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## Genre Matters? Female Suicide in Mythic, Mytho-Heroic and Historical Contexts

Kirsi Kanerva

### Introduction

In the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr commits suicide after Sigurðr's death: she stabs herself with a sword and is burned on his funeral pyre. Brynhildr's suicide appears to be a northern innovation since in the southern version of the legend Brynhildr's fate is left suspended (Kuhn 1971; Anderson 1980: 35). The episode can nevertheless be seen as a parallel of Nanna's death in *Snorra Edda*: at Baldr's funeral Nanna dies of grief and is burned together with Baldr on his funeral pyre. Brynhildr has also been paralleled with the *Laxdæla saga* heroine Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir (e.g. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934b: xlvi; Andersson 1980: 241, 243; Heinrichs 1986: 110), who is responsible for the death of her beloved, Kjartan, but unlike Brynhildr, she does not commit suicide and lives until old age.

In this chapter, I will consider medieval Icelandic conceptions of, attitudes towards, and norms concerning suicide by employing three levels of comparison. I first deal with Nanna's death in mythic time. Second, I discuss Brynhildr's suicide in mytho-heroic time, which was situated in the ancient and heroic past where mythic figures such as Óðinn could still occasionally cross the boundary between the world of the humans and the world of the gods. Third, I examine Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir's life in historical time. The aim of the comparison is to examine whether genre matters; whether the different genres examined here reflect uniform values or not, and, if not, in what ways do the norms, attitudes and conceptions reflected in the sources differ from each other? Are these genres commensurable in general when examining conceptions of, attitudes towards, and norms concerning suicide in the thirteenth-century context where, according to scholarly consensus, the main sources of this study were written? (What) can we benefit from the examination of different genres when studying suicide in medieval Iceland?

As hinted above and elaborated further below in the discussion, the texts examined here may reflect the collective tradition of folklore shared by particular twelfth to early fourteenth-century families, such as the Sturlungs, who claimed descent from Brynhildr and Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir. This tradition was central to the maintenance of their identity and the existence of this traditional community. The members of the community were familiar with the topics that the sources examined here transmitted, and could share views, mental images and conceptions concerning the subject matter. (See e.g. Enges 2012: 36, 74, 99.) The sources may reflect the

thinking and worldview of these Icelanders, their consciously and unconsciously held models of thought and experience, and their attitudes, values, and emotions. These models were part of the “mental toolbox” (*ouillage mental*), a concept originally coined by Lucien Febvre (1968: 141–142) that was at people’s disposal to perceive and understand the world in the historical and cultural context in which they lived and which determined the individual and collective action and experience. Many of the “tools” were shared, some of them were based on the cultural inheritance that was preserved in the deep structures of culture, but the contents of the “toolbox” could also vary, from one individual or family to another. The contents could also be changed and modified as a consequence of foreign influences. (Siikala 1999: 22–25; Korhonen 2001: 42.) Concerning views of suicide, the mental toolbox of these medieval Icelanders was equipped with indigenous ideas that had been inherited from the pre-Christian era, and with foreign influences, which were made explicit, among others, in the ecclesiastical law and later also in the secular law.

#### *Suicide: A Historical Context*

Suicide had become a sin quite early in the history of Christianity and, in the Middle Ages, suicide became a legal felony, a “self-murder”, which in many parts of Europe was punished with confiscation of property in secular law (see e.g. Groot 2000). Ever since the Council of Braga in 563, all perpetrators had also been denied Christian burial ceremonies (Murray 2000: 183). In Iceland, the Christian view of suicide was adopted in *Kristinn réttur forni* (‘the Old Church Law’), which was presumably originally compiled by Þorlákr Rúnólfsson (1086–1133), the bishop of Skálholt beginning from 1118 (Fix 1993).<sup>1</sup> *Kristinn réttur forni* included regulations concerning suicide, but the law was conditionally exclusive. Suicides were not allowed burial in consecrated soil, unless they express in some way that they repented of their deed. They should either ask a priest absolution for their sins, or tell a layperson they repented of their deed, or, if they could not speak, express their repentance in any other possible way. (Finsen 1852: 12; on nonverbal signs of repentance, see Cormack 1993.) In 1275, the bishop of Skálholt since 1269, Árni Þorláksson (1237–1298), introduced *Kristin réttur nýi* (‘the New Christian Law’) (Fix 1993), which prohibited the burial of suicides in the churchyard in principle but allowed it on the same conditions as elaborated in the old law. The new law added that suicides who had shown any sign of repentance would be granted absolution for their sins by the bishop and buried in the churchyard, unless they had been

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have argued that *Kristinn réttur forni* was influenced by *Decretum Gratiani* and, therefore, that the Law as it is known today cannot be older than ca. 1180 (Nilsson 1989: 30).

excommunicated by the bishop or by the pope. (Storm & Hertzberg 1895: 29.) Both the Old and the New laws thus offered loopholes that could guarantee the suicide burial in sacred ground.

After the Icelanders had submitted to the rule of the Norwegian monarch, Hákon Hákonarson and his son Magnús in 1262–1264, a law known as the Jónsbók Law was enacted for Icelanders by the Norwegian king in 1281. In Jónsbók, suicide was explicitly criminalized for the first time in Iceland. Suicide was handled under the heading of *níðingsverk* ('villainy'), and confiscation of property was declared as its punishment. (Ólafur Halldórsson 1904: 41–42; Fenger 1985: 63.) This particular decree was opposed by Bishop Árni Þorláksson, but, despite his criticism, the Jónsbók Law was ratified (Ólafur Lárusson 1960: 80–84). When the main sources of this study – *Völsunga saga*, the *Prose Edda*, and *Laxdæla saga* – were compiled according to scholarly opinion, suicide was thus already condemned in the ecclesiastical context, but it had not yet become a legal felony. However, the earliest surviving manuscripts of these texts date from the fourteenth century or from ca. 1400 (*Völsunga saga*) and thus from an era where suicide had already become criminalized.

### *Text Types and Mythic Discourse*

The sources examined here represent three types of text, or genres, which differ in various respects. They can be seen as communicating narratives of the past situated in different temporal and spatial realities: in mythological, mytho-heroic and historical time and space (on genre as a social and semiotic phenomenon, see Frog 2016: 56–57).<sup>2</sup> The same motif, female suicide, appeared in these three genres, but different genres could communicate the theme of suicide in different ways, thus expressing different perspectives of the same theme (Honko 1981: 26). As carriers of meanings, the text types may have contributed to the expression of diverse, even conflicting norms and values, which may have existed within the same culture. Different genres offered diverse opportunities for discussion. *Laxdæla saga* as one of the *Íslendingasögur* was situated in the past, but authorial inventiveness was restricted by oral tradition: even if oral tradition was flexible, the story could not be drastically changed because people were familiar with tales about the ancestors who had settled in Iceland and about their earliest descendants (on *Íslendingasögur*, see Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 191–229). Texts such as eddic heroic poetry and *Völsunga saga* that recited stories of ancient heroes in the far away past, and mythological texts

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<sup>2</sup> See, however, on the problems of distinguishing myth per se as a genre, as myths may e.g. be “expressed and referred to across genres” in Frog 2018: [section 4.5](#).

could more easily be used to discuss issues that could not be discussed otherwise from a distanced perspective (Torfi Tulinius 2002: 39–43; Clunies Ross 2009: 318, 320–323).

Anna-Leena Siikala has introduced the idea of mythic thinking; mythic consciousness operates with mental images that make phenomena “tangible” and observable so that they can be “seen” (Siikala 1999: 43–44). A concept related to this idea is “mythic discourse”, which refers to people consciously or unconsciously using and manipulating “images, motifs and stories that had a mythic quality in order to mediate conceptual models, values, understandings and so forth” (Frog 2015: 37; see also Frog, this volume). In mythic discourse, issues that otherwise cause tension and problems can be represented. Elements from other text types (text understood here in a broad sense), such as their motifs and images, can be used to produce meanings in different genres. The meanings are constructed in connection with other texts, intertextually. They are based on relationships between various texts, which are either implicitly implied or explicitly stated, and which have directed both the production and reception of those texts. Each text should be interpreted as a part of a wider network of texts; the meaning of a text is always born in relation to other texts.<sup>3</sup>

By scrutinizing these three genres, it is possible to access not just one but several perspectives that were expressed in medieval Icelandic reality. These perspectives – discourses – may have complied with existing norms, counteracted, challenged, or criticized them, or advanced them by offering models for proper behavior. They represented the diversity and variety of views that may have existed (see also Bønding, this volume), despite the condemning position held by the Church (at least in principle) and later represented also in secular law. (See e.g. Bagerius et al. 2013: 387–388.)

I suggest that medieval Icelanders held multiple views of suicide, in which Christian and inherited ideas and norms could be fused. The study of discourses in different genres enables us to access these views, whereas concentrating only on more “realistic” historical sources may prevent us from seeing those aspects of thought that might be less normative. The genres scrutinized here share some values, but the texts situated in mythic and mytho-heroic contexts enabled the expression of multiple possibilities, even views that implied passive acceptance of suicide whereas the historical sources perhaps needed to heed more ardently to the Christian and later also legal views of self-killing. Therefore, studying different genres and comparing the views expressed in

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<sup>3</sup> On intertextuality, see Chandler 2001; Tarkka 2005, 63–65, 72–74.

them enables us to gain a more comprehensive view of medieval Icelandic conceptions of, attitudes towards, and norms concerning female suicide.

