

## The Anomalous Pursuit of Love in *Kormaks saga*

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*Kormaks saga*<sup>1</sup> belongs to a subdivision of the Sagas of Icelanders called skald sagas, all of which deal in some way with romantic matters.<sup>2</sup> *Kormaks saga*, which is thought to have been written around 1200, is one of the oldest Sagas of Icelanders, but differs from them in a number of ways. The narrative is not centered on one dramatic event; there is, in fact, no climax. No important character is killed, and no one exacts a heavy duty of revenge. Honor and prestige are key concepts in the Sagas of Icelanders and the society in which they were created, but the protagonist of *Kormaks saga*, the skald Kormakr, behaves in a way that runs counter to ideals of honor. Moreover, sorcery and supernatural powers have a considerable influence on the course of events in *Kormaks saga*, and women very often play a key role in this connection. The saga's main plot concerns the love affair between Kormakr and Steingerðr, and the clarity with which the saga depicts the position of women in society and their point of view

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1. Einar Ól. Sveinsson has argued that Kormakur is the authentic version of the protagonist's name, and in accordance with this view the saga is here called *Kormaks saga*, not *Kormáks saga* (see Einar Ól. Sveinsson, "Kormakur skáld og vísur hans," *Skírnir* 1966, p. 164).

2. When I wrote this article, I had not yet seen Daniel Sävborg's *Sagan om kärleken. Erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur*, which appeared in 2007. I wish to express my gratitude to Sävborg for his comments and the interesting discussion we have had on the subject. I also owe several colleagues thanks for reading the article and giving useful comments. Many years ago, I attended a course at the University of Iceland on the Icelandic family sagas, where I chose *Kormaks saga* as a project. I am grateful to my teachers, Vésteinn Ólason and Jónas Kristjánsson, for their guidance.

is unusual. *Kormaks saga* is in almost every respect an anomaly. In this paper, I consider the saga's presentation of honor, love, women's views, and society's attitude toward those men who let their feelings control their actions and do not concern themselves with ideals of honor and prestige. I also attempt to determine if the saga is intended as a tragedy or a comedy.

### *Kormaks saga*

*Kormaks saga*, which is rather short, may be divided into five parts. A brief introduction describes Kormakr's grandfather and namesake in Norway, and how it happened that Kormakr's father went to Iceland and settled there. It is not specified where in Norway Kormakr's grandfather lived, only that he was "powerful and of prominent family."<sup>3</sup> Kormakr and his brother are then introduced, and Kormakr is described. The introduction concludes in the third chapter, when Steingerðr appears on the scene. The plot commences when she and Kormakr fall in love, at which time their problems begin. It is the events and activities of this section that have the most influence on the saga's course of events (in short that Kormakr asks for Steingerðr's hand, but when the wedding is to be held, he does not attend). The third part begins when Bersi is introduced and then becomes both Steingerðr's husband and Kormakr's adversary. The disputes and quarrels between Bersi and Kormakr are described, but little by little the saga's focus shifts almost exclusively to Bersi. The fourth part of the saga begins when Steingerðr leaves Bersi and is married to Þorvaldur Tinteinn, who becomes the greatest thorn in Kormakr's side. Many different conflicts occur between Kormakr and Þorvaldur, and especially between Kormakr and Þorvaldur's supporters, his brothers and friends. In the fifth part of the saga, Steingerðr, Kormakr, and Þorvaldur Tinteinn continue to form the classic love triangle, but the saga's stage is expanded beyond the borders of Iceland, mainly to Norway. The saga concludes overseas, with the death of Kormakr in Scotland.

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3. "Kormáks Saga" in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, trans. Rory McTurk with introduction and notes by Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 5. Here and in the following, references are to this translation.

### Dating the saga

*Kormaks saga*, once considered among the youngest Sagas of Icelanders, is now thought to be among the oldest. The primary evidence for its dating is found in the saga itself, since no other sources mention it.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars of the nineteenth century considered the saga “post-classical,” that is, written after the peak period of Icelandic saga-writing. They based their dating on the fact that the saga’s many verses overshadow the prose narrative, that it is replete with references to magic, and that its beginning differs from what is found in typical Sagas of Icelanders. The conclusions of these scholars were shaped to a great extent by their shared opinion that the oldest sagas were the best ones, as well as by their rationalism and antipathy toward “superstition.” Björn M. Ólsen later argued in support of an older date for the saga but drew different conclusions from the evidence given by earlier scholars for the saga’s young age, and believing that the roots of Icelandic saga-writing could be traced to an earlier period:

