no choice but to go into service, and the following year she became housekeeper for Sveinbjörn Magnússon (1821–1899), her brother-in-law, who had himself recently become a widower and lived on the nearby islands Skáleyjar. The family was dispersed, with four of the daughters going with their mother to Skáleyjar, while the other three, Herdís, Ólína and María Magdalena, born in 1859,² were sent off to be fostered in various places. Sesselja and Sveinbjörn later married.

Herdís was taken into the household of Brynjólfur Benedictsen (1830–1870), merchant in Flatey, and his wife Herdís, after whom she had been named. She remained there until she was thirteen. Although not treated badly by her foster-parents, she was made to work hard from an early age and lacked all tenderness, being brought up, in her own words, “við strangan aga eins og siður var” (with strict discipline, as was the custom) (Herdís Andrésdóttir, 1963, 7). She spent a year at Staður in Reykjanes with the Rev. Ólafur Johnsen (1809–1885), who prepared her for Confirmation. After that she worked in various places around Breiðafjörður. In 1880 she married Jón Einar Jónsson (1844–1889), from Steinnes í Húnaþingi. They had seven children, four of whom died in infancy; her husband died in December 1889, when she was just thirty-one (and pregnant with their youngest child). After her husband’s death she was taken in by her sister-in-law, moving with her to Reykjavík in

1 There is some discrepancy in the sources regarding the number of children in the family. Herdís herself says in her poem, “Brot úr kvæði”, cited below, that they were six when their father died; the seventh, named Andrésa, was born the following April. A poem by Sesselja in which she names her children, who number seven, is cited in Valdimar Már Pétursson, 2002, 16. Nine children are listed by Þorsteinn Jónsson (1996, 10–11), two of whom died in infancy, which may account for the discrepancy.

2 María Magdalena died in 1965, 106 years old, the oldest person in Iceland at the time (see Valdimar Már Pétursson, 2002, 18).



The sisters Herdís (L) and Ólína (R) Andrésdætur. Photo: courtesy of the National Museum of Iceland (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands), Mms-30060

1902. For the last years of her life, Herdís lived with her daughter, Elín Elísabet Thorarensen.

Ólína was initially taken in by the Rev. Eiríkur Kúld (1822–1893) and his wife at Helgafell on Snæfellsnes, but reunited with her mother eight years later. She remained with her mother in Skáleyjar, working at various jobs, until taking up a position as a domestic servant in the household of Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson (1820–1897) at Hvítidalur in Dalasýsla, western Iceland, thirty-eight years her senior, married and the father of nine. She had two children by him, one of whom, a girl named Sesselja, died in infancy. The other, named Ástríður, was born in 1880, when Guðbrandur was sixty and Ólína twenty-two.

Ólína and Ástríður remained at Hvítidalur for twenty years, in an arrangement which must have been difficult, though not all that unusual at the time. Guðbrandur openly acknowledged Ástríður as his daughter – in the census for 1890, for example, she is listed as being nine years old, “hórgetin dóttir bónda” (illegitimate daughter of the farmer) – and appears to have had a close relationship with her.

Guðbrandur was a prolific scribe and collector of learned lore (*þjóðlegur fróðleikur*), and there are over twenty manuscripts preserved in his hand. Three of these bear inscriptions to Ástríður. In one, written in 1888–1889 and presented to Ástríður in 1890, Guðbrandur has written: “Fargaðu ekki bókinni dóttir mín. Þegar þú ert orðin stór geturðu lesið hana” (Don’t part with this book, my daughter; when you grow up you will be able to read it).³

Following Guðbrandur’s death in 1897, Ólína and Ástríður left Hvítidalur (presumably at the request of his widow), returning initially to Flatey. They spent two years there and then moved to Vatneyri, Patreksfjörður, in the Westfjords, where Ástríður worked as a seamstress and Ólína at various menial jobs (domestic servant, in the fishing etc.), but also offered instruction to children. In 1916 the two moved to Reykjavík.