### *Sources*

The story of Nanna's death appears in the Gylfaginning section of Snorri Sturluson's (1179–1241) *Prose Edda*. Snorri compiled his work around 1220, but the *Prose Edda* survives only in later manuscripts, the oldest of which date from the fourteenth century (Codex Regius, Codex Wormianus, Codex Upsaliensis). The Codex Regius version of the *Prose Edda*, GKS 2367 4to, which is the most comprehensive of the surviving manuscripts, suggests that Snorri knew the story tradition of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani which *Völsunga saga* follows. It has been suggested that the episode discussing Baldr's death had as its source *Húsdrápa*, a poem referred to in *Laxdæla saga* and attributed to an Icelandic skald Úlfr Uggason, but of which only thirteen verses survive, all in the *Prose Edda*. (Heimir Pálsson 2012: xxx, xlii, xlix–l, liii, lxxxii; Faulkes 2005: xxiii, xxviii; Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 200, 352.)

The earliest attestations of Brynhildr's story appear in eddic poetry and in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda*. It has been suggested that Brynhildr's suicide was invented by the compiler of *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, which dates from ca. 1200–1250, but the poem's probable origin as oral poetry allows speculation that the suicide motif was devised earlier (Kuhn 1971; Andersson 1980: 35–36; Neckel & Kuhn 1962: 215; Faulkes 1998: 48). *Völsunga saga* was compiled at the end of the thirteenth century, but the oldest surviving manuscript, NKS 1824 b 4to, dates from ca. 1400 (Andersson 1980: 20–23; Finch 1993: 711). The anonymous compiler of the saga may have drawn upon oral knowledge of the story tradition, but s/he presumably copied the eddic poetry included in the saga from a written source genetically related to texts preserved in the Codex Regius. As *origo gentis* literature of medieval Icelanders (Lassen 2012), *Völsunga saga* recited the story of Brynhildr and Sigurðr who were highly relevant figures for some remarkable thirteenth and fourteenth-century Icelandic families. Through their daughter Áslaug, many of the Icelandic families could trace their roots to ancient heroes and to Scandinavian royal families (Rowe 2009).

*Laxdæla saga* was compiled in the middle of the thirteenth century, and it survives in two versions. The oldest surviving fragments of the saga date to end of the thirteenth century. The longer version followed here is found in the fourteenth-century Möðruvallabók and in copies of the lost Vatnshyrna manuscript. The writer of the saga was influenced by European romance

literature, and s/he was presumably connected to the Sturlung family. Speculations concerning the writer or commissioner of the saga have ranged from Óláfr Þórðarson *hvítaskáld* to Sturla Þórðarson, or the female members of Sturla's family. For medieval Icelanders, *Laxdæla saga* was history that told about their ancestors who had inhabited the island and their earliest descendants who had adopted Christianity. As Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir was the ancestor of noteworthy thirteenth-century Icelandic families and *Laxdæla saga* was presumably written by or for her descendants, the Sturlungs, it is probable that there was a tendency to present her life in a favorable light. (Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 244–245; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934b: lxxvi–lxxx; Stefán Karlsson 1993; Sverrir Tómasson 1993; Guðrún Nordal 2013: 209–210).

### Understanding the Act of a Bereaved Widow

In the world of the myth, Baldr dies as a consequence of divine arrogance. The gods think no one and nothing can harm Baldr, but the mistletoe cast by Baldr's blind brother eventually kills him. Everyone is shocked and filled with grief, not least Nanna, Baldr's wife, whose reaction to the events is drastic. According to the Codex Regius of the *Prose Edda*, as Nanna saw Baldr's corpse carried to his ship, which would become his funeral pyre, *þá sprakk hon af harmi ok dó. Var hon borin á bálit ok slegit í eldi.* (Faulkes 2005: 46.) ('then she burst of grief and died. She was carried on to the pyre, which was set fire to'.)<sup>4</sup>

In Old Norse-Icelandic culture, grief as a consequence of loss and "bursting" from extreme physical effort or excessive emotion as indicated by the verb *springa* was considered a potential cause of death (Hill 2013: 110–111; Kanerva 2013a: 16, 22; Kanerva 2014: 237; Larrington 2015: 78; Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfusson 1957: 584, s.v. 'springa'). In the modern sense, dying of grief, or "bursting of grief", does not imply any intentionality in the process of dying, but, in medieval West Scandinavian society this kind of death was considered deliberate. *Ívens saga* is a thirteenth-century translation of Chretien de Troyes's *Yvain* (ca. 1170) commissioned by king Hákon IV that dates either to ca. 1250–1257 (Togeby 1975: 185; Marti 2013: 41) or the first half of the thirteenth century and survives in copies from the early fifteenth century (Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 210; Barnes 1993). This saga suggests that dying from grief was considered self-killing. In the saga, a maiden says to a lady whose husband has just died: *þat er eigi fagrt, frú [...] at þú drepir þik sjálf*

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<sup>4</sup> The text reads similarly also in the Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol.) version of the *Prose Edda* (Codex Wormianus, p. 34). The Uppsala Edda version merely states that *Nanna Nefsdóttir sprakk er hon frá* (Heimir Pálsson 2012: 76) ('died from over-exertion when she heard'; literally: 'she burst upon hearing that [Baldr's corpse was carried on the funeral pyre]').

*af sorg ok harmi. Þyrm lífi þínu* (Kalinke 1999: 54–55). ('It is not good, my lady [...] to kill yourself with sorrow and grief. Respect your life.') The excerpt is not a literal translation of the original *Yvain*, and it does not follow the spirit of the original work, which at this particular instance does not represent extreme grief as a cause of death or dying from grief as an act of self-killing.<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that the idea expressed by *Ívens saga* – that death from grief was a deliberate death and thus a suicide – was of Scandinavian origin. The original translation of *Ívens saga* no longer survives,<sup>6</sup> so it is difficult to say whether the idea of seeing dying from grief as suicide reflected the understanding of an early thirteenth-century Norwegian translator, a fifteenth-century Icelandic scribe, or the views of West Scandinavians in the Viking and Middle Ages in general. Earlier studies suggest that the story of a knight and his lion was known in Iceland around 1200 at the latest, as the story appears to have first become known in Iceland through oral sources and only later through the translation made in Norway.<sup>7</sup> Knowledge of the tale does not necessarily indicate that dying of extreme grief as a suicide was insinuated in connection with the story by then. However, dying of grief as a consequence of bereavement was represented as an intentional self-inflicted death (e.g. by means of self-starvation) in other contemporary sources, such as the early thirteenth-century *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.<sup>8</sup>

The context of the translation and its manuscripts is clerical, but rather than representing merely a moralizing religious view of dying of grief as a self-inflicted death, the writer or copyist may have been expressing some native thoughts concerning the immunity of a person. As has been suggested elsewhere, in the medieval European context more generally, sadness was considered dangerous and detrimental to health because it affected the mental and bodily immunity of a person. For instance, sadness could expose people to the influence of demons or

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<sup>5</sup> “Dame, est ce ore avenant/ Que si de duel vos ociëz ? / Por Deu, car vos an chastieëz, / Sel leissiez seviaus non de honte. / A si haute dame ne monte / Que duel si longuemant maintaingne. / De vostre enor vos resovaingne / Et de voïtre grant jantillesce ! / Cuidiez vos que tote proesce / Soit morte avuec vostre seignor ? / Çant ausi buen et çant meïllor / An sont vif remés par le monde.” (Foerster 1887: 67.) ('My lady, is it seemly that you should thus torment yourself with grief? For God's sake now control yourself, and for shame, at least, cease your lament. It is not fitting that so great a lady should keep up her grief so long. Remember your honourable estate and your very gentle birth! Think you that all virtue ceased with the death of your lord? There are in the world a hundred as good or better men.' Chretien de Troyes 2008.)

<sup>6</sup> Copies of the saga were made in fifteenth and seventeenth-century Iceland and survive in the following manuscripts: Holm perg. 6 4to (early 15th cent.), AM 489 II 4to (ca. 1450) and Holm papp. 46 fol (1690) that was based on the now lost \*Ormsbók (from the second half of the fourteenth century) (Marold 1985: 157–158; Bandlien 2013; Sif Ríkhardsdóttir & Eriksen 2013: 18, 25).

<sup>7</sup> Earlier knowledge of the story is suggested by the carvings of the medieval Valþjófsstaður church door, which depicts a scene from this story (see Harris 1970).

<sup>8</sup> In the saga, Egill intends to starve himself to death after his son Böðvar has died, but is finally persuaded to eat, and thus prevented from dying, by his daughter Þorgerðr (Bjarni Einarsson 2001: 148–149).



evil spirits (Caciola 2000: 77–78). In the medieval Icelandic context, the human body was considered porous and “open” in that (to follow the general definition of such an open body schema) the body boundaries were considered as “*opening up* to the external environment” (Stark 2006: 152, original emphasis, on the body schema in Finno-Karelian culture). Various natural and supernatural forces from the extra-bodily environment could exert their influence on people by penetrating the body boundaries through bodily orifices. (Kanerva 2015a: 94–95, 134–137.) As a consequence, a person could fall ill and eventually even die. Sadness was considered a lapse or total loss of agency of the self, which could lead to involuntary opening of the body’s boundaries and of the borders of the self. As a consequence, the person was vulnerable to the penetration of various external influences. (Kanerva 2014: 231–233.) In light of this body schema, which construed sadness and grief as a condition that made people vulnerable to influences that induced illness and death, people were expected to benefit from avoiding such emotions and thereby keeping their body boundaries intact. Seeing death caused by grief as self-killing suggests that failing to avoid extreme sadness which could have lethal consequences was to some extent comprehended as a deliberate act that the individual should try to avoid.