. . . sem má kalla kveðskaparöldina, þegar alt var lagt á minnið og kvæði skáldanna voru hinn besti stuðningur til að muna sagnirnar. Firsta sporið í þá átt að skrifa samanhagandi sögur mun hafa verið fólgið í því, að söguritarinn safnaði í eitt vísuð um viðburðina og tengdi þær saman með frásögnum í sundurlausu máli, sem vísunum filgdu.<sup>5</sup>

(. . . that may be called the age of poetry, when everything was dedicated to memory and the skald’s poems were the best means for keeping the sagas fresh in memory. The first step toward writing comprehensive sagas would have involved the saga-writer’s gathering together of verses about events and connecting them with snatches of narrative that accompanied the verses.)

4. The saga is preserved in *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) from the middle of the fourteenth century. A very short fragment of the saga is found in AM 162 f fol. from the late fourteenth century.

5. Björn M. Ólsen, “Um Íslendingasögur. Kaflar úr háskólafyrirlestrum,” in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmennta að fornu og nýju* 6.3 (1937–1939), p. 226.

In Ólsen's view, the large number of verses, the anecdotes involving magic spells, sorcery, and supernatural phenomena, and odd words that appear in it and almost nowhere else, testified to an earlier dating. He claimed that he could find nothing in the saga's diction indicative of it being young and placed it at the end of the twelfth century, ca. 1180.

In his preface to the edition of the saga in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series, Einar Ól. Sveinsson shared Ólsen's view, claiming that the saga writer had been "samvizkusamur, en ekki fimur að skrifa, lítill fræðimaður og ekki rýnninn."<sup>6</sup> He admitted that this in itself gives no indication of the saga's age, but agreed that it was old. Although Bjarni Einarsson had different ideas about the origin and creation of *Kormaks saga*, he was in agreement with Björn M. Ólsen and Einar Ól. Sveinsson about its age.

#### The verses and their relationship to the saga's prose narrative

*Kormaks saga* preserves more verses than any of the other Sagas of Icelanders. Of its 85 total verses, 65 are attributed to Kormakr, and approximately half of the ones recited by him are love poems. Most are concerned exclusively with love, passionate feelings, and amorous glances, although the first verse in the saga has a more melancholy tone; here love is blended with pain, and sorrow and mourning are the result of deep, uncontrollable love. Some of the verses are poems in praise of women, in which feminine charm is admired in an almost fanatical way. The other verses recited by Kormakr are unlike the love poems in both content and style. They are comprised of rebukes, threats, and insults on the one hand, and on the other descriptions of battles, swords, and the like. Some of the poems in the saga are occasional verses tied to specific events; they include verses about Þórdís the prophetess, her witchcraft, and her sacrifice of geese. The second half of the saga contains several verses, in which Kormakr describes a battle and laments the woman he still loves. These verses, which express hopelessness, are different in tone from the first love poems and characterized by strong, passionate feeling.

6. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Íslenzk fornrit* 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939): "conscientious, but not an agile writer, not much of a historian, and not scrutinous" (p. cvi).

Like Björn M. Ólsen, Einar Ól. Sveinsson was convinced that the verses were old. Both he and the *Íslensk fornrit* series are known as the chief representatives of the so-called Icelandic school, whose main critical focus is on “such matters as the individual saga’s literary sources (its *rittengsl* or literary connections), use of skaldic stanzas, manuscript transmission, dating, authorship, and provenance . . . [rather than] its oral background, its social and political biases, or its narrative art.”<sup>7</sup> Bjarni Einarsson thus took a different approach when he proposed that the verses were of the same age as the saga and in fact were composed by its writer.<sup>8</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson objected to his idea on prosodic, linguistic, and in some way contextual grounds, and Theodore M. Andersson also disputed his theories.<sup>9</sup> Bjarni Einarsson did not give up, however, and later reasserted his theories more convincingly than before.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, scholars have been for the most part in agreement in viewing the verses in *Kormaks saga* as one of many sources used by the narrator or writer in the composition of the saga, that is, that the verses and the saga’s narrative were brought together in oral tradition before the saga was written down. Heather O’Donoghue, for example, states: “There are some verses which allude in such detail to the specific circumstances of their recitation that it is hard to imagine how the verse could ever have survived transmission without accompanying explanatory prose, indeed, without the very prose context which at present frames them in the saga narrative.”<sup>11</sup>

7. Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 241.

8. Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur. Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1961).

9. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Kormakur skáld,” pp. 163–201; Theodore M. Andersson, “Skalds and Troubadours,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2 (1969), pp. 7–41.

10. Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer. En analyse af Kormáks saga og Hallfreðar saga* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1976).

11. Heather O’Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative. Verse and Prose in Kormaks saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 174; cf. Russell Poole, “Introduction,” *Skaldsagas. Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 27 (Berlin and New York: Gruyter, 2001), p. 2, and Daniel Sävborg, “Kormáks saga—en norrön kärlekssaga på vers och prosa,” *Scripta Islandica* 56 (2005), p. 70.

**Bjarni Einarsson's views reevaluated**

Various scholars have long considered it likely that both older and younger Sagas of Icelanders display the influence of the story of Tristan and Iseult (Tristram and Ísönd), which supposedly reached Iceland not only through the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas' poetic romance that was translated by Brother Robert into Norse in 1226, but in other ways as well. Bjarni Einarsson believed that various narratives or versions of the saga of Tristram and Ísönd had been known in Iceland at an early stage. He suggested the idea—which is still debated—that this influence is seen both in *Kormaks saga* and in its verses. He pointed out that (1) *Kormaks saga* is about love that is prevented by magic from coming to fruition, while *Tristrams saga* is about love that is incurable because of magic; (2) *Kormaks saga* contains an episode involving a duel that is similar to the duel episode in *Tristrams saga*; (3) both Kormakr and Tristram go to meet their loved ones but wind up in a trap laid for them by their enemies; (4) both sagas have love triangles and show sympathy for the lovers at the expense of the husband.

For many years, the artistic composition of the saga received little attention, and most scholars thought that it was poorly written and clumsy. For a long time, Bjarni Einarsson was the only one to draw attention to the ingenious narrative that the writer seemed to have completely under his control, yet his theory that the writer composed both the narrative and the verses met with a great deal of opposition and is still not widely accepted. In recent years, however, the opinion has gained some ground that although Bjarni's theory about the young age of the verses may not hold up, his reading of the saga, his approach and viewpoint, are quite valid. Daniel Sävborg reads the saga as a unified narrative and criticizes the opinions of Roberta Frank and Heather O'Donoghue, who place most emphasis on the discrepancies between the saga and the verses.<sup>12</sup> Like Bjarni Einarsson, Sävborg prefers to interpret the saga first and foremost as a love story: "Trots att stroferna säkerligen är äldre än prosan utgör de til sammans—som Kormáks saga—en analyserbar enhet . . . Vers och prosa samverkar till en helhet, vars kärleksskildring alls inte är torftig eller oroman-

12. Roberta Frank, "Kormáks Saga," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* 7 (New York, 1986), p. 299; O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative*, p. viii.

tisk.”<sup>13</sup> He points out that Bjarni Einarsson has been alone in his interpretation of *Kormaks saga*, since most scholars have considered the saga “oromantisk, torftig och rå berättelse utan kärleksuttryck eller kärleksdialog, där kärlek överlag underordnas strid och konflikter män emellan. Det märkliga är givetvis at dessa påståenden möter om just en saga som mer än någon annan islänningasaga är uppbyggd kring en mans kärlek till en kvinna.”<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Sävborg’s interpretation of *Kormaks saga* as primarily a love story. He correctly notes that in *Kormaks saga*, more so than in any of the other Sagas of Icelanders, the protagonist expresses his love directly and openly.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it is a fact that *Kormaks saga* has more than one thematic thread and two different voices. One is the voice that always speaks the language of lovers; the other is the voice that examines matters from the viewpoint of society. This double voice makes the saga provocative and entertaining, but it also gives rise to ambiguity.

#### One of the Sagas of Icelanders, a skald saga, or a saga under the influence of romance?

*Kormaks saga* is grouped with the Sagas of Icelanders despite its lack of various features that are considered typical for such sagas. Marianne Kalinke has delineated the key features that are thought to distinguish the Sagas of Icelanders from the romances: “The standard against which Old Norse-Icelandic romance has been measured has been the family saga with its objectivity, realism, and lucid style.”<sup>16</sup>

13. Sävborg, “*Kormáks saga*,” pp. 71 and 76: “Although the verses are certainly older than the prose, together—as *Kormáks Saga*—they form a unit that is possible to analyze . . . Verse and prose work together to form a single work whose depiction of love is not at all plain or unromantic.”

