

**“So is all the world a story”.  
An Icelandic storyteller’s  
life and stories<sup>1</sup>**

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AS Iceland has no specialised folklore institute the duty of carrying out folklore research has fallen to the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic studies and the Department of Ethnology at the National Museum of Iceland. The Institute has recorded a great deal of folkloric material on tape from all parts of the country, as well as from the Icelandic settlements in North America. This material includes all types of folk songs, along with oral compositions, both prose and verse: poetry of various genres, all sorts of folktales, and descriptions of folk customs. The oldest material examples in the collection are recordings made by four individuals on wax cylinders between 1903 and 1935. These recordings are mostly music: folksongs, hymns and the special Icelandic Rímur.<sup>2</sup> Numerous scholars and collectors have contributed to the archive and the folklore archive now preserves over two thousand hours of recorded folklore material from the last century. The majority of this material

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- 1 This paper was read as a Hermann Pálsson Memorial Lecture at a day conference held by The Scottish Society for Northern Research 27th November 2010. I met Hermann Pálsson a few times and I have of course also read some of his books; my favourite is *Söngvar frá Suðureyjum*, or Songs from the South Islands as the Hebrides are named in Icelandic, where Hermann mentions St Columba a few times. Another one read with great interest is his book *Sagnaskemmtun* (Storytelling) about the Saga tradition in mediaeval times. With these strands, quoting St Columba and mentioning storytelling, I decided to make a link to Hermann Pálsson through my title.
  - 2 Rímur are a genre of narrative poems that can be traced back to the fourteenth century. Rímur is the plural form, but the singular form ríma is used for a single canto within a longer rímur cycle. In a rímur cycle a story is related, and the cantos serve as chapters in a story. Rímur have strict forms when it comes to meter, rhyme and alliteration, but the four-line stanza or quatrain is the most common.

was collected in the third quarter of the twentieth century by three individuals: married couple Jón Samsonarson and Helga Jóhannsdóttir, who collected material from 1963 through 1973, and Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson, who was hired by the Institute in 1966 specifically to be responsible for folk traditions.

One of many informants in the folklore collection of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies was a woman who was born and raised on one of the small islands in Breiðafjörður, on the west coast of Iceland, where her parents lived as farmers and fishermen. Because some delicate information is contained in the recordings I am not going to reveal her true identity here, but will say that she was born in the early twentieth century and I will call her Lizzie. When she was 19 years old, Lizzie moved to the mainland to work on a farm and a year later she attended a school for young women in northern Iceland. That was the only formal education she ever received, as there were no schools in the islands of Breiðafjörður.<sup>3</sup> After that, Lizzie moved around the country for some years and worked in several places (spending time in the town of Akureyri and a nearby farm, as well as in Reykjavík) before marrying a man who also came from one of the many islands in Breiðafjörður. During the first years of their marriage, they lived on two different islands, but then moved to the mainland. They had four children; one died young. Lizzie worked for many years as a weather surveyor in her hometown for The Icelandic Meteorological Office. She died in 1986.<sup>4</sup>

When I interviewed Lizzie's nephew and niece, it emerged that she was the only one in the family who had gone away from home in search of education or work. They said that Lizzie had longed for higher education, but had no opportunity to study. She nonetheless acquired a wealth of information from her surroundings, oral stories and books. This information appears in turn in her own narratives and songs, both oral and written, and that is a good reason to choose her as a representative for the many tradition-bearers in the folklore collection.

More than one collector recorded interviews with Lizzie five times from 1965 to 1975.<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, a Danish folk music specialist accompanied the Icelandic collector and in this session the emphasis was on recording folksongs. Lizzie knew all kinds of nursery rhymes and verses by heart, as well as humorous verses and epic poems. Lullabies and nursery rhymes can be short verses, often with the same meter as *rímur*, and *rímur* melodies can be used, sung in a different style. Longer poems known as *pulur* are also

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3 Children were taught at home and sent to the nearest school on the mainland to take compulsory exams.