Even if the expression “to die of grief” could also be used as a euphemism used to speak about suicide in a less offensive way (Mills, **forthcoming**), death caused by sadness – including Nanna’s death – could be comprehended as a deliberate and self-inflicted death among medieval Icelanders in general. In the myth, the moral value of Nanna’s death as either positive or negative is not explicitly indicated. A similar case occurs in *Laxdæla saga* where Kjartan’s wedded wife Hrefna is said to have died of grief after her husband is killed. The saga tells that, after the incident, she *var mjök harmþrungin; en þó bar hon sik kurteisliga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 158) (‘was very swollen with grief, but still she behaved in a courteous manner’). She lives only a while after returning to her parents, and the saga states, somewhat laconically, that *er þat sagn manna, at hon hafði sprungit af stríði* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 158) (‘people said that she had died of grief’). Based on what has been said above, Hrefna’s death was construed as deliberate from the medieval Icelandic perspective, but her behavior was still considered courteous instead of reprehensible.

The Nanna episode in the *Prose Edda* appears to emphasize the severity of the grief the gods are experiencing at Baldr’s sudden death: it cannot be expressed in words (see e.g. Lindow 1997: 67–68; Lindow 2002). The figure of Nanna is like a condensation of all the grief felt; Nanna expresses the immensity of everyone’s sorrow. As a myth, however, Nanna’s story makes the

sorrow of young widows, including Hrefna's in historical time, and their subsequent suicides, understandable. The deaths in both mythic and historical contexts suggest, however, that – even if ecclesiastical and later also secular law considered suicide a legally and socially punishable act (see also Kanerva 2015b: 61–65) – the death of young widows was viewed with a certain empathy. Bishop Árni Þorláksson's criticism of Jónsbók's handling of suicide suggests this empathetic view could be shared by both lay people and clerics. The portrayal of a certain priest in Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason further suggests that even clerical people knew and accepted methods that were used to disguise a deliberate death as a non-suicide, that is, something that would not result in exclusion from Christian burial. The saga tells of queen Þyri, who is heartbroken because of Óláfr's death. She cannot eat or drink, and she prefers death to living. She is advised by a clever priest to eat a single apple, to free herself from guilt and to eventually die *utan synðina* ('without sin'). She follows his advice and dies after sustaining her life for nine days with the single apple. (Groth 1895: 114–115.)

Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason brings forth the moral aspects of deliberate death as a consequence of grieving, whereas the Nanna and Hrefna episodes do not present any ethical evaluations. Nanna and Hrefna are perhaps vulnerable and weak because they cannot keep their body boundaries intact as a consequence of their grief, but their behavior is not condemned and they are not presented as reprehensible sinners. The potential sinfulness of suicide is not explicitly mentioned. Both cases suggest that, in spite of the sanctions in Church laws and Jónsbók, suicide was passively tolerated. It was an option that the members of the society had internalized as possible, even though they would not have considered it advisable and desirable,<sup>9</sup> since they were aware that the act was condemned by Church law and later also by secular law. Some widows would grieve the deaths of their spouses so tremendously that their sorrow would affect their immune functions and cause them health problems, which eventually led to their death.<sup>10</sup> Some would accelerate their end by not eating or by using other means to end their lives. In mythic time, Nanna's death is stated as a matter of fact; in historical time, the saga tells about rumors

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<sup>9</sup> On a similar view among the Inuit in the Northern Alaska and the Palawan in the Philippines (widows in particular; see Macdonald & Naudin 2014: 34, 40).

<sup>10</sup> According to modern scientific conception, grief and other stressful life situations can make people unable to operate in everyday contexts and increase their health problems by affecting the immune functions (see e.g. Segerstrom & Miller 2004; Buckley et al. 2012). Although medieval Icelanders did not think this way, their bodies presumably functioned similarly to modern ones. Consider also observations presented in anthropological studies, for example by María Cátedra, who suggests that in Vaquiro thought “death begins before dying” (2014: 67). In other words, for instance “[p]ain, age, sickness, and suffering all constitute the long, liminal glide from life to death [. . . and] the borderline between life and death [is] vague” (*ibid.*).

concerning Hrefna's death, but emphasizes her positive traits (i.e. courteousness). In addition, in mythic time, Nanna's destiny is explicitly portrayed as "happy", since Nanna and Baldr spend their afterlife together in the "great mansions" of Hel, where they get on fairly well: they equip Hermóðr, who visits them, with many precious gifts for Óðinn and Frigg (Faulkes 2005: 47; Heimir Pálsson 2012: 76). The story of Nanna may reflect ideas that had survived in the slowly evolving long-term structures of culture, which suggested that sometimes following one's husband in death was not the worst option for a widow. Certainly, like Hrefna's example shows, such a decision made the widow in no way less virtuous as she could still show regard for others and was remembered for this courteousness of hers after death.

### **The Rationality of an Altruistic Act**

Like Nanna's husband Baldr in the mythological sources, Guðrún's spouse Sigurðr in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* is killed by her kinsmen. Neither Sigurðr nor Baldr can be avenged; Guðrún cannot whet her kinsmen to avenge her husband, because her brothers are themselves to blame, and even though Loki is involved in Baldr's death, the lethal wound is inflicted by Baldr's blind brother. Nanna and the gods seem to be facing a dead end: taking revenge appears as impossible unless the rules of feud are changed and the gods start to kill members of their own family.<sup>11</sup> For Guðrún, the situation is even worse. *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* and the proceeding prose excerpt (*Frá dauða Sigurðar*) states that she cannot weep, but she is so overwhelmed by her grief, so impassioned that she is about to burst (*mundi hon springa*), in other words: she nearly dies (Neckel & Kuhn 1962: 201–202). According to *Völsunga saga*, Guðrún *wants* to die: after Sigurðr has died, she leaves and disappears out in the woods. Wolves move around her and she can hear their voices. She thinks it would be more pleasant to die.<sup>12</sup> (Finch 1965: 62.) *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* tells that as Guðrún sat beside Sigurðr's dead body she prepared herself to die (*gorðiz at deyja*). She intends to die until her sister Gullrönd persuades her to cry, which then appears to give impetus to a "healing process" (Neckel & Kuhn 1962: 202–204; Hill 2013: 108–111), as a consequence of which she does not die.

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<sup>11</sup> Óðinn does beget an avenger on Rindr, named Váli, but Váli is Baldr's and Höðr's halfbrother, which makes the bloodfeud pattern slightly problematic: as John Lindow has pointed out, the rules of feud are changed, and the *æsir* start to perish because of this bloodfeuding (Lindow 1994). Based on this interpretation, it could be questioned whether begetting the avenger is rather connected to Óðinn's role as the instigator of havoc and conflicts between kinsmen.

<sup>12</sup> As shown by Eila Stepanova and Frog (2019), in laments preferring death to life is part of the grief rhetoric.

Guðrún does not succeed in bringing about her own death after Siguðr's demise (see also Kanerva 2018: 136–138, 151–152), but she is unsuccessful also in her later attempt to drown herself after killing her children and feeding them to her second husband Atli, and then killing Atli and burning him together with his men in his hall (Finch 1965: 72–74). Since Guðrún does not die at Siguðr's death, the rest of *Völsunga saga* is filled with violence. She becomes the death of many men, including her brothers and her sons. As a result, her own family line is brought to an end whereas Brynhildr's and Siguðr's family line continues through Áslaug. Although Guðrún, unlike Krimhild in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks saga*, does not wish the death of her brothers, the result of the visit of her male kin to her second husband's hall is the same in both versions. In *Völsunga saga*, the brothers are well aware of their impending death: they do not care, even though their ship is ruined as they reach the shore, and they do not fasten their ships since they do not intend to return. (Finch 1965: 68.)

The Nanna myth makes the sudden death of grieving widows understandable, but it also points to the problem of widows (such as Guðrún) who survive husbands that have died of unnatural causes. Guðrún's case suggests that, at times, a widow could become a problem as far as social equilibrium was concerned, should she wish to orchestrate revenge.<sup>13</sup> Before the law that forbade feud was decreed by the Norwegian king in the latter half of the thirteenth century, and thus the king and his representatives became the only legitimate holders of executive power in Iceland, the need to avenge and demand compensation could bring about more deaths. The whetting woman is a common figure in saga literature, as has been shown in several studies (e.g. Heller 1958: 98–122; Jochens 1996: 174–203; Clover 2002; Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir 2013a: 17–25, 87–88). Even though the connection between the literary figure and historical reality has been disputed, inciting men to take revenge would presumably have been a task of women, who usually did not resort to violence and use of arms themselves.<sup>14</sup> Although mothers, wives, sisters and daughters who ensured that revenge was taken on enemies were often held in esteem, in many sagas, female whetters were used as scapegoats, whose vengefulness caused the death of many good and heroic men. (See e.g. Jochens 1996: 174–203; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2016: 118.) Had Guðrún (whose historicity medieval Icelanders may not have disputed, since some of them

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<sup>13</sup> Consider e.g. the vengeful widows Hallgerðr and Hildigunnr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, whose proneness to feud and vengefulness cause the death of many men.