14. Sävborg, “*Kormáks saga*,” p. 67: “. . . an unromantic, plain and raw story without expressions of love or conversations between lovers, where love on the whole is subordinated to the fights and conflicts between men. The strange thing is of course to read such statements about a saga that more than any other *Íslendingasaga* is based on a man’s love for a woman.” See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Kormakur skáld,” pp. 163–201, and Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga. An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 233.

15. Sävborg, p. 68.

16. Marianne Kalinke, “Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*),” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 317.

Neither objectivity nor realism are, in my opinion, terms that can be used to describe *Kormaks saga*, but its style is certainly closer to that of the Sagas of Icelanders than the very different style of the romances, such as *Tristrams saga*.

A key feature of the Sagas of Icelanders is that they tell of events having to do with disputes or with the development of events and actions considered to be of great consequence since they are often tragic in some way. Events comprising the climaxes of the narratives are followed by descriptions of what happens in their wake, what consequences these events have. A comparison of *Kormaks saga* with other Sagas of Icelanders shows how different it is. The narrative of *Kormaks saga* is not focused on one dramatic event, and no one bears the heavy burden of exacting revenge. The saga describes many fights, often in the form of duels, but there are few killings, due mostly to the fact that the quarreling parties are often protected by magic spells.

*Kormaks saga* is a skald saga, and it has often been noted that the skald sagas are unlike other Sagas of Icelanders: “Tellingly, one of the most salient characteristics of the skald saga is the negative one of its not being a family saga [. . .] instead, its emphasis falls upon individuals at the margin of the Icelandic social order, who do not succeed in perpetuating their family line.”<sup>17</sup> Skald sagas are considered to have their own particular characteristics, but as Poole points out, the distinctions and demarcations do not work precisely: “Formally, a notable aspect of the skald sagas is their characteristic blending of prose and verse, a format that would seem a natural corollary of encapsulating the life-story of a poet. But this is no conclusive genre marker either, since many sagas of Icelanders, whether they are centrally concerned with poets or not, contain an essentially similar blend.”<sup>18</sup> The skald sagas share with the romances the fact that love is a central theme, which overshadows other events in the life of the characters.

It is important to consider how the Tristan material could have influenced Old Norse-Icelandic literature without it having been a direct literary model. Bjarni Einarsson believed that the French chivalric romances were brought orally to Iceland and influenced

17. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 5.

18. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 5.



the oral stories that existed there, among them the story of the skald Kormakr and his love affair, and the view that *Kormaks saga* is a “romance” must be considered. Love affairs are certainly important in many of the *Íslendingasögur*, but *Kormaks saga* differs from such well-known Sagas of Icelanders as *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* in that Kormakr’s feelings for the female character are clear to the audience. Moreover, in other sagas, different issues are intertwined with the love affairs, whereas in *Kormaks saga* the love affair stands alone as the central thread. Finally, the narrator of *Kormaks saga* seems strangely detached from the events described; duels, trips abroad, and activities at the king’s court are all described as if the narrator is not familiar with actual circumstances.

#### The narrative method of *Kormaks saga*

In *Kormaks saga*, Kormakr becomes the focal point of the narrative after a very short introduction that describes his family and upbringing, and the saga ends with his death. One may define the saga as the biography of a skald, but it is clear that the saga’s main theme (and the narrator’s primary interest) is the love affair between Kormakr and Steingerðr. Kormakr’s achievements and exploits in foreign countries are told in just a few sentences. On the whole, the narrative focus is maintained, but it is interrupted by the introduction of material about Bersi after his separation from Steingerðr. It is possible that the writer of the saga knew oral tales about Bersi that he considered natural to include, but Bjarni Einarsson drew attention to the fact that the chapters about Bersi are incorporated into the saga when the saga’s suspense is at its peak: Steingerðr has left Bersi, and the reader/listener must wait in suspense to find out whether her path will again cross Kormakr’s.<sup>19</sup> Concerning the Bersi material, O’Donoghue correctly states that “all of the events in Bersi’s life are carefully linked together in a causal chain, and as a result each episode can be traced back ultimately to the story of Kormakr and Steingerðr.”<sup>20</sup> Although the Bersi episode is long-winded, its conclusion is nevertheless important for the development of Kormakr’s and Steingerðr’s love story; as the

19. Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer*, p. 81.