4 Most of the information on Lizzie's life is taken from the recorded interviews with her.

5 The shelf-marks of the recordings will not be given so as not to reveal Lizzie's identity.

used to entertain children or to put them to sleep. Þulur are some of the clearest examples of oral tradition. Their form is quite free, with no division into stanzas and very free alliteration and rhyme schemes, though usually a simple end-rhyme is used. Texts that are orally transmitted in this manner always undergo some form of change in the process. In the case of þulur, these changes are not only lexical – it is also very common for individual þulur to fuse together into larger units or break apart into several smaller ones. What may be a complete þula for one informant may be only a section of a much longer þula in the eyes of a second informant – one man’s text is another man’s fragment.

Although most transcriptions of þulur sung to children date from the nineteenth century, the oldest transcriptions date from the seventeenth century when several such texts were copied down.<sup>6</sup> That þulur are a much older phenomenon than this can, however, be stated with some certainty. While Iceland’s scribes paid little attention to þulur, the oral þulur tradition remained strong for centuries. When comparing seventeenth-century manuscripts to the twentieth-century audio recordings, it becomes immediately apparent that many of the þulur in these first attestations are still remembered and recited 300 years later. One of the þula that Lizzie had in her repertoire is *Kúabula* – the Cow Þula – where the names of the cows are reeled off as they return home one by one to be milked.

Sestu niður sonur minn  
og súptu úr ausu þinni.  
Nú eru kýr karls míns  
komnar af fjöllum.  
Íla og hún Ála  
ofan í skála.  
Drynjandi fer hún  
Dröfn og hún Hringja.  
Fræna og hún Flekka  
fylla þær skjólur.  
Gangi til hellirs,  
hvað er í hellri?  
Hornaskella,  
Aldinskjalda

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6 This can be seen in the hitherto largest publication of þulur, *Íslenzkar gátur, skemtánir, víkivakar og þulur IV*, edited by Ólafur Davíðsson and published in Copenhagen 1898-1903.

og Langspena.  
Dína og Dalla  
og drynja þar snjallar.  
Upp eru taldar  
karls kýrnar allar.  
Gullinhyrna gengur fyrir þeim öllum,  
mjólkur hún fullan stútinn handa börnum.

The Finnish scholar Otto Andersson travelled to Shetland in 1938, where he transcribed two verses and melodies sung to him by a Mr. William Ratter in Lerwick. One runs like this:

Baava bonja.  
Di mana wakna Starra, Stritja.  
Lyra, Langspanja koman heim an stidmo.

The informant could not explain what the text meant, but did say that this was a lullaby (Andersson 1938: 87-89). There is no doubt, in my mind, that this lullaby is a fragment of the “same” Cow-þula sung by Lizzie in Iceland around 30 years later. As a matter of fact, the Icelandic þula is often put in the settings of a lullaby, as Lizzie did, which starts by telling a child to sit down and be quiet. The earliest evidence we have of the Icelandic Cow-þula are nineteenth-century manuscripts where we can find examples that sound even more similar to Mr. Ratter’s version, for example the mention of “Brók og Brynja”; “Bjarnareidur með kolsvörtum mana, komin heim á sumri” and “Lína og Langspena” in the ms AM 969 4to.

The Icelandic scholar Jón Samsonarson’s research on þulur texts is still the most extensive in the field, and he has pointed out other cousins of the Cow-þula in Norway and the Faeroe Islands (Jón Samsonarson 1979: 157-159). In the Faeroe Islands this þula is part of a story in which an elf woman sits and counts her cows as they come home:

Eg sát már í heygi við Rumlu og reigju, hár hoyrði eg Hupulin gella; oman skríða Hákur og Krákur; kenni eg Kinu langs spina, Íla og Ála, Eskja og Kála, Geita og Grána, Flekka og Fræna; Hildan stjarna er kennd fíri már; Gullgríma og Oxakolla; misst hávi eg Grímuna grávu, stitstu og lágu; komnar eru kýr okrar allar. Stinjandi gongur hon Brinja aftast á hölunum á öllum. (Hammershaimb 1852: 201)

In Norway the texts are a part of the tradition of “lokker” or “lokkerop”, used to call the cows and goats home to be milked. These “callings” are sometimes

very simple, put together by sounds, but they often take on a form where the names of the animals are reeled off just as in the Icelandic þula (see Blom 1977: 27-47). Jón Samsonarson has pointed out that oral material from these countries would have had much smoother sailing to Iceland prior to the mid-sixteenth century as after then most oral texts arrived in the country from or through Denmark (Jón Samsonarson 1979: 155).