<sup>14</sup> On the connection between female lament and whetting in sagas, see e.g. Clover 2002; Sävborg 2013: 97. See, however, also on the argument presented by Eila Stepanova & Frog (forthcoming) which suggests that in sagas, this connection may in fact have been exaggerated.

thought they descended from Brynhildr and Sigurðr) died when she wished to, her brothers and children would not have lost their lives (albeit we would have missed a good story).

Seen in this light, Nanna's death becomes a good death. Her death ensures that the situation will not escalate and lead to immense and disproportionately cruel chain of violence which may result in the death of many (even innocent) people. Suicides committed by wives after the death of their spouses have been categorized as altruistic suicides by Emile Durkheim. According to his definition, altruistic suicides were committed for larger goals and included self-sacrifice that was undertaken for the interests of one's own group. He associated the so-called *sati* practice with altruistic suicides, in which a widow takes her own life shortly after the death of her spouse or immolates herself on his funeral pyre. (Durkheim 1897: II, ch 4.)<sup>15</sup> The *sati*-type practice involves "conformity to accepted norms", and the self-inflicted death is comprehended as a "rational, ethical suicide performed by an altruistic subject" (Macdonald & Naudin 2014: 35). In myth, Nanna is comparable to an altruistic widow. The sorrow remains even after her death, but she is not the cause of extreme destructive violence. Nanna sacrifices herself for the benefit of social equilibrium that can be restored by following the principles of feud, not by killing even the innocent bystanders. Her suicide is not only altruistic, but also rational and ethical.

In light of Nanna's "good death", then, Guðrún's death – should it have occurred – would have been rational and ethical since it would have prevented disproportionate blood-shed. It would also have prevented Guðrún from bloodying her own hands. Because she survives, she becomes a macabre monster who defiles her hands in the blood of her own children – something that the other women in *Völsunga saga* do not do; even if Signý does have her children by King Siggeir slayed, she does not kill them herself but allows her brother Sigmundur and her son from an incestuous relationship, Sinfjötli, to kill them (Finch 1965: 8–9, 12). The consequences of Guðrún's survival are severe. It is as though Guðrún's case echoed the view of the compilers of the *Digest* of

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<sup>15</sup> Earlier studies have touched upon the possibility of an ancient tradition, according to which the wife was expected to die voluntarily if her spouse died (see also Lindow 1997: 90–93; Price 2008: 266–267; Gunnell, [forthcoming](#)), but it is not certain whether a funeral custom resembling the *sati* ritual was ever practiced in the north of Europe. The description of a ship burial among the Volga Rus around 920, given by the Arab traveler ibn Fadlan, is sometimes cited as an example of such *sati* practice. It describes how a Rus chieftain who has died is cremated in his funeral ship and the chieftain is then accompanied by a slave woman intended to be his bride in the otherworld, and who willingly goes to her death with her master. However, it should be borne in mind that ibn Fadlan's report is a source that was produced by an individual who was an outsider to the culture he described, and whose motivation is not fully known to us. In addition, although presumably of Scandinavian or Germanic origin, the Volga Rus may not have practiced only customs of Scandinavian/Germanic origin; they may have adopted other cultural conventions from the peoples they had been in contact with or created new ones. Therefore, ibn Fadlan's report alone cannot be used as evidence that a similar custom was commonly practiced throughout Scandinavia, either during the Viking Age or before it, or elsewhere in Germanic areas.

Justinian, who thought that people who attempted suicide could “dare anything”, which made them dangerous to society (Murray 2000: 175, 381).

What has been said above is not to suggest that medieval Icelanders thought it was better for wives to die or to kill themselves if their husband died of unnatural causes, or that they pushed widows in that direction. As mythic discourse, the story of Nanna became a point of reference, with which people could engage, talk about, and reflect on the issue of widows whose husbands had died a violent death, in a cultural context where honor, shame, and revenge still had certain weight, but where Christianity emphasized forgiveness, and feuds eventually became sanctioned by law. The Nanna myth presented an ethical principle that did not comply with the Christian or legal view of suicide *per se* but, like a silent wish that was never verbalized, the myth implied that sometimes the death of a widow could benefit the society more than her survival. In *Völsunga saga*, Guðrún offered an example of the opposite scenario, which suggested that, from the perspective of society, vengeful widows could create problems.

However, it should be noted that even if the death of the widow could eliminate a potentially vengeful spouse from the scene, her death would probably not ease the grief that the deceased’s kin were experiencing. Their grief as a consequence of loss could eventually be the cause of violence and vengeance as well, which is what happens in *Laxdæla saga* where Hrefna’s death in historical time, the information about which was presumably based on orally transmitted knowledge, does not put an end to feuding.

### **The Suicide Avenged**

The myth of Nanna the *sati* was manifested in the story of Brynhildr, who commits suicide and is burned on a funeral pyre together with Sigurðr. The story of Brynhildr’s death uses the “narrative power” from the Nanna myth to explain Brynhildr’s actions (see also Frog 2010: 173–174, 252–253, 282, 330–332): by committing suicide, Brynhildr makes claims about her true marital status. In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr’s suicide is presented as the destiny of Sigurðr’s real wife: it is she who follows Sigurðr in death, not Guðrún. (McKinnell 2005: 229.) In the mytho-heroic context, however, Brynhildr does not die of grief like Nanna but kills herself with a sword.<sup>16</sup>

Female suicide by sword or other sharp blade was a popular theme especially in Classical art and literature (van Hooff 1994). Some of the literary products of Classical culture (where suicide as

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<sup>16</sup> Even though Brynhildr takes her last breath after she has walked on the pyre, stabbing herself with a sword that pierces her body was apparently considered as Brynhildr’s actual suicide method.

such was not always condemned) that depict female suicides by sword were translated to Old Icelandic; it has already been observed by Theodore Andersson that *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* may be in debt to Virgil's Dido (Andersson 1980: 241). In Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book IV), Dido and Aeneas are in love, but he is sent off with his fleet by Mercury. As a consequence, Dido cannot live anymore, but builds herself a pyre, ascends it, and kills herself with a sword she has received from Aeneas, after which the funeral pyre is burned. Before that, she curses Aeneas and the Trojans, and predicts that there will be endless hate between the Trojans and Carthage.

Dido appears in *Breta sǫgur* in the early fourteenth-century manuscript Hauksbók.<sup>17</sup> The similarities between Virgil's Dido and Brynhildr are clear, but in the process of translation, or "re-writing", as some scholars have suggested,<sup>18</sup> the saga represents a fusion of elements from both Scandinavian culture and classical literature,<sup>19</sup> while details about the pyre that would produce a parallel between the stories about Brynhildr and Dido have been omitted. The story in Hauksbók nevertheless includes details that generate some additional meanings as far as female suicides committed by sword are concerned. *Breta sǫgur* states that Dido took her life when she heard that Enea (i.e. Aeneas) did not want to come to her anymore. Prior to her act, she accuses Enea of betraying her and the gods, and of destroying both her and their son whom she is carrying. She expresses her wish that gods avenge her. According to *Breta sǫgur*, after Dido had killed herself, *þers þottiz hefna Hanibal konvngs á Rómvervum þá er hann van Róm* (Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 232–233) ('King Hanibal was thought to avenge this [death of Dido] on the Romans when he conquered Rome'). *Breta sǫgur* thus suggests that suicide was a death that could be avenged. In addition, the saga implies that suicide could be propelled by an individual's intersocial environment. In other words, it was assumed that other people could be held as responsible for the self-killing and thus guilty of causing suicide.

A similar idea of suicide as an act that should be avenged is reflected in a story about Deianira in *Trójumanna saga*.<sup>20</sup> The translation of the story material differs from the putative

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<sup>17</sup> *Breta sǫgur* was based on Geoffrey Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. Geoffrey's *Historia* was presumably known in Iceland by the end of the twelfth century and translated shortly after 1200. *Breta sǫgur* survives in two versions. Hauksbók contains the shorter version (AM 544 4to) that was supposedly systematically condensed by Haukr Erlendsson himself. (Würth 1998: 80–82; Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 50–51; Gropper 2011.)

<sup>18</sup> On Old Norse-Icelandic translations, see e.g. Barnes 1974–1977.

<sup>19</sup> Compare the fusion of Scandinavian and Ovidian elements in *Trójumanna saga* and how this symbiosis created new possibilities for the representation of female experience in sagas; possibilities that neither of the elements alone may have produced (Eldevik 2002).