Although they had occasionally corresponded over the years, Herdís and Ólína had not seen each other after their initial separation, until reunited many years later in Reykjavík. This reunion was brought about by their sister María Magdalena, who recognised Herdís, whom she had not seen for fifty years, on a ship travelling to Reykjavík.⁴

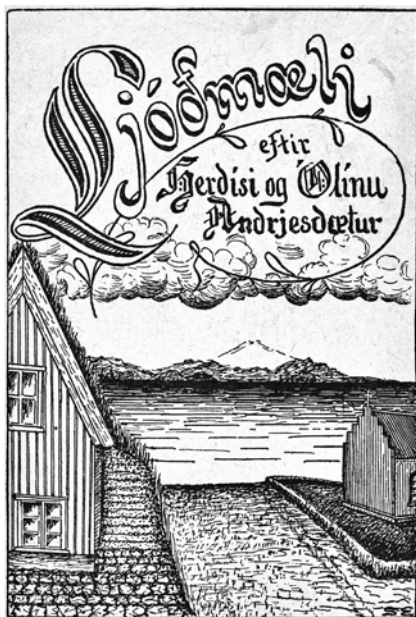
Herdís and Ólína⁵ had by this time become well known, locally at least, as capable story-tellers and verse-makers in the traditional style. Not surprisingly, in view of the nature of the lives they led, it had scarcely occurred to them to write any of their poems down, let alone have them published.⁶ After they had both settled in Reykjavík, the sisters were encouraged by friends to do so, and in 1924 they brought out, at their own

3 On Guðbrandur and his manuscripts see Driscoll, 2017, 232–235.

4 María tells this story in an interview with Matthías Jóhannessen on the occasion of her 100th birthday. The interview was published in *Morgunblaðið* on 22 July 1959, and appears also in the collection of interviews by Matthías, *M. - Samtöl* (Matthías Jóhannessen, 1977). A long interview with María was also published on the same day in *Þjóðviljinn*, where she tells the story in even greater detail (*Þjóðviljinn*, 22.07.1959, 4–7).

5 The order in which the sisters are named varies. On the title pages of the various editions of their poems, for example, Ólína appears first, whereas it is the other way round on the covers. When mentioned in ordinary prose, the names generally appear in this order, Herdís first, then Ólína.

6 In her review of their book, Theodóra Thoroddsen (1925) mentions that Ólína had in fact previously published several of her poems in various newspapers and journals, though always under assumed names; she repeats this in her obituary of Ólína (1835). Herdís appears never even to have written anything down.



The cover of the first edition of Herdís and Ólína's *Ljóðmæli* (Reykjavík, 1924). Photo by Suzanne Reitz

expense, a collection of their poems, entitled simply *Ljóðmæli* (Poems). The poems were written down from memory, theirs and other people's, over the course of just two weeks and represented only a small fraction of what they had actually composed.

The book sold well, and a second edition, with some additional poems, came out in 1930. A third edition, prepared by Herdís's grandson, the Rev. Jón Thorarensen (1902–1986), was brought out in 1976, long after their deaths. It contained much new material, principally by Herdís; this edition has since been reprinted twice, in 1980 and 1982.⁷

Critical reception was universally favourable, both in the learned and more popular press, with highly positive reviews appearing for example in the journals *Skírnir* (Árni Pálsson, 1924) and *Eimreiðin* (Sveinn Sigurðsson, 1925) and in the newspaper *Lögrjetta* (Guðmundur Finnbogason, 1924). Although the sisters were in many ways at odds with the literary establishment of the day, they had several powerful

⁷ The third edition is a photostatic reprint of the second, with additional material added on pp. 185–199 and 265–308.

supporters among the literary and intellectual élite, foremost among them Prof. Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974), who published a glowing review of their book, in which he said, among other things: “Þessa bók leggur enginn frá sér án þess að hafa lært eitthvað í henni” (No-one can put this book down without having learnt something from it).⁸ Nordal also wrote a warm obituary of Herdís when she died in 1939.⁹

Another major literary figure of the time, himself something of an outsider, Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888–1974), also spoke very highly of them. In a short humorous piece called “Styrjöldin við Herdís og Ólínu” (The war with Herdís and Ólína), published in his book *Edda* (Þórbergur Þórðarson, 1975, 203–210), he describes an evening spent in their company, the “war” in question being conducted in verse – he won, in his own telling, although admitting that the sisters were far more skilful poets than he was. In the piece he says, among other things: “Ég held, að mesta skemmtun mín á þessum árum hafi verið að ræða við þær systur, sérstaklega að heyra þær segja frá. Þær höfðu frásagnagáfu á háu stigi og voru geysilega fróðar” (I think that my greatest pleasure in those years was talking to the sisters, especially hearing them tell stories. They had a tremendous gift for storytelling and were enormously knowledgeable).