20. O’Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative*, p. 89.

narrator points out: “As a result of these events Steingerd conceived a dislike for Bersi and wished to divorce him” (p. 36). The statement awakens the reader’s/listener’s curiosity: is there any hope that the lovers will be reunited?

The saga’s narrative pace is noticeably rapid in the chapters that take place outside of Iceland (the introduction and all of the final chapters). On the other hand, the pace decelerates a great deal in the chapters that take place in Iceland, which describe the time that the lovers spend together; the description of Kormakr’s and Steingerðr’s final meeting in Miðfjörður after their long separation, where they sit down in the grass together and idle the day away, is an example. On the whole, the narrative of *Kormaks saga* is more concerned with domesticity and the realm of women than with what happens on the broader social stage of men. This is clear at the very start of the saga, in the conversation between Steingerðr and the maidservant.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, several studies on the social position of skalds in Old Norse-Icelandic society have appeared, examining men’s expression of love, the arrangements of married life, and the consequences of not following established rules, as well as the importance of women’s consent to marriage plans, the nature and influence of magic, and love as a central theme in the sagas. Here an attempt will be made to use the findings of this research to show how different viewpoints in *Kormaks saga* make it a provocative and classic work of art: (1) the viewpoint of lovers whose love justifies their actions; (2) the viewpoint of a society that condemns anything that causes imbalance; (3) the comic viewpoint; (4) and the tragic viewpoint.

Björn Bandlien suggests that it is possible to explain Kormakr’s reluctance to marry Steingerðr because of her unworthiness for him; or, to put it better, by continuing to court her without asking for her hand in marriage, Kormakr is sending the message to society that he does not consider her worthy of him and that her family is so unimportant that he need not show it any overt concern. Þorkell, Steingerðr’s father, reacts as one might expect; his behavior reveals his concern for his dignity and family honor: “Þorkell shows his power

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21. Another minor example is when Kormákr comes to find Steingerðr after she is wed to Þorvaldr Tinteinn: he meets “a woman there on the farm” (p. 53), they start speaking, and Kormakr recites a verse to better explain his errand.

to decide on his daughter's marriage after all; he chooses a strategy where he manages to retain much of the honour he was in danger of losing if he had settled for Kormákr's reluctance to become his son-in-law."<sup>22</sup> *Kormaks saga* and other sagas containing the same motif (a man courts a woman but will not marry her) show the importance of the person called *giptingarmaðr*, a parent or guardian who is responsible for bringing a particular person into a marriage. Courtship visits or love affairs that do not end in marriage bring disgrace to the *giptingarmaðr* and threaten the balance of society, for a suitor who courts a woman continuously prevents the possibility of her being betrothed to another man. Although it can be argued that Þorkell in *Tunga* reacts as he should when he decides not to accept Kormákr's behavior, the saga-writer is not "behind him," as evident from the description of Þorkell's collaborators, Oddr and Guðmundr; they are "a boisterous pair" (p. 13), and Narfi, who helps him most, is "an impetuous and foolish man, and given to beasting, for all the pettiness of his character" (p. 12).

As is well known, the *mansöngur* (love song) was prohibited by law in the Free State period. Jenny Jochens claims that it has deep historical roots and may originally have been addressed to slave women. She believes that the *mansöngur* consisted primarily of an insult directed either at a woman's *giptingarmaðr* or her husband.<sup>23</sup> Bandlien considers it likely that the *mansöngur*, like other poetry, was powerful and influenced the position of the woman it described, turning her mind toward the man who least deserved it.<sup>24</sup> *Kormaks saga* shows that it was also possible to falsify a *mansöngur*, by composing an obscene poem and lying about the identity of the writer: when Steingerðr marries a second time, Þorvarðr and Narfi hire a tramp to recite an obscene verse to her and attribute it to Kormákr, thus damaging his reputation and infuriating Steingerðr, since, as she says, this news has "now been spread around the whole district" (p. 52).

22. Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion. Love and Marriage in Old Norse Society*, trans. Betsy van der Hoek, *Medieval texts and cultures of northern Europe* 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p. 68.

23. Jenny Jochens, "From Libel to Lament: Male Manifestations of Love in Old Norse" in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1992), pp. 247–64.

24. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 75.