<sup>20</sup> *Trójumanna saga* is a compilation of texts, and survives in three versions (alfa, beta, Hauksbók). Depending on the version, the text is based, for instance, on Dares Phrygius's *De excidio Troiae historia*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and *Ilias latina* as well as Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoseon libri*. It has been suggested that *Trójumanna saga* was translated in

original source, Ovid's *Heroides* (IX) (Eldevik 2002: 57–60), suggesting that the idea expressed in it could be indigenous to medieval Icelanders. *Heroides* (IX) suggests that Deianira kills herself because she knows she has caused Heracles's death. Out of jealousy, she has smeared a love potion on Heracles's shirt, but the potion is actually toxic and causes Heracles great pains. Finally, he throws himself onto a pyre and dies. In *Trójumanna saga*, Erkules does not die and Deianira does not need to feel any guilt for causing his death. She nevertheless kills herself after finding out that her husband has taken a farmer's daughter as his wife. Before using violence against herself, she sends a letter to Erkules and describes in many words all the unmanly traits that he appears to have adopted after wedding the low-born woman: she mocks him for combing wool with his wife, for drinking wine day and night, and for eating dainties. (Louis-Jensen 1963: 32–34; Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 203.) Even though her words paint a picture of Erkules as a kind of non-heroic weakling, with whom she would presumably not want to be married, Deianira has nevertheless cried and shed tears for Erkules's sake, so that there are blots in her writing (Louis-Jensen 1963: 34).

Deianira's tears may indicate that she is sad, but her mocking words suggest that, from her perspective, she has been offended and she wants to get even. She is perhaps also vengeful: like Hildigunnr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, who brings her kinsman Flosi the bloody cloak of her killed husband, whetting him to avenge his death (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 291; Clover 2002: 15–16, 38–39), Deianira sends Erkules along with her letter a bloody piece of clothing. *Trójumanna saga* states explicitly that the fabric is reddened by *her* blood (Louis-Jensen 1963: 34–35; Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 203). In the end, she draws her sword and ends her life with it, thus following her father, brother and sisters who she claims have all committed suicide (Louis-Jensen 1963: 35; Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 204).<sup>21</sup> In light of Hildigunnr's gesture, which may reflect an actual custom associated with medieval Icelandic blood feud practice, it is as if Deianira urged Erkules to avenge her death. Since the excerpt implies that she holds Erkules responsible for her condition and thus guilty of causing her death, it could be suggested that Deianira urges Erkules to take revenge on himself, in other words, she incites him to commit suicide. It is possible that the translator misunderstood the meaning of the robe of Nessus saturated with Hydra's poisonous blood in *Heroides*, but even then, the possible misinterpretation is significant, since the meaning

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Iceland during the reign of Hákon IV Hákonsson. Some Latin version of the Trojan War has nevertheless been known in Iceland already by the end of the twelfth century. (Eldevik 1993: 658–659; Würth 2005: 165; Gropper 2011: 48–49, 51.) Deianira's story is found in its beta and Hauksbók versions of the saga.

<sup>21</sup> In the original version of the story, Deianira says that her mother, not her father, has committed suicide by sword.



of this section would most probably have been interpreted in the context of the blood feud tradition that medieval Icelanders were well familiar with.

It is not suggested here that *Breta sögur* and *Trójumanna saga* or the texts these translations were based on served as models for Brynhildr's suicide. The stories of Dido and Deianira also differ from Brynhildr's in that the husbands of the former ancient heroines do not die and therefore neither woman follows her husband in death like Brynhildr.<sup>22</sup> However, both sagas appear in Hauksbók, which demonstrates the genealogy of its owner, Haukr Erlendsson, from the Trojans through Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Brynhildr Buðladóttir (see also Rowe 2009: 347–348, 353–358). Thus, it is possible that the suicides of Dido, Deianira, and Brynhildr were known among those thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Icelanders who considered Sigurðr and Brynhildr their ancestors; the ideas represented in these stories could reflect models of thought shared by these people.

The idea that other people could be held responsible for a woman's suicide and that being guilty of causing someone's death by suicide was a reason for vengeance is reflected also in *Völsunga saga*. When Brynhildr's brother Atli has the Gjúkungr killed, his aim may be to possess Sigurðr's gold but he is probably also avenging the death of his sister, since he states that her death is what grieves him most (Finch 1965: 69; see also Kanerva 2018: 142–143).<sup>23</sup> Thus, the story of Brynhildr offered a distanced perspective as a case that people could discuss events that could elicit vengeful thoughts, such as if a kinswoman living in the household of her husband took her own life. In such cases, suicide could be considered a kind of forced act, caused by someone who did not hold the sword but who brought about the deed by their actions and behavior.<sup>24</sup> In the minds of men, enacting vengeance upon people held responsible for suicide could be

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<sup>22</sup> Other women who commit suicide by sword in *Antikensagas* include Cordelia in *Breta sögur* (Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 252) and Lucretia in *Rómverja saga* (Þorbjörg Helgadóttir 2010: 229, in AM 595 a–b 4to, ca. 1325–1350). Both of them appear to be motivated by shame. Cordelia commits suicide as she remembers all her sorrows and because she thinks her honour is threatened. Lucretia kills herself with her sword at a *þing* meeting because she has been raped and does not want to live in shame. It is possible that some would have understood Brynhildr's suicide in a similar way: that she died to avoid shame, but it can be questioned whether her shame resulted from her pre-marital relationship with Sigurðr, which, after all, produced one of the ancestors of medieval Icelanders (i.e. Áslaug), or her marriage with Gunnarr, whom she did not respect as he was not the man who could feel no fear. In addition, *Piðreks saga af Bern*, even though it represents the southern tradition of the *Völsung-Niflung* cycle, implies that Gunnarr is impotent, which, as suggested by the case of Unnr and Hrótr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, was grounds for divorce, but perhaps also a source of shame for the woman, since Unnr does not want anyone else but her father to know about her problem, and the saga states explicitly that no one could hear while she talked about it with her father (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 22–26).

<sup>23</sup> In light of the *sati* practice, Brynhildr is a sacrifice, but following René Girard's ideas of sacrificial victims in his work *La violence et le sacré*, Brynhildr is not a victim that can be harmed – sacrificed (murdered) – without the risk that her death will be avenged (Girard 2004: 29–30).

<sup>24</sup> Consider also forced *seppuku* in Fusé 1980: 58–60. The same principle appears to apply to Loki who is held responsible for the death of Baldr, even if he does not commit the actual killing. I thank Frog for this insight.

construed as justified, even though such an act was not necessarily realized in practice but only in the mytho-heroic time of sagas. Through this narrative medium, various troubling emotions related to such events could be purged and emotional tensions were relieved, which could eventually lead to catharsis. The sources scrutinized here also suggest that suicide was not seen merely as a deed of which the individual was guilty alone, whereas Christian ideas of confession and the criminalization of suicide in the Jónbók Law emphasized the personal responsibility of the perpetrator.

### **The Sword of Desperation**

In *Völsunga saga* Brynhildr resorts to a suicide method that, from ancient to early modern times, has usually been ascribed to men (i.e. she uses a weapon), whereas Guðrún's attempt to commit suicide by drowning has been considered a feminine method (Kanerva 2018: 148–149, and works there cited).<sup>25</sup> The “maleness” of Brynhildr's actions and character, including her tendency to see herself as superior to other women, has been noted in earlier research (McKinnell 2005: 229; Kanerva 2018; see also *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, sts. 61–62).<sup>26</sup> Likewise in Classical culture, using a sword to commit suicide was a “means of *virtus*”; that is, the method was associated with manliness, strength, vigor, bravery, and courage, and used by men. In Classical thought, women who resorted to this method were considered exceptional. When Lucretia killed herself by sword, Valerius Maximus suggested that her actions were enabled by a male soul that had been implanted into her female body. (van Hooff 1990: 21; 1994.)

The suicide of the “male-spirited” women who turned their own sword against themselves in Classical literature was often a consequence of tragic passion and fatal love (van Hooff 1990: 100–101; 1994). Like Deianira and Dido, Brynhildr is an angry woman who has been betrayed in love. Her anger and vengefulness are reflected in her foreseeing the fate of the Gjúkungs, which does

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<sup>25</sup> As a consequence of her suicide method and her character Brynhildr would probably have been categorized as belonging to the so-called *hvatr* group of people, who were thought to be “powerful, vigorous and bold” (Kanerva 2018; on the term *hvatr*, see Clover 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Another Scandinavian parallel which presents a woman who follows her husband in death as distinctive, honorable, praiseworthy, and strong (whereas other women are considered weak and disloyal) appears in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, where Gunhild, the queen of the Swedish King Asmund, commits suicide after her husband's death. According to Birgit Strand, for Gunhild (of whom nothing else is mentioned except her suicide), her suicide is a merit. In addition, Strand has pointed out that Saxo's attitude towards wives who follow their husbands in death in general is fairly positive. (Strand 1981: 146–147.)

not bode well for them, predicting only pain and suffering (Finch 1965: 60).<sup>27</sup> All three women are grieving, and they do not care to live anymore since their lovers are gone. In that sense, they have lost hope; in medieval thought, then, the opposite of hope was despair, which, along with sadness and sloth, was counted among the most common motivating forces that propel suicidal behavior, especially in religious sources (whereas chronicles concentrated more on worldly matters as motives for suicide; see Murray 1998: 400–402).