Lizzie also had in her repertoire the tradition about *jólasveinar*, those beings who supposedly wander around at Christmastime (see Árni Björnsson 1993: 341-353; abridged English version in Árni Björnsson 2008: 75-78), and songs about Grýla, their mother. The folklorist Terry Gunnell says:

One of the oldest Icelandic folk traditions – if not the oldest – is that connected with the figure of Grýla, the hideously ugly, ever-ravenous mother of the Icelandic *jólasveinar* (Christmas Lads). In modern day Iceland, Grýla is well-known to all young children. Along with the dreaded *jólaköttur* (Christmas Cat), she annually strikes terror in the hearts of under-six year-olds every Christmas when she descends from the mountains in search of badly-behaved children to eat [...] Despite the recent efforts of certain parties to ease the fears of the young by prematurely announcing Grýla’s death in a popular Christmas song, the ancient ogress seems to hang on interminably in folk memory. She lived over eight-hundred years, and, quite understandably, is not so easily persuaded to give up the ghost. (Gunnell 2001: 33)

The Faroese scholar Jakob Jakobsen researched Faroese and the fate of the Norse dialects on the islands off Scotland. In 1897 he published this verse about a female giant:

Ske[k]la komina reena toona  
swarta hesta bletta broona,  
fomtina (fjomtan) haala and fomtina (fjomtina) bjadnis a kwaara haala.

Jakobsen calls this “an old nursery rhyme from Foula [...] for frightening unruly, disobedient children” and he translates it like this: “A *skekkel* (that is to say: some sort of bogie or fabulous animal) has come riding to the ‘toon’ on a black horse with a white spot on its brow, with fifteen tails, and with fifteen children on each tail.”<sup>7</sup> Another word for Skekla is Grølik, a cognate of Grýla in Icelandic and Faroese (Jakobsen 1897: 51-52; see also Gunnell 2001: 38-41).

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7 In his *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland* (1928) Jakobsen says the the translation was “given [him] by an old woman” (I, p. xciii).

In the Faroese version Grýla has forty tails, a sack on her back, a knife in hand, and comes to cut up any children who cry for food during lent:

Oman kemur grýla frá gørdum  
við fjöruti hölum  
bjálg á baki, skálm í hendi,  
kemur at krivja búkin úr börnunum  
ið gráta eftir kjöti í föstu. (Thuren 1908: 65)

In Iceland a large number of songs about Grýla are to be found, and even though Lizzie did not have the exact equivalent of these verses from Shetland and the Faroe Islands in her repertoire many of the Institute's informants in the twentieth-century recordings do. Ólafur Daviðsson (1887-1903) published a version and made references to many nineteenth-century manuscripts (146) and one version was printed in a primer 1889. But there are even older examples to be found in manuscripts, such as:

Grýla reið í garð ofan  
hafði hala fimmtán  
en í hverjum hala  
hundrað belgi  
en í belg hverjum  
born tuttugu. (Jón Samsonarson 1975: 428)

The meaning of this Icelandic version is: "Grýla rides into the homefield, with fifteen tails, and a hundred sacks in each tail and twenty children in each sack." In the manuscript dated from 1582 the verse is put forward as a mathematical puzzle and the result is given as 30,000. The earliest Icelandic references to Grýla are from the thirteenth century<sup>8</sup> and the connection between the verses almost certainly goes back to before 1500, as after that time Shetland's direct connections with the Faroe Islands and Iceland were broken.