When Sigurður Nordal and Þórbergur Þórðarson later collaborated on a collection of tales and anecdotes, *Gráskinna* (Grey-skin), much of the material was collected from the telling of Herdís and, in particular, Ólína.¹⁰ Þórbergur can also be said to have “immortalised” Herdís in a poem he composed for her daughter Elin’s sixtieth birthday, one of the stanzas of which begins with the line “Þar var Herdís, þar var smúkt” (Herdís was there; it was lovely). The poem, or several verses from it, is frequently sung to this day in Iceland, to a melody by the composer Atli Heimir Sveinsson.¹¹

- 8 Sigurður Nordal, 1925, 74. Nordal’s review of *Ljóðmæli* appeared in two parts in the newspaper *Vísir* (21–22.10. 1924); it was later reprinted in the journal *Iðunn* (1925).
- 9 Nordal’s obituary appeared in *Morgunblaðið* on 3 May 1939; it was reprinted in Nordal’s *Áfangar* II (1944) and again in *Mannlýsingar* II (1986).
- 10 The collection was originally published in four volumes in the years 1928, 1929, 1931 and 1936; in 1962 it was re-issued as a two-volume set, called *Gráskinna hin meiri* (Sigurður Nordal & Þórbergur Þórðarson, 1962).
- 11 The poem was printed in Þórbergur’s *Edda* (Þórbergur Þórðarson, 1975, 211–213). In performance there has been a tendency in recent years to replace the name “Herdís” with the word “herlegt” (splendid), which, like “smúkt”, is a loanword from Danish; see Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, 2011.

In 1951 a book was published under the title *Lundurinn græni* (The Green Grove) containing a series of humorous poems by the sisters concerning a visit to their cousin Ásthildur Thorsteinsson (1857–1938). Along with the poems were illustrations by Halldór Pétursson (1916–1977). The book was edited by their friend, the Rev. Jón Auðuns (1905–1981), who also wrote an introduction to it, and had previously written a fine obituary of Ólína (Jón Auðuns, 1935). The poems from *Lundurinn græni* were incorporated into subsequent editions of *Ljóðmæli*, starting with the third in 1976.

Ljóðmæli, in all editions, is divided into two parts: poems by Ólína, which make up about two thirds of the book, and then poems by Herdís; in between there is short selection of poems written by them jointly.

2. Style and form

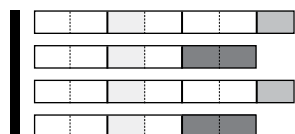
In terms of form, the sisters favoured the traditional Icelandic metres, in particular *ferskeytla*, or “square rhyme”. *Ferskeytla* was the preferred metre for the long narrative poems known as *rímur* (rhymes), a uniquely Icelandic genre which first made its appearance in the fourteenth century and remained popular until the late-nineteenth century.¹² It was also used for shorter poems and *stökur* (sing. *staka*), individual stanzas generally composed on the spot to refer to specific events (a practice which survives to the present day). Although the *rímur* were, for the most part, the domain of male poets, *stökur* could be composed by anyone; in fact, it has been suggested (Guðrún Helgadóttir, 1961–1963, I, 16) that this form of expression, the *staka*, particularly suited women, who would have had little time to devote to the composition of longer poems.

Ferskeytla, in its most basic form, consists of four-lined stanzas rhyming *a b a b*, with the a-rhymes masculine and the b-rhymes feminine. Closely related to this are *langhenda* (lit. “long-verse”) where the a-rhymes are feminine and the b-rhymes masculine, and *samhenda* (lit. “same-verse”) rhyming *a a a a*, and *stafhenda* (lit. “stave-verse”) *a a b b* (all rhymes masculine). In addition to rhyme there was alliteration, the first line of the couplet containing two alliterating words, on the first and third, second and third or third and fourth stressed syllables, and the second line one, always on the first stressed syllable. All vowels alliterated with each other, but it was considered bad form to use the same one. Only the first consonant in a cluster mattered, so that words beginning