In late medieval Europe, despair was not one of seven cardinal sins, but, as the opposite of hope, was often categorized under the vice of *acedia* ('sloth') (Murray 2000: 372, 384), having two faces. One face was passive and apathetic, whereas the other was violent and dynamic (Barasch 1999: 570–573). In late medieval church art, the two forms of desperation were portrayed differently. Intense sadness and despair as sloth and loss of hope were portrayed as the passive and apathetic figure of Melancholy. Movement and action were absent from these figures, which could be described as somewhat sluggish. (Barasch 1999: 570–571.) However, there were two ways of representing the dynamic and violent type of despair, the figure of Desperatio. These figures were characterized by instability and restlessness, action and movement, and their movements were dramatic and exaggerated. It was not the passive and apathetic despair, but this violent and dynamic despair (which in the Middle Ages was not yet associated with insanity) that was thought to be self-destructive. (Barasch 1999: 572–573.)

In spite of the great sorrow that has robbed them of their will to live, Dido, Deianira, or Brynhildr do not remain passive. Brynhildr is ready to act and resorts to a sharp blade instead of bodies of water, and, unlike Guðrún, she is not frightened, having instead the guts and determination to follow Sigurðr in death (Kanerva 2018: 145–152). In fact, the account in *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* (st. 27) suggests that Brynhildr is capable of changing her mood and behavior so drastically that as a result of this change, she is able to pierce herself with a blade. According to the poem, Brynhildr excites herself in great frenzy: when she looks at Sigurðr's wound, fire blazes from her eyes and she snorts poison (Neckel & Kuhn 1962: 206). In the statement *strengði hon elvi* (literally 'she strengthened her *elvi*'), *elvi* is usually translated as "might" or "strength" (see e.g. Hill 2013: 110; Ney 2017: 50). The portrayal of Brynhildr's gestures bears resemblance with the Finno-Karelian acts related to "raising" and "strengthening" one's

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<sup>27</sup> Another example of a woman who kills herself (by hanging) because she is so angry is Helga in *Hervarar saga*: she becomes angry and kills herself after hearing that her father has been killed by her husband King Heiðrekr (Tolkien 1960: 26).

*luonto* (“nature”). In preindustrial Finno-Karelian vernacular understanding, this *luonto* was the “dynamistic force present in the human body/self” (Stark 2006: 262) which could be used by the individual to influence his or her surroundings. According to this conception, some exceptional individuals who had a “hard” *luonto* could work magic. They were powerful and they had agency, in the sense “what she wills, it happens” (Stark 2006: 265).<sup>28</sup> Raising and strengthening one’s *luonto* was linked to becoming angry and expressing various (even exaggerated) gestures of anger, such as grinding one’s teeth, spitting and being in great frenzy (Siikala 1992: 207–208; Stark 2006: 263). It is not suggested here that Brynhildr would be working magic, but, as she strengthens her *elvi*, she is as though evoking some kind of innate force that enables her to “change shape” (or rather: *hamr*) and become like a dragon who snorts poison. Brynhildr’s fire-burning eyes and her dragon-like features make her appear as fiercer and angrier and more aggressive than usual. She is as though raising her rage to get herself into a “killing-mood” and to become fierce enough to turn her own sword (i.e. to use violence) against herself.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, the violent and dynamic Desperatio in church art was either represented as a hanged figure (Judas Iscariot often stood for this type of despair), or as a female figure that was plunging a sword into her side (Barasch 1999: 573–574). The mental image of the fierce Brynhildr piercing her body with the sword thus resembled the iconographic representations of Christian Desperatio. It can be questioned whether this image ever entered the awareness of any Icelander when they travelled in Europe and may have visited cathedrals where Desperatio was depicted in the ornamentations of the church.<sup>30</sup> The idea if not the image of the sword of despair may nevertheless have been transmitted through Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*, which, like many of Gregory’s works, was apparently known in Iceland, presumably also by the writer of *Laxdæla saga*. His works also influenced the vernacular saga writing (Heizmann 1996; Wolf 2001). In *Moralia*, Gregory writes about Job as a saintly man who would not despair of God’s mercy and contrasts him with a robber who would pierce his body *gladio desperationis* (‘with the sword of despair’) (Murray 2000: 389–390). In the Christian sense, despair signaled a “failure to hope for

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<sup>28</sup> On the concept of *luonto*, see further Stark 2006: 262–266; see also Kanerva 2015a: 138–139.

<sup>29</sup> On Brynhildr’s portrayal in the poem as if she were *hamröm*, see Kanerva 2018, 145; on change in *hamr* in a slightly similar phenomenon, *berserksgangr*, and on the heightened state of embodied emotion behind it, see Frog 2019.

<sup>30</sup> In the Middle Ages, among the most famous representations of Desperatio was e.g. a relief in Notre Dame in Paris. The dating of the relief is not certain; estimations vary between ca. 1160–1250. Þorlákr Þorhalsson (1133–1193), for instance, studied in Paris ca. 1153–1159 (Fahn & Gottskálk Jensson 2010: 19), and therefore it is not certain that he would have seen the relief, whereas Icelandic students or pilgrims who travelled to Paris after him may well have seen it.

God's mercy" (like Judas) or committing a sin that was too grave to deserve pardon (like Cain). According to confessors' manuals, lack of regular confession, not confessing everything completely and unwillingness "to abandon the sins they confessed" were common forms of despair (Murray 2000: 377–378). This Christian connotation of despair, *orvilnan*, was probably adopted in Iceland at an early state; it can be attested in surviving homilies,<sup>31</sup> and miracle collections that emphasized *at einginn skyldi orvænta hennar myskunnar, hversu syndugr sem hann er* (Unger 1871: 981) ('that no one should despair of her [Virgin Mary's] grace, no matter how sinful he is').

It can be questioned whether Brynhildr's suicide would have been interpreted as being motivated by *religious* despair. Explicit evaluation that would have followed the orthodox Christian view is lacking in *Völsunga saga* and *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, where Brynhildr's character is morally condemned by the Gjúkungs – although not by Sigurðr, who finds her his equal (Heinrichs 1986: 122) – but her suicide is not explicitly disapproved. Brynhildr's blade as the sword of Desperatio may nevertheless have served as a contrasting model for another female ancestor, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir, as Guðrún's "saintly" aureole would have been brightened by Brynhildr's "pagan" despair.

### **The History of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir**

Like Brynhildr and Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga* seem destined to get married, but neither of the planned marriages takes place, either because of witchcraft (*Völsunga saga*) or because of another man's dishonesty (*Laxdæla saga*). Kjartan's return from Norway is delayed and Guðrún marries Bolli. When Kjartan eventually returns, Guðrún is already married, and Kjartan decides to wed another woman, Hrefna. Guðrún is presumably bitter, and she contributes to the hostility between Kjartan and Bolli. Eventually, the situation escalates and leads to Kjartan's death. Guðrún is not represented in the saga as totally innocent in Kjartan's death at the hands of Bolli and Guðrún's brothers. Her reply to her son's question which man she had loved most in the end of the saga is enigmatic; she says: *þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 228) ('I have treated worst the one(s) I loved most').

Unlike the heroine of the mytho-heroic past, Brynhildr, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir does not commit suicide. She was a historical figure, the ancestor of many remarkable thirteenth and fourteenth-

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<sup>31</sup> See e.g. *Íslensk hómilíubók* in de Leeuw van Weenen 1993: 9v.

century Icelanders who wrote and commissioned sagas. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of the account concerning Guðrún's death. It is also probable that the saga presented the great grandmother of Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson (1067/1068–1148) and the ancestress of the Sturlungs in a morally favorable light – even if it is possible that there were in circulation in medieval Iceland orally transmitted stories about Guðrún which may have differed from the accounts that have survived until today and which may have viewed her actions more critically.

In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún plays the role of the female whetter, who, in her own words, had spun yarn while Bolli was busy with killing Kjartan (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 154). As Guðrún spins the yarn, the linear historical time she inhabits is as though momentarily penetrated by cyclical mythical time: a link is made to the supernatural female figures who decide the fates of men. As Kjartan's fate is determined in the battle, Guðrún engages in a task that was obviously not an unusual chore for medieval Icelandic women in general, but which was often associated with mythical women, such as nornir and valkyries. She literally “spins yarn” – or the fates of men, as nornir and valkyries would do at the same time Bolli and her brothers attack Kjartan and eventually kill him.<sup>32</sup> Guðrún's role as a female whetter is converted into a role as a mythical *valkyrja* ('chooser of the slain') who, like Brynhildr when she had Sigurðr killed, is choosing the ones who will die. For a moment, she is not just a mortal woman with her own personal interests and grudges, but also an agent of fate whose actions are as if transcendently motivated. As a consequence, Guðrún's deed is (at least partially) excused.

Even though Guðrún as the instigator of Kjartan's killing is thus spared from explicit criticism, the saga eventually points to Guðrún's faults. Broken norms that could cause social disequilibrium and Guðrún's involvement in the breaking of these norms are symbolically referred to in an event that occurs shortly before Guðrún learns about the death of her fourth husband, Þorkell. As Guðrún is on her way to church in Helgafell one night, she first encounters a *draugr* ('animated dead person, revenant') that wants to tell her some great tidings but which she orders to shut up. Before she enters the church, she sees her husband and his men, all wearing wet clothes. As she

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<sup>32</sup> As shown in earlier studies (see e.g. Winterbourne 2004: 95–100) spinning and weaving have been associated with fate in many cultures through ages, including in Germanic cultures; see e.g. the valkyries Hildir, Hjörprimul, Sanngríðr, Svipul, Gunnr, and Göndul mentioned in Darraðarljóð in *Brennu-Njáls saga* who weave the threads of destiny (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 454–458). Spinning yarn is also associated with magic in *Fóstbræðra saga*, where Grima spins yarn after hiding Þormóðr so that his enemies cannot perceive him (Björn K. Þórolfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 246), and in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where Katla spins yarn to deceive the eyes of Arnkell and his men so that they cannot find her son Oddr (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 52–53). It is of course possible that Grima's and Katla's behavior was understood as the practice of magic, but, at the same time, this magic affected the fates of men. Thus, it could be considered a function similar to “weaving the threads of destiny” or “spinning the yarn of destiny”.

returns to the house, she cannot find the men anywhere, which startles her somewhat. Only later does Guðrún hear news about their having drowned. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 222–223.)