Although the description of Grýla in the tradition is not exactly pretty, verses about her have long been sung to children and were sometimes even used to sing them to sleep. This is likely also the case with other such "ugly" songs for children – dark lullabies – and the question of whether they would really terrify children into behaving themselves does arise. These rhymes

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8 Even a variant of the verse can be found in the contemporary historical saga, *Sturlunga saga*, quoted by a man on his way to launch an attack on an enemy's farm (this is supposed to have happened in the year 1221):

Hér ferr Grýla í garð ofan  
ok hefir á sér hala fimmtán. (*Sturlunga saga* 1988: I 266)

could also be thrillingly scary rather than nightmare-inducing – children still love to hear scary stories today.

The other rhymes and verses Lizzie had in her repertoire certainly do appeal to children. In them an entertaining absurdity alternates with glimpses of mundane, everyday objects. In addition to the human characters, which make their appearance here, both the odd and the ordinary, these rhymes are populated by a host of familiar farm animals – cows, sheep, horses, dogs and cats – along with wild birds and fish. Soothing motions, such as rocking or stroking, accompany some, while others involve little games such as counting one’s fingers. Still others are brought to life with specific actions, such as clapping, stamping or bouncing. Some are simply to be listened to and enjoyed.

Lizzie knew not only lullabies and songs but also many fairy tales and legends, of which the legends pertaining to her husband’s home-island and her own family comprise a major part.

When Lizzie was recorded for the last time, in July 1975, a friend of her family, also an islander, was present. Together they recalled various legends connected to the districts of Breiðafjörður. Most of those legends were already in print, and it may well be that Lizzie learned them from printed books, even though they were undoubtedly also orally transmitted throughout the district. The stories about her own ancestors are a different matter: she said that she had learned them because they were repeated again and again in her childhood home.

These stories concern elves (*huldufólk*, hidden people) and spiritual gifts. For example, Lizzie’s great-grandfather was the first member of the family to farm on the small island, and she tells a legend about him several times. He dreamed about an elf-woman who asked him not to mow her meadow; ever since, a small peninsula called *Heiðnatangi* (“heathen peninsula”) has been an *álagablettur*, a cursed or taboo spot. Every time Lizzie tells this legend, it is immediately followed by another one where Lizzie’s grandfather heard someone singing inside a cliff in the island. On one occasion this is followed by a memory concerning the occasion when Lizzie herself, along with her husband, heard song emerging from a different cliff. When asked about it, Lizzie said she had never spoken about it before, and it is clear that this memory is not a fixed part of her stories about the dealings of her family with the elves in the island.

Lizzie also talked about her great-great-grandmother, who had the second sight, or more precisely was “long-sighted” – she could see events as they took place even though they happened far away. Lizzie told how her ancestress saw that a man was stranded on an island but couldn’t figure out

which island it was. The next day the man was found, but no one had known that he was stranded. On another occasion she was able to say how many seals had been caught in one of the islands, even though she herself was on a different one. The daughter of this woman had the same ability, and she predicted that a father and three sons would drown near the island where Lizzie's husband came from. This event is connected to other legends Lizzie told concerning that island, but it is not clear whether she learned them as a child or after she had met her husband and his family. An example of such a legend is that before the accident occurred off the island, a sea monster or a strange animal called *fjörulalli* had been seen there again and again. It is clear that Lizzie believed in the existence of the *fjörulalli*: she pointed out that otherwise so many people couldn't have seen one. The same is true of the other legends. Lizzie was in no doubt about the spiritual abilities of her ancestors, or that hidden people lived in the cliffs on her home island.

However, she refused to tell stories of ghosts (*draugar*) or fetches (*fylgjur*) when asked. It is perhaps noteworthy that she herself experienced a rather mysterious event when she was a child: the children of the island heard a strange sound that was impossible to describe. Lizzie didn't tell this story, but read the account she herself wrote down. It is striking that in the account she refers to herself in the third person and thus distances herself from these supernatural events. Lizzie wrote down other legends as well: another one is recorded, a story about elves told to her by her friend. Further, her account of events and people of her husband's home island, as well as her memories of her grandmother, were published in the local historical magazine. This shows that Lizzie had ambitions as a scholar and an author.