**Honor and the attitude of society**

Luck, fate, and honor are key concepts in the Sagas of Icelanders. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, William Ian Miller, Jesse Byock, and others have pointed out that the course of events in the sagas is determined especially by the characters' responses to the demands upon them to protect their honor and, in particular, to increase it. In *Kormaks saga*, the honor of all the characters involved is important, and their actions are judged in terms of whether they serve to increase or decrease honor. Kormakr, however, holds a unique position in that all of his actions are more or less dubious with regard to the concept of prestige or honor.<sup>25</sup>

The position and prestige held by women in the thirteenth century was determined by the positions of their fathers and husbands, as well as by considerations of how good a match they were. Nevertheless, women had their “own” prestige;<sup>26</sup> although an affair between a woman and a man could put the reputation of a *giptingarmaðr* and his family in danger, the woman was often considered a decent match no matter what might have happened earlier; as Bandlien says: “Despite the multitude of stories about unwanted suitors in the early Icelandic sagas, there are few signs that women suffered from a lack of regard because of the situation.”<sup>27</sup>

In *Kormaks saga*, the reader's attention is often drawn to the fact that Kormakr makes decisions that are unlikely to increase his honor. Examples include “Thorgils [. . .] thought the situation would bring them little honour” (p. 23) and “Bersi said he would come, declaring that Kormak was choosing the less honourable option” (p. 29). Kormakr almost always does things that conflict with the rules of

25. Yet, as Poole, “Introduction,” p. 3, points out, skalds usually enjoyed the respect of society: “Many of them [the skalds] enjoyed prestige and prosperity both at home and abroad, not least because of their verse-making skills” (p. 3).

26. Sólborg Una Pálsdóttir, “Hlutu konur enga virðingu?” in *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*, ed. Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), pp. 41–55. See also Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, “En mér þykir illt að láta risnu mína”—Um virðingu kvenna og stöðu á heimili í Fljótsdæla sögu,” in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélagið, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 257–268; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 88.

27. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 87.

society, and good advice always comes to nothing in his hands. Among other things, he kills the sons of Þórveig, refuses to pay compensation to her, and drives her away from the fjord. This is unjust, and Þórveig does the only thing she can to take revenge, declaring, “This is how I’ll pay you back for it: you will never enjoy Steingerd’s love” (p. 16). Kormakr’s behavior is therefore one of the saga’s explanations for the problems that it recounts. All of the interaction between the lovers is colored by the fact that their relationship is problematic. Kormakr blames Steingerðr, telling her “he felt that she had let him down in wishing to marry another man” (p. 24). But Steingerðr goes right to the heart of the matter, when she says: “You were the cause of things going wrong before, Kormak [. . .]” (p. 24).

Kormakr uses every opportunity he can to express his contempt or distrust for sorcerers and their powers, as when he ironically says: “What will you sorcerers think of next?” (p. 25). In fact, it seems that this attitude is a main cause of his misfortune. The only time that Kormakr follows a prophetess’ advice is when he rejects Helga, Bersi’s sister, and it is noteworthy that Kormakr is here associated with his mother. The prophetess names his mother, when she warns Kormakr about marrying Bersi’s sister, but when his mother learns that he has rejected the match she takes it very badly. Like the prophetess, she uses the word fate (*forlög*) and says: “Not much luck will come to us from the way your fate’s turning out, since you’ve refused the best of matches there” (p. 24). In this instance, Kormakr chooses to challenge Bersi to a duel, and his mother helps him prepare for the fight. She asks what sword he intends to use and advises him to visit Miðfjarðar-Skeggi and borrow the sword Sköfnungur. Kormakr shows Skeggi little respect and again does not do as he is told. This and other incidents reveal that in the saga-writer’s view Kormakr almost always makes wrong decisions.

When Steingerðr is married to Þorvaldr Tinteinn, Kormakr tests the patience of the men with whom Steingerðr is associated. Actually, Steingerðr’s husband is such a milksop that it seems he will make no attempt to end Kormakr’s continued courtship of his wife. In fact, it is his brother, Þorvarðr, as well as Narfi, who view the courtship as dishonorable, although their immediate reaction is ignoble in that they falsify the *mansöngur* and attribute it to Kormakr.