Guðrún's encounter with the revenant and her deceased husband, albeit she is not consciously aware of seeing the dead when it happens, suggests that, like the heroic characters in *Íslendingasögur* who encounter and destroy revenants, she is in a liminal state of social status (i.e. she has become a widow since obviously her husband is already drowned by then),<sup>33</sup> and, in her life, she has transgressed some social norms, which causes the dead as moral judges and as upholders of social equilibrium to cross the border between this world and the otherworld, interfering in the lives of the living (see e.g. Kanerva 2011: 33–44; 2013b: 225–226). Guðrún conquers the *draugr* as she orders it to keep quiet, and she is not affected by the other dead until later, when she realizes that they were not alive. As might be expected from a respectable ancestress, Guðrún does not become frightened by the realization of the meaning of the incident. She is merely amazed, which is expressed by her eyebrows shooting up, whereas other facial or bodily expressions that could indicate a drastic emotional reaction or horror are not mentioned whatsoever. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 223; Kanerva 2019: 63.) The scene suggests that, even though Guðrún's descendants showed her great appreciation by first preserving stories about her and then writing a saga about her, they were also aware that, from a Christian normative perspective, some of her deeds that had caused social disequilibrium were problematic and jeopardized her status in the Christian afterlife.

When Guðrún's fourth husband Þorkell drowns, she is said to have taken it much to heart, but to have carried her grief like a noble and outstanding person should. Not long after her bereavement, the saga tells that Guðrún became very religious (*trúkona mikil*) later in her life (in effect: the first nun and anchoress [*einsetukona*] on the island), and she is said to have been the first woman in Iceland who learned the Psalter by heart. After that, it is told that she spent a lot of time praying in the church at Helgafell during the nights. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 223, 228.) Guðrún is clearly portrayed in a positive light. Her familiarity with the Psalter<sup>34</sup> – that she had acquainted herself with this religious text and memorized it – suggests that she was considered a good, devoted Christian. But the Psalter had other meanings as well.

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<sup>33</sup> On liminality, see Turner 1985.

<sup>34</sup> According to Ian J. Kirby (1986: 81–82), since psalms were important for both devotional practices and liturgical purposes in medieval Christianity, it is probable that an early Old Norse-Icelandic translation of the book of Psalms existed in Western Scandinavia prior to the Reformation although no complete medieval translation survives in a manuscript.

Bearing in mind Guðrún's clerical descendants, such as Ari the Wise, her knowledge of the Psalter appears to echo some texts of ecclesiastical origin. *Augustinus saga*, on St. Augustine, is a translation of some Latin hagiographical texts made by an Augustinian monk and later the abbot of the Þykkvabær monastery, Runólfr Sigmundarson (d. 1307). This work presumably dates from the end of the thirteenth century (Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 326; Wolf 2013: 41). *Augustinus saga* may thus be slightly later than the original version of *Laxdæla saga*, which has not survived. Any intertextual connection with the hagiographical saga might seem far-fetched at first, but it is nevertheless worth considering that, in Augustinian monasteries, St. Augustine must have played a special role. The Augustinian monastery of Flatey was moved to Helgafell in 1184 (Jón Jóhannesson 1974: 196–197; Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 28–29). Helgafell was the farm where Ari and his foster father Gellir and his great grandmother Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir had lived (Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 120). It is probable that some knowledge of Augustine's life had been adopted in Helgafell even prior to the translation of the Latin hagiographical material, and that religiously significant contents of the story were transmitted also orally, not only to the monastery residents, but also to non-clerical audiences in the vicinity of Helgafell.

Both Sturla and his female kin who may have been involved in the commissioning and writing of *Laxdæla saga* (Guðrún Nordal 2013: 209–210) were familiar with the district and presumably also with stories of the strong women who had lived there and were portrayed in the saga, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Auðr/Unnr in *djúpúgða*. Helgafell was also in the vicinity of the farms Sturla Þórðarson inhabited while in Iceland (Saurbær, Hallbjarnareyri, Fagurey), while his wife Helga was related to the family of Skarðverjar, which also had connections with Helgafell (Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991: xcvi–cvii). Sturla, and presumably also his wife and daughter, probably had first-hand knowledge of Helgafell and its history, and of the social, religious, and political significance of the place. Consequently, people associated with the writing of *Laxdæla saga* would have been under the literary and spiritual influence of the Augustinian Helgafell monastery. Sturla and his inner familial circle, as well as their presumable connections in the monastery, may also have found it appropriate, if the ancestors of the family and Helgafell as a place were portrayed in a positive light in the saga (as was indeed done).

Of special interest in *Augustinus saga* is the description of St. Augustine's last days:

En i banasott sinni bauð hann, at honum skyldi rita þá fá psalma af Davíðs psalltara, sem einkanliga eru af sannri synða iðran; setti han þessi kvaterni við vegginn hia



hvilunni, ok las þar af psalmana opttliga, meðan han lá i þessi sott, ok felldi iafnan noglig iðrunar tar.

Unger 1877: 145–146, based on AM 234 fol, ca. 1340

During that illness that led to his death he asked that those few psalms from David's Psalter, which are particularly about the real repentance of sins, would be written for him. He placed these guidelines on the wall beside his resting place, and from there, as he was lying there in this illness, he often read the psalms, and he always shed plentiful tears of penitence.

Even though St. Augustine is already old and his health has deteriorated, he still heals men who are possessed by demons and a sick man before he eventually dies. The saga mentions the Psalter, and the connection between psalms and repentance. Accordingly, *Laxdæla saga's* statement that Guðrún was the first woman in Iceland to learn the Psalter and the first nun and anchoress in the country, who prayed in the church at night, is not only an indication of Guðrún's talents and her pious life. Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir behaves like the Christian saint: she resorts in her old age to the Psalter and its "psalms of penitence".<sup>35</sup>

The saint is also said to have shed the tears of penitence on his deathbed. From the Christian perspective, tears of penitence (*paenitentiae lamentis*) were also of great significance. Already in the early Christian (pre-Gregorian) theology of tears, it was indicated that, as a consequence of the recognition of guilt, tears purified the soul. Tears were the visual symbol of this purification. Later in the Gregorian doctrine of tears, Christian tears were conceived, like the tears of Mary Magdalene, as tears of penitence and regret, and as tears of love, grace, and compassion, as well as of pity for the Passion of Christ, and the purifying nature of tears was likewise recognized. In the following centuries, the meaning of tears as part of a pious Christian life – the holiness of tears – was further emphasized. Tears signified the love of God, saints were "blinded" by tears, and, for thirteenth-century female mystics, tears were an essential part of their religious experience. They were a sign of their repentance, a Christian practice, the role of which had been emphasized by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, where the annual Confession was decreed as obligatory for every Christian. (Apostolos-Cappadona 2018: 206.) The tears of penitence were holy tears, and, in

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<sup>35</sup> Connection between the psalms and repentance is similarly made, for instance, in the saga of St Mary, where the term *iðranarsálmr* ('psalm of penitence') is used (Unger 1871: 22, 362).

Christian thought, the proper place to perform one's penitence (and penitential tears) was the church (Iogna-Prat 2008: 163–165).

The decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in question was adopted in the Norwegian Church Law in 1268 (Nedkvitne 2004: 160–165), and it is likely that Icelanders too adopted the idea of annual Confession in the thirteenth century.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the practice of penitence was most probably known in Iceland by the twelfth century at the latest, since the earliest Icelandic penitential, Penitential of St. Þorlákr, dates from the end of the twelfth century (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1982), and, as Margaret Cormack has shown, evidence in *Íslendingasögur* and *samtiðarsögur* suggests that early thirteenth-century Icelanders were well familiar with Orthodox marks of penitence (1993: 188–199). Bearing this evidence in mind, the cursory mention of Guðrún's tears becomes all the more interesting: according to the saga, immediately after Guðrún has been portrayed as a good Christian, her granddaughter Herdís Bolladóttir dreams one night that an unfriendly-looking woman, a *vǫlva*, comes to her. She wants Herdís to tell her grandmother Guðrún that she does not like her company. As Guðrún prays in the church at night, she sheds many hot tears above her, which burn the *vǫlva* and make it unbearable to her. Herdís tells her grandmother about the dream, and Guðrún, who thinks Herdís's dream is a revelation, has the church floor excavated. Bones of a *vǫlva* are dug up and then reburied elsewhere where people do not usually walk. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934a: 223–224.)

The tears Guðrún shed in the church while praying, as a nun who presumably often spent time in solitude as she is called an *einsetukona*, suggest a Christian interpretation of the story: *Laxdæla saga* portrays Guðrún as a good and pious Christian, who repented her sins and purified her soul by shedding holy tears, which signified her love of God (see also Kanerva 2019: 60–64).