But she did not write down her favourite legends from her childhood, and these stories do not contain any supernatural events. These are the stories of her ancestress, who lived on one of Breiðafjörður's islands at a time when Icelanders still lived in fear that Algerian pirates would land and kidnap people, as had happened in the south and east of Iceland in 1627. The woman was alone at home with her children while her husband was out fishing on Breiðafjörður. She saw a ship approach the island and was sure that they were pirates. She sent her children into the farm and stood herself in the doorway with a scythe for a weapon, and was prepared to defend her children with her life. It turned out that the ship was owned by merchants who had asked her husband to lead them to the harbour. Lizzie's story was recorded three times, and she had clearly told it many times before; nonetheless, it was never told the same way twice. Once she told it from the point of view of the woman's daughter, one of the children who was sent into the farm. Sometimes the ship arrives at the island because the crew needed water; sometimes they wanted



to buy milk. In one recording Lizzie emphasized that the ship had black sails, and so on. Sometimes Lizzie told a number of short legends about this same woman, but the legends about her are clearly not as firmly tied together as the stories about the hidden people on her home island. She told one story about when the woman was sailing on Breiðafjörður along with her husband and they met with very bad weather. The man was terrified, certain that they would drown, but the woman drove him from the tiller and sat by it herself, and told him how he should set the sails. They made it home safe and sound. All the legends about this woman agree in that they portray a woman who let nothing stand in her way, and show clearly that Lizzie valued stories about courageous and intelligent women.

I have researched eight storytellers who tell fairy tales but most of them tell some legends in addition to the fairy tales, even narratives of their own life experiences, as Lizzie did. But they often give their legends the flair of fairy tales, sometimes in their relation to reality and sometimes in the structure. Lizzie appears to have been brought up on legends rather than fairy tales, and she held on to the qualities of the legends both by telling them as stories of real events and by keeping the loose structure that designate most legends. But she didn't like to say much about herself or her own experiences, as can be seen when she refers to herself in the third person. As a result of this tendency to distance herself, her interest as a storyteller turned towards fairy tales rather than legends when she had grown up.

She and the other fairy tale tellers seem to wish to transport themselves and their audience away from the everyday and disappear into an imaginary world. But at the same time that they long to do this, their real environment creeps into their tales without their realizing it.

Many examples can be given of how local conditions and the natural environment in the tales, such as Icelandic landscape and weather conditions, point back to the storytellers' own surroundings, and how Icelandic farming society appears in fairytales even though a tale's main characters are princes and princesses (see Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson 1995). J. R. R. Tolkien delivered an Andrew Lang Lecture, “On Fairy-Stories,” at the University of St. Andrews in 1938. It was published later “with a little enlargement,” and in a note to it he says:

If a story says ‘he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below’ ... every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word. (Tolkien 1975: 76)

This then also means that landscape and local conditions in fairy tales can directly have a particular meaning for the storyteller and the audience. As an example, one may take one of my storyteller's variants of AT 327C (*The Devil (Witch) Carries the Hero Home in a Sack*).<sup>9</sup> In this Icelandic tale type it is a *skessa* (an ogress) who comes to the farm, takes the lazybones *Smjörbitill* (Butter-Bridle) and puts him in her sack. She heads off, up the mountain, home to her cave, but then she needs to relieve herself and asks where she should go to do this. *Smjörbitill* tells her to go to the seashore, thereby giving himself enough time to escape from the sack and make it back to his home. The farm where the storyteller lived is high up on the mountainside, and from there it is rather far to the seashore, although it is easily seen from there. The storyteller and her audience can thus put their own surroundings, *Their Mountain, Their Seashore*, into the story, and because they know the distances between them, the audience understands the amount of time that passes in the story without the storyteller needing to explain it any further.

In Lizzie's fairy tales the characters more commonly sail between places than walk from one to the other and it is clear that Lizzie's environment, the sea, has influenced her tales. In one of them (AT 404\*) a girl is transformed into an ugly woman by her evil stepmother and to get rid of the spell she has to, among other things, become a ship's captain. And another tale contains the only example that I know of where a shellfish turns out to be an enchanted prince.