12 On *rímur* see e.g. Shaun Hughes, 2005, and references there.

with, for example, *k*, *kr*, *kn* and *kv* could all alliterate with each other; the only exception to this were clusters beginning with *s*, meaning that *sk*, *sl*, *sm*, *sn*, *sp* and *st* could only alliterate with themselves. *Ofsluðlun* (over-alliteration), i.e. having more alliterating words than required by the metre, was also considered bad form. Despite the complexities, many Icelanders, at least of the older generation, are still able to “kasta fram stöku” (dash off a quatrain) if the mood takes them.

Ólína even composed a poem, “Til ferskeytlunnar” (To *ferskeytla*), in praise of the metre. The poem appeared in the journal *Eimreiðin* in 1924 and in *Ljóðmæli* the same year. It comprises fifteen stanzas in a form of *ferskeytla* called *hringhenda* (ring-rhyme), which also uses internal rhyme, vertically, on the second stressed syllable in each line. The following diagram, taken from the website *Bragi* (<http://bragi.arnastofnun.is/>), illustrates the structure of *hringhenda*; light grey indicates the masculine a-rhymes, dark grey the feminine b-rhymes and very light grey the internal rhyme.



“Til ferskeytlunnar” was one of Ólína’s more popular poems, and there are nearly two dozen recordings on the *ÍsMús* website (<https://www.ismus.is/>) of people reciting it, the earliest from 1920 – before it appeared in print.

Enn á Ísa- góðri grund
græðist vísun kraftur,
ertu að rísa af rökkurblund
rímna dísin aftur?

(Again in Iceland the good
verses gain strength.
Are you rising from your twilight slumber,
O goddess of rhymes?

Vertu á sveimi vina til,
vek þá hreimi snjalla,
láttu streyma ljós og yl
ljóðs yfir heima alla.

Hover over your friends,
awaken them with your bright voice,
let poetry’s light and warmth
stream throughout the world.)¹³

¹³ All translations are by the author. Only the sense is given; no attempt has been made to reproduce the metre or rhyme-scheme.

Both sisters were deeply conservative when it came to poetry, and were quite disparaging about the work of the younger, neo-romantic poets like Davíð Stefánsson (1985–1964). Ólína wrote several poems describing her reaction to reading recently published books of poetry, which was not favourable: “Nú ertu hrygg og sjúk, mín sál” (Now you are sad and sick, my soul) starts one. For her, the greatest living Icelandic poet was the Rev. Matthías Jochumsson (1835–1920), their first cousin once removed, the author of what later became the Icelandic national anthem. When news reached her of his death in 1920, Ólína composed the following verse:

Gleðin smækkar, hrygðin	(Happiness diminishes, sadness
hækkar,	increases,
hróður brást um andans völl,	glory fails in the spiritual domain,
skáldum fækkar, landið lækkar,	poets become fewer, the land sinks,
loksins sjást hjer engin fjöll.	finally no mountains can be seen.)

Despite, or possibly because of, its highly complex metre, which makes use of internal rhyme both horizontally (smækkar – hækkar, fækkar – lækkar) and vertically (smækkar – fækkar, brást – sjást), this verse has survived better than most other poems written in memory of Matthías Jochumsson and is still widely known.

Herdís also prefers the older forms, as she makes clear in her poem “Nýjir bragir” (New Poems):

Snemma hafði jeg yndi af óð	(Early on I enjoyed poetry
og ást á fögrum brögum.	And loved beautiful poems
En ungu skáldin yrkja ljóð	But the young poets compose verses
undir skrítnum lögum.	In strange metres.
Uni jeg mjer við eldri ljóð,	I enjoy older poetry
ungdóms fjærri glaumnum.	Away from the ruckus of youth
Jeg er út úr öllum “móð”	I am totally out of fashion
og aftur úr nýja straumnum.	And way behind the new trend.)

3. *Þulur*

Ólína, and to a lesser extent Herdís too, also wrote poems in metres other than *ferskeytla*. Indeed, Ólína may be said to have been instrumental in

reviving the *þula*, a type of poetry with ancient roots but associated in modern times with verses for children.