Concerning the burning effect of Guðrún's tears on the *vǫlva*'s grave, another interesting parallel appears in the story of St. Pelagia in *Barlaams saga and Jósafats*. This saga was based on a Latin model, which became popular in medieval Europe and was translated in Norway in the thirteenth century. *Barlaams saga* has often been associated with Hákon *ungi* (1232?–1257?), but views concerning the dating of the saga vary. Some scholars have suggested a connection between *Barlaams saga* and *Stjórni* and have thus concluded that the saga must be a late thirteenth-century work (Rindal 1993: 36; Wolf 2013: 46, 308), whereas Ian Kirby has questioned the relationship

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<sup>36</sup> The possibility that Icelanders embraced the practice of annual confession even earlier than Norwegians cannot be ruled out, either, since there were apparently some Icelanders present in the Lateran Council in Rome, e.g. Kygri-Björn Hjaltason (see e.g. Fairise 2014: 182–183).

(1986: 44n.57, 64n.60, 66, 97). *Barlaams saga* recites the story of St. Pelagia. In the saga, a bishop goes to church to shed tears and pray for the beautiful Pelagia, whose life is represented as immoral and pertaining to vices. The bishop's prayers are heard and Pelagia becomes a Christian and receives baptism. As she is together with the bishop in his abode, the devil appears to them and blames the bishop for shedding his tears on the devil's dwelling place (presumably in the church, as the bishop sheds his tears there), thus ruining of the grounds of the demon's abode (Keyser & Unger 1851: 87–89). The saga does not speak of tears that burn, but the principle appears as similar to Guðrún's case: like the tears of the bishop, Guðrún's tears cause the evil (in her case, the *vǫlva*) harm and inconvenience.

In the saga, the Psalter and tears appear as a "code word" that suggests a Christian interpretation of this particular part of the saga. In medieval Icelandic thought, or in the minds of the people in the western part of Iceland where stories of Guðrún, Bolli, and Kjartan were circulating in oral tradition and where many of the descendants of the families who had participated in the conflict were still living, Guðrún had sins to atone for since she had contributed to Kjartan's killing. *Laxdæla saga* suggests that she *did* atone for her sins, and that, as a good Christian – as the mother of Gellir Þorkelsson and the great grandmother of Ari the Wise – she deserved all respect.

Interestingly, Brynhildr's story in *Vǫlsunga saga* and Guðrún's story in *Laxdæla saga* appear to emphasize each other's meanings: Guðrún's piety emphasizes Brynhildr's pagan character, and Brynhildr's despair highlights Guðrún's hope – hope of salvation in the Christian universe she inhabited. Without Brynhildr as her counterpart, her guilt as a consequence of her actions as the "chooser of the slain" and the glory that follows from her penitence are not represented in full. In the district where Guðrún and her descendants lived, stories about her involvement in Kjartan's killing may have circulated in the area; Kjartan had been the grandson of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, and even though Kjartan's offspring is only vaguely implied in *Laxdæla saga* and *Landnámabók* and apparently did not gain any remarkable status in Iceland later on, rumors undoubtedly spread about Guðrún's responsibility for his death. Guðrún could have despaired and used violence against herself (in the imagination of the writer, but not necessarily thought of as an option by Guðrún herself), but she did not follow this "pagan" model. Instead, she conquered the ghosts of the past and the dead *vǫlva* and did not despair, because as a Christian she could rely on the grace of God and his forgiveness. In her contemplation and rituals of repentance, Ari's great

grandmother became a saint-like figure, and similar to *Vǫlsunga saga*, which gave voice to Brynhildr, *Laxdæla saga* became Guðrún's *apologia*.

## Conclusion

The various genres examined here all discuss the same theme, female suicide. Stories of Nanna and Brynhildr in mythic and mytho-heroic time, respectively, enabled people to represent, reflect on, and talk about this phenomenon that had been sanctioned by the Church from the twelfth century onwards and became a legal felony in the thirteenth-century Jónsbók Law. In these genres, various aspects of the act could be contemplated from different perspectives and compared to sagas situated in historical time, while making the phenomenon itself understandable. Although characterized in modern saga scholarship as less "realistic", these sources gave voice to those thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century ideas and attitudes that people may have held but which challenged the norms and views decreed and enhanced (at least officially) by the Church and the Crown. According to these alternative voices in mythic discourse, female suicide could be passively tolerated. Although people would not have expected and wished the widows to commit suicide, on a conceptual level, a woman's decision to end her life could be considered a better option than her survival, as far as the social equilibrium and the preservation of peace in her community was concerned, especially if there was a risk that the widow was vengeful and wished to generate discord.

As far as the sagas situated in historical time were concerned, the destiny of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir was well-known, even if stories circulating in the oral tradition could view her from different perspectives. *Laxdæla saga* emphasized Guðrún's religiousness later in life; this most probably reflected the view held by her descendants. After all, the deeds of this honorable foremother were slightly problematic if viewed from the perspective of Christian morals. Guðrún had sinned; as a kind of female "Judas", she had acted deceitfully and caused the death of an outstanding (Christian) man. Such a deed, especially if one was a pagan and could thus not hope for God's mercy, could result in despair. As a consequence of violent despair, a strong-willed woman could resort to violence against the self, like Brynhildr did in mytho-heroic time. Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir acted quite differently, however, and became a pious Christian who repented her sins in an orthodox Christian way. Even though the creativity of the saga writer was restricted by the commonly held orally transmitted knowledge of Guðrún's life, s/he could wash away her sins and make her a good Christian and a well-thought-of foremother. At the same time, in the mytho-

heroic past, another foremother, Brynhildr, served, through her pagan example, as the opposite of Guðrún. Her model emphasized the piousness of Guðrún's behavior, and her hope of Christian salvation. Suicide committed by strong-willed and respectable foremothers belonged to the pagan past, whereas the old Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir acted according to the norms of her thirteenth-century descendants.

In *Laxdæla saga*, suicide is not mentioned explicitly in the first place. However, it should be pointed out that *Laxdæla saga* does not explicitly condemn suicide either. Neither does the saga represent Hrefna's death in a negative light – even though it could be construed as suicide, since it was caused by grief – but the writer emphasizes the courteousness of her behavior. What is surprising is indeed that all the genres discussed here appear to lack explicit moral reprehension expressed towards suicide. The female suicides committed in mythic, mytho-heroic, or heroic time are not directly condemned in any of the sources scrutinized here. This notion cannot be wholly explained by the laconic style common to many sagas. The portrayal of Nanna's death from grief in mythic time is brief and laconic, even though the genre would have allowed comment on the subject, either through reactions of others in the narrative or in evaluative stancetaking by the narrator. Surprisingly, the depiction of Hrefna's destiny in historical time is more abundant in words (although not extremely wordy as such) and treats Hrefna respectfully, portraying her in a positive light. That the death of a widow is not extensively described could indicate that female suicide in general did not require detailed comment. Although self-inflicted death was not held as advisable and desirable (probably not even in a pagan context), there was no need to emphasize the sinfulness of the act, and the perpetrator was viewed with a certain understanding. Some may have felt empathy towards female suicides. Some may even have identified with the women described in these accounts, even though, in the medieval Icelandic thinking model, withering away slowly as a consequence of bereavement could be understood as weakness.

Although the Church Laws and Jónsbók Law punished the individual and thus held the suicides themselves responsible for their act, in mytho-heroic sources, the idea that the interpersonal environment could affect a person's behavior was made tangible. The portrayal of Brynhildr's suicide and its consequences, especially if read intertextually in connection with the translated Latin histories, voiced the thought that sometimes other people could be seen as responsible for a woman's suicide. As a consequence, suicide could be construed as a compelled act, something which could cause anger and bitterness in those who had lost their kinswoman. In the mytho-heroic context, those who were left behind were offered the opportunity to get even

and avenge the suicide. This practice may not have obtained in the actual medieval Icelandic reality, but the example in this particular genre suggests that vindictive thoughts were considered possible, and perhaps even likely.

Thus, the different genres examined here offer slightly different but occasionally also fairly similar views of female suicide. It is, however, fruitful to scrutinize these views represented in different genres since they allow us to see behind the ideal and the normative. By examining these sources, we can detect a variety of perspectives, some of which contradict the established rules and deviate from the normative or challenge it. As these perspectives are represented in literary texts, we know that they existed, at least as possibilities and as part of people's mental toolbox, even if they would not obtain in real life. Considering all these perspectives (and not just perspectives in more "realistic" sagas situated in historical time) enables us to draw a wider picture of the varying ideas held by medieval Icelanders concerning female suicide. They knew about the Christian ideal, but they also understood that, in real life, people acted in different ways. Some did not follow the norms prescribed by the laws, but the perpetrator was not necessarily morally condemned because of her act. In spite of the Jónsbók Law that considered suicide the worst of all crimes, a *níðingsverk*, all of the genres discussed here suggest that, when Bishop Árni Þorláksson opposed the Jónsdók decree in question, his act was not necessarily linked only to contemporary power struggles between the Church and the Crown, but may also reflect commonly held views of (female) suicide as a passively tolerated and sometimes understandable act that was also connected to the relationship between individuals and their intersocial environment.

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