Most often, however, it is rather difficult to detect a direct connection to the individual surroundings in fairytales, and instead what we have are examples of Icelandic ecotypes; it is not possible to connect such changes directly to the individuals who tell the stories. Distinctions would also have to be made between the views that appear in most or all traditional fairytales and the worldview of the storyteller him- or herself. All eight tellers in my research stick to traditional narrative laws in their fairytales and so does Lizzie. They ensure that everything that should happen three times does so, and they all use traditional phrasing that is well known from Icelandic fairytales in general. From these details it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the personality of the storytellers or their worldviews, since they employ such means out of respect for the tradition. The storytellers reveal their worldviews first and foremost through their choice of stories, and then by how they create new variations.

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9 References are made to the Aarne and Thompson international index of tale types from 1961 (AT) and not Uther's revision from 2004 (ATU) because most of the unique Icelandic tale types disappear in that edition (see Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir 2010: 240).

Six of Lizzie’s fairy tales have been recorded:

- AT 317A\* *Peasant Girl Seeks Prince*: Lizzie had two variants.
- AT 327 *The Children and the Ogre*
- AT 480 *The Kind and the Unkind Girls*
- AT 404\* *Girl Transformed by Jealous Stepmother*: In Lizzie’s version the girl is transformed into the most ugly woman
- Tale related to AT 949A\* *Empress and Shepherdess Change Places*: Lizzie’s story tells of a peasant girl who helps a princess to become a shepherd’s wife

Of the six fairy tales Lizzie could not remember when she learned two of them, apart from that it was probably when she was a child. The other four she learned as an adult.

Research on storytellers often shows that they choose fairy tales with heroes of the same gender and social status as themselves. This is because the teller identifies with the hero, so that his or her repertoire reflects the world-view of the storytellers (see for example Holbek 1987: 405-406). This is also true of Lizzie’s fairy tales. But most of them are very unusual and differ strikingly from traditional Icelandic fairy tales. In both variants of AT 317A, a girl gets a dwarf to help her because she has previously helped him, for example by saving his child. Usually Icelandic stories of this type do not involve a helper; in Lizzie’s version the episode illustrates a reward earned by a good deed.

Common to all the stories mentioned so far is the fact that they have girls as their main heroes. Lizzie only told one fairy tale where you could say that a boy has the leading role: the story of the three children of a king (AT 327). Her variant is very different from the “typical” Icelandic folktales of this tale-type. The usual story concerns two siblings whom the evil stepmother sends out to her sister, who is a *skessa*. Lizzie’s fairy tale has three children, and the oldest brother saves his younger brother and sister from a *skessa* into whose hands they fall by accident. The story is also unusual in that it does not begin with the death of the queen and the king marrying a new wife who becomes the evil stepmother. Instead, the king moves out to live with the queen in the next kingdom. The children’s own mother sends them away before she dies, in order that they will not become the victims of her husband’s lover. As mentioned, they fall into the hands of the *skessa* by accident, or more precisely because they lose their way. I have spoken to many people who remember Lizzie and her family and who have told me that the story is her own. She had three children and a husband who had an affair with a neighbouring woman. In the tale the elder brother discovers his father’s affair with the new

queen, who, of course, turns out to be a witch. The witch changes the boy into a dog so that he cannot reveal the affair, but this is, I believe, Lizzie's symbolic interpretation of reality and her own state of mind. Her eldest son was a teenager when his father's affair took place, and he had most certainly known about it, just as everyone else in the village did. Lizzie also knew that her son knew, but she could not discuss her feelings with him. Because of this, he becomes a speechless animal in the tale. This is by far the strongest example I have found of how a storyteller can tell the story of her own life in a fairytale.

Lizzie's version of the story also clearly illustrates a negative attitude towards men on her part. This picture is supported by the fact that all of Lizzie's other fairy tales concern good, intelligent and courageous girls who prove to be better than male characters at problem solving. Thus, the same characteristics and attitudes appear in the fairy tales Lizzie chose to tell as in her favourite legends about her female ancestors.

Lizzie longed for an education, and her writings show that she had potential as both an author and a scholar. I once commented on Lizzie that if she had been born a few decades later, she would undoubtedly have been an educated woman and a scholar. I was then asked what her specialty would have been. My reply: She might well have been a folklorist, or perhaps a historian, but her research would clearly have been written from a feminist perspective.

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