A *þula* (pl. *þulur*), often called in English a “rote” or “rigmarole”, is a string of verse-lines undivided into stanzas. The origin of the word is not completely certain, but it is used in Old Icelandic in this sense, especially of long poems involving lists of names. Related is the verb *þylja*, “to say, read or chant in a continuous manner, to recite, to run off a list”. *Þulur* could be very long. There is end-rhyme, but no, or at least no regular, use of alliteration. Lines could vary in length. The rhymes often came in couplets but could also occur in much longer stretches, seven or eight lines in a row, or even whole poems, all rhyming on the same sound. In the late pre-modern period *þulur* were primarily associated with children, and many were collected from oral tradition by folklorists in the nineteenth century, generally from recitations by women. Modern literary *þulur* began with the sisters’ contemporaries “Hulda”, the pen name of Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind (1881–1946; *Sumargjöf* 1905), Ólöf [Sigurðardóttir] frá Hlöðum (1857–1933; *Nokkur smákvæði* 1913) and especially Theodóra Thoroddsen (1863–1954; *Þulur* 1916), who, like Matthías Jochumsson, was a cousin.

In a review in *Skírnir* for 1914 of Ólöf frá Hlöðum’s book *Nokkur smákvæði*, the journal’s editor, philosopher and psychologist Guðmundur Finnbogason, while genuinely positive, reflects that the *þula* as a form seems particularly suited to women poets – indeed the form itself, he implies, is just like a woman: lacking formal structure, ever-changing and impulsive, dwelling on one thing and then leaping to another for no apparent reason – “*Þulan er kvennlegur bragarháttur*”, he concludes (The *þula* is a feminine metre).

This metaphysical interpretation did not impress Theodóra Thoroddsen, who in the following number of *Skírnir* wrote an article – accompanying the first of her own published *þulur* – in which she offers an entirely pragmatic explanation, arguing that women do not compose *þulur* because their form suits women’s scatter-brained and fickle nature, but because they provide an effective way of keeping children occupied and entertained while other tasks are performed – such as mending clothes and darning socks (Theodóra Thoroddsen, 1914; Helga Kress, 1997, 75–76).

Ólína composed about a dozen *þulur*. “Barnaþula” (Children’s *þula*), the second poem in *Ljóðmæli*, is very much in the tradition of children’s verse (as the title suggests), containing descriptions of named

children at play mixed with words of advice on good conduct etc., such as “Heimskur er sá sem hirðir ekki um að lesa” (foolish is the one who doesn’t pay attention to reading). Others, such as “Gekkt jeg upp á hólinn” (I went up onto the hill), focus on nature and the supernatural forces at work there.

There is a similar theme in “Margt er það í steininum” (Much there is within the stones), certainly one of her best poems. It is not referred to as a *þula*, though formally it has much in common with them. Comprising thirty-two rhyming couplets, it tells the story of an amorous encounter the poet has with an elf, described as a “dökkhærður sveinn” (dark-haired lad), who is in search of an eternal soul. Unlike the bulk of the sisters’ work, its tone is decidedly erotic.

It begins with a line well known from folklore:

Sat jeg upp við Svarthamar sumarkveldið eitt.	(I sat up at the Black cliff one summer’s eve.
Hljóður var minn hugur og hjartað mitt þreytt.	Quiet was my mind and weary my heart.)

And ends with another:

Margt er það í steininum, sem mennirnir ekki sjá.	(Much there is within the stones that humans cannot see.
Er þar stundum grátið, svo enginn heyrá má.	Sometimes there is weeping there that no-one can hear.)

Ólína’s best known poem – which was not in the first edition of *Ljóðmæli* but was included in the second¹⁴ – is called simply “Þula”. It is however written in a ballad metre reminiscent of that used in the medieval Icelandic *Tristrams kvæði* (The Ballad of Tristram), probably the most beautiful of the one hundred or so Icelandic ballads that have come down to us. Known as “Útnesjamenn” (The Men of the Outer Peninsula) or “Suðurnesjamenn” (The Men of the Southern Peninsula), the poem was set to a rousing tune by the composer Sigvaldi Kaldalóns (1881–1946) and recorded, under the latter title, by the Icelandic folk-group Savanna-tríóið in 1963. It has since become an Icelandic standard, a regular feature of Scout rallies and long-distance coach trips. As is often the case with such things, the song

14 Herdís Andrésdóttir & Ólína Andrésdóttir, 1930, 103–107.

as sung today hardly does the original poem justice. Reduced from thirty stanzas to just six or seven (or four, in the case of the Savanna-trío recording), the original narrative content – on the collecting of eggs on the treacherous skerries off the Reykjanes peninsula – is entirely lacking. It is also doubtful that many of those singing it today are aware of its authorship.