Everything goes well for the brothers at the court of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri in Norway, and later the brothers become friends of Hákon's successor, Haraldr Grey-Cloak, "who was sympathetic to their interests" (p. 46). However, the chapters that describe the travels of Kormakr and his brother in foreign countries give very few details. One chapter states briefly that the brothers were held in high honor at the court in Norway and that in the summer they went on Viking raids, performed valorous deeds, and earned a great deal of fame. Nevertheless, it is obvious that what matters most in the narrative is the fact that Kormakr cannot stop thinking about Steingerðr. The verses play a key role here, because in these Kormakr expresses his incurable love. It is Þorgils, Kormakr's brother, who expresses what must be on the readers'/listeners' minds when he says: "You're always mentioning her, but you wouldn't marry her when the opportunities were there." To this Kormakr replies: "That had more to do with the spell-casting of evil spirits than with my fickleness" (pp. 45–6). The reply suggests that even Kormakr recognizes the role that his capriciousness may have played in the non-marriage, even though he lays the blame on the evil spell of Þórveig.

Due to Kormakr's insomnia and malaise because of his longing for Steingerðr, he decides to go to Iceland. Kormakr's physical sufferings certainly indicates that he is "lovesick," cf. the medieval disease "lovesickness" described by, for instance, Gerard of Berry and Andreas Capellanus (d. after 1191) in *De Amore* (ca. 1181–86).<sup>28</sup> His brothers' and the king's responses to this decision represent the voice of society and reveal how unwise Kormakr's decision is. His brother says: "I don't know at this stage how things will turn out," but the king said "he was acting unwisely and tried to dissuade him from the journey" (pp. 47–8). The episode demonstrates how Kormakr's feelings, especially his incurable love for Steingerðr, work steadily against his gaining social prestige both in Iceland and Norway. These dramatic prophecies, which in other Sagas of Icelanders would lead to damaging events, do not have real consequences in *Kormaks saga*, but instead give the saga a melodramatic or comic character. Various things occur on the way home, such as miserable weather and rough seas, but no

28. Cf. Mary F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 51).

sooner has Kormakr cast anchor in Miðfjörður than he sees a woman riding by on shore, and it is none other than Steingerðr!

### The feminine point of view in *Kormaks saga*

Carol Clover maintains that “[m]odern feminism has had less impact on saga studies than on other medieval literatures, perhaps because saga women, prominent as they are, were discovered long ago as scholarly subjects and their literary role remarked by generations of critics.” She points out that “Kellogg has made the intriguing literary-historical suggestion that the peculiar persistence of the vernacular in Iceland may indirectly testify to the participation of women, for whom the study of Latin was seldom feasible, in the production of literature.”<sup>29</sup>

The first scene in *Kormaks saga* describes the very first meeting between Kormakr and Steingerðr when they fall in love. The description, which is precise, vibrant, and beautiful, is given from the point of view of both parties. Later in the narrative, it is the women, Steingerðr and her servant, who consider the man and ponder his qualities:

In the evening Steingerd left her room, and with her was a slave-woman. They could hear the voices of the strangers in the hall.

The slave-woman said, ‘Steingerd dear, let’s take a look at the visitors.’

Steingerd said there was no need for that, but nevertheless she went to the door, stepped up on to the threshold, and looked over the wood stacked by the door; there was a space between the bottom of the door and the threshold, and her feet showed.

Kormak saw that [ . . . ].

Steingerd now sensed that she was being observed [ . . . ] The light now shone on to her face [ . . . ].

Tosti said, ‘She’s starting to stare at you.’ (pp. 7–8)

29. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” pp. 256–7. Cf. Robert Kellogg, “Sex and the Vernacular in Medieval Iceland” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh 1971* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), pp. 244–58.

Helga Kress argues that in *Kormaks saga* the gender roles are in fact reversed: “Það tilheyrir gamanseminni að hér er það kona sem bendir annarri konu á spennandi karla. Það eru þeir sem eru í sjónmáli, sem þannig er afhjúpað og haft til sýnis. Hlutverkum er snúið við.”<sup>30</sup> Helga makes no attempt to determine why this is the case in *Kormaks saga* as opposed to all the other Sagas of Icelanders from which she derives examples; she views the role-reversal first and foremost as comedy or a humorous exposition. Poole, on the other hand, argues that “Kormákr, for one, describes his male gaze as contested, if not anticipated, by a gaze from Steingerðr. That, along with the experience of falling in love at first sight, appears to unnerve him.”<sup>31</sup>