4. Love, nature, hardship and sorrow

In general, Ólína has been regarded as the better poet, and certainly a number of her poems, such as the fine and delicate love poem “Svarað brjefi” (A Letter Answered) or the beautifully evocative “Til næturinnar” (To the Night), are easily equal in quality to anything else written at the time. In Herdís’s poetry, much of which is more overtly autobiographical, sorrow and hardship play a prominent role, giving her verses a “hardness”, which has perhaps diminished their appeal to some readers (Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, 2011, 18). In her “Brot úr kvæði” (Fragment of a poem), for example, she describes the difficulty of growing up in another household, denied her mother’s love, a theme she also addressed in her prose piece “Ekki er allt bezt, sem börnin vilja” (Herdís Andrésdóttir, 1963).

The poem consists of eight stanzas; the first four are given here:

Jeg var ung, er unnir alt mjer tóku frá,	(I was young, when the waves took everything from me
má þess aðeins minnst, margt hvað breyttist þá.	I can remember how many things changed then
Föður minn hinn milda, marinn kaldur fól,	My gentle father the cold sea embraced
Sex við áttum systur samt hjá móður skjól	Still we six sisters had shelter with our mother.
Þá kom þrauta-árið, það jeg man svo vel,	Then came the year of suffering, I remember it well,
heitt mjer hrundi tárið, harm þann stærsta tel,	My hot tears fell, I think it the greatest sorrow
að jeg frá minni móður mátti fara burt.	That I had to go away from my mother
Þá sorg og hel oss sækja, að sökum ei er spurt.	When sorrow and death visit us, no-one asks the reason why

Á göfgum höfðings-garði gefið var mjer brauð;	At a noble household I was given bread
þar voru nógar nægtir, nóg af hvers kyns auð,	There was enough of everything, plenty of wealth of every kind
gull og dýrir gripir, góðra vina fjöld,	Gold and fine object, many good friends
og alt, sem yndi vekur, æðst þar hafði völd.	And everything bringing pleasure was given priority.
Fann jeg fljótt og skildi, föðurlaus og snauð,	I realised quickly and understood, fatherless and poor
að minna var um mildi og mannkærleikans auð.	There was less gentleness and human kindness
Lærði lítt að kvarta, leið þó margt og þar;	I learnt not to complain, but suffered and endured much
en að jeg ætti hjarta, enginn hugði þar.	And that I had a heart, no-one there thought of that.)

In another poem, which was first published in the journal *Skírnir* in 1924 under the curious – and somewhat offensive – title “Kerlingarnöldur” (lit. The Grumbling of an Old Woman), Herdís writes of how she had wanted more out of life: “Leiddist mjer að lúta smáu, / langaði eftir flugi háu” (It wearied me to deal with lesser things, longing to fly high). The poem appeared later that same year in the first edition of *Ljóðmæli*, with the first line used as the title and an additional verse. It is one of her best-known, and best, poems.

Another well-known poem is “Kveðið við spuna” (Recited While Spinning), which was composed, as she says in the first stanza, when she was seventy-five. It first appeared in print in the women’s magazine *Hlín* in 1951 and was then taken up in the third edition of *Ljóðmæli*, published in 1976. In the edition’s table of contents the poem is given, presumably by the book’s editor, Herdís’s grandson Jón Thorarensen, the extra, explanatory title “þjóðháttakvæði” (lit. “folk-customs poem”), and although it in a way is a catalogue of traditional women’s tasks, it is first and foremost Herdís’s autobiography (Helga Kress, 2008, 59–62; Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, 2011).

The poem comprises thirty stanzas in ordinary *ferskeytla*. The poet speaks in the first person, addressing a group of children, whom she is looking after, and whose full attention she is trying to get. The subject

of the poem is all the hard work which the poet has had to perform in her life, back-breaking, never-ending hard physical labour from which, however, she says she has at times nevertheless derived pleasure.