In his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Roland Barthes maintains that “every lover who falls in love at first sight has something of a Sabine Woman (or of some other celebrated victim of ravishment)”; the person in question ceases to be a *subject* and is transformed into an *object*: “. . . the object of capture becomes the subject of love; and the subject of the conquest moves into the class of loved object.”<sup>32</sup> Barthes suggests that the language of love is feminine by nature, and that a man in love can therefore be considered feminine, since his feelings have taken control of him. For this reason, he runs counter to the rules of society, and the language of love is a kind of babel, the language of poetry. In the quest for love, the goal always remains distant: it exists elsewhere and can never be reached. For this reason, a man in love is restless, lonely, and depressed; to be in love is a condition that is in direct opposition to society and that always tries to fight against

30. Helga Kress, “‘Gægur er þér í augum’. Konur í sjónmáli Íslendingasagna” in *Fyrir dyrum fóstru. Greinar um konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornþókmenntum* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofa í kvænnafræðum, 1996), p. 148: “It is comical that here it is a woman who directs the attention of another woman to interesting men. It is the *men* who are being viewed, and thus are uncovered and put on display. The roles are reversed.”

31. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 22.

32. Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977); *A lover's discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 188. In this connection, it is interesting that not only does Steingerðr watch Kormákr; she and the maid also openly discuss his looks: “Kormak heard them talking about his looks. The slave-woman declared him dark and ugly. Steingerd declared him good-looking and as fine as he could be in every respect, but added: ‘There is just one fault—that the hair is curled on his forehead’” (p. 9). When Kormákr’s appearance is described, it is specified that he looks like his mother: “Kormak had dark curly hair and a fair complexion and was rather like his mother” (pp. 6–7). Some medieval physicians and writers regarded love as a disease, and one of the symptoms was that it feminized the male lover (cf. Wack, *Lovesickness*, p. 65).



society in a subconscious, silent way. A man in love cannot express his feelings except through the language of poetry and madness.<sup>33</sup>

In Norse-Icelandic sources from the early Middle Ages, men who let themselves be controlled by love are viewed negatively: “Excessive love-longing positioned the man as submissive both socially and by gender and could also effect a questioning of the social identity of his entire household or social group.”<sup>34</sup> For this reason, scholars, including Bjarni Einarsson, have argued that *Kormaks saga* could never have been written without influence from the French Tristan material. However, Bandlien maintains that there is much evidence that Norse males could express their love without resorting to forms imported from the continent, even if such expression was in fact bound formally; it was, for example, natural to express one’s feelings in *dróttkvætt*. Bandlien says: “There are in my opinion good reasons to believe that skalds could express their passionate love in the early Middle Ages, and further that their poems could find a public that preserved them until they were written down centuries later.”<sup>35</sup> He further argues that *dróttkvætt* provided men with “a legitimate language for their love.”<sup>36</sup> In his view, Norse men sought out both the love of women and the recognition from them that served to increase the respect in which they were held. He claims that Egill Skallagrímsson, Kormakr Ögmundarson and Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld gained respect because of women’s love for them: “[A]ll win honour by winning women’s love.”<sup>37</sup> What is interesting about *Kormaks saga* is that although the social respect granted Kormakr is extremely limited because of his behavior, he enjoys the sympathy of the narrator and probably the audience as well.

#### The role of women in conflicts

Although *Kormaks saga* describes conflicts between men, the prominent role that women play in these conflicts is clear. At the beginning of the saga it is told that “Helga, the daughter of Earl Frodi, had a

33. Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d’amour* (Paris: Denoel, 1983); *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

34. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 93.

35. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 93.

36. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 108.

37. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 129.

foster-mother who could foretell the future [. . .]. [She] used to feel men with her hand before they went into battle; she did this to Ogmund before he left home, and declared that at no point would he be severely harmed [. . .]. The viking presented his side, but nothing could pierce him” (p. 6).<sup>38</sup> When Þorvarðr, the brother of Þorvaldr Tinteinn, plans his attack against Kormakr, he goes first to the prophetess Þórdís and asks her for help. Kormakr goes for the same reason and “[tells] his mother his intention” (p. 54). Dillmann maintains that in the Sagas of Icelanders and *Landnámabók*, the number of women and men practicing magic arts is about equal, with the number of women being slightly higher. Of the twenty-six sorcerous women mentioned in the Sagas of Icelanders, half of them are married women or widows,<sup>39</sup> and the prophetess Þórdís in *Kormaks saga* is married.

One of the distinguishing external traits of individuals who in the sagas practice magic is the look of their eyes, as seen, for example, in Þórdís and Þórveig in *Kormaks saga*.<sup>40