She lists a wide range of domestic and agricultural chores: washing, knitting, darning, mending clothes, preparing food, rounding up sheep, cleaning down, making hay, mending nets, rowing boats, gathering berries etc.¹⁵

Kveðið við spuna

Þó mig gigtin þjái grimmi og þunnan beri eg lokkinn, séð hafi árin sjötíu og fimm, sit eg enn við rokkinn.	(Though cruel arthritis afflicts me and my locks are thin, I've seen seventy-five years. Still I sit and spin.
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[...]

Þó gæfist mér ei gull í mund og grátt mig léki þörfín, eg hef marga yndisstund átt við hversdagsstörfín.	Though I have not been given gold in hand and I had unfulfilled needs, I've had many good times in the course of daily tasks.
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Þá eru kveðin þessi ljóð, þar við skal nú lenda. Verið þið blessuð, börnin góð, bragurinn er að enda.	Thus these verses are sung, there we shall now finish. May you be blessed, good children, the poem is concluded.)
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5. Conclusion

Herdís Andrésdóttir and her sister Ólína, ordinary self-educated women who had endured much emotional hardship, both as children and as young adults, became in their old age well known cultural and literary figures in Reykjavík, regularly giving readings and speaking at various events organised by reading groups, literary societies, women's institutes and so on. Their book, *Ljóðmæli*, brought out at their own expense in 1924, when they were in their mid-sixties, sold well and was often reprinted. From the very first, reviews of it were overwhelmingly

¹⁵ There is a recording by Bára Grímsdóttir on the album *Flúr*, released in 2013.

positive. Sigurður Nordal, in his review of the first edition in the newspaper *Vísir* (Nordal, 1925), predicts that the sisters' poems are of such outstanding quality that they would soon be known to everyone: "[Þ]að er óhætt að fullyrða, að sumar þulur Ólínu, kvæði eins og "Svarað bréfi", "Til næturinnar" og fjölda margar af vísium þeirra beggja systra verði áður en langt um líður á hvers manns vörum" (It is safe to say that some of Ólína's *þulur*, the poems "Svarað bréfi", "Til næturinnar" and many more of the verses by both sisters will before long be on everyone's lips). In his review of the second edition, published in 1930, the poet Magnús Ásgeirsson makes a similar claim as to the lasting value of their work: "Skerfur sá er þessar tvær alþýðu konur hafa lagt til íslenskra bókmennta, er harla merkilegur, og mun verða metinn að verðleikum, er tímar líða fram" (The contribution that these two working-class women have made to Icelandic literature is quite remarkable, and will come to be truly appreciated as time goes by).

Strangely, this has not happened. Despite having become "world-famous in Iceland" in the 20s and 30s, the sisters are but little known today. Their work, with very few exceptions, has not been anthologised to the same extent as that of other poets from the period, and has consequently not been taught in schools and at university, or read by the general public, and, despite some recent studies, it has certainly not received anything like the scholarly attention it deserves.¹⁶ It may well be that this has something to do with the fact that they were women, and that what we have here, as has been argued by, among others, Helga Kress (2008), is simply another example of the silencing of women's voices. But I think there is more to it than that. Herdís and Ólína were traditionalists, preferring the old *rímur*-metres, which at the time were rapidly falling out of fashion, and in the *þula* embracing a traditional poetic form primarily associated with nursery rhymes. So it may also be that, although they were popular in their time, they have not been seen as being typical of their time – "út úr öllum móð", as Herdís put it. Whatever the reason, a reassessment is long overdue.

¹⁶ There have been a few recent academic studies of Herdís and Ólína in Icelandic, viz. Ármann Jakobsson, 1995; Helga Kress, 1997, 78–80; Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2006, 184–186; Helga Kress, 2008, 59–62; Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, 2011 and Ingveldur Thorarensen, 2014. In English, apart from a very fine assessment by the Icelandic-Canadian scholar Richard Beck (Beck, 1950, 149–150), there has been almost nothing, only brief references in e.g. Stefán Einarsson, 1957, 289, and Helga Kress, 2007, 508, 525–526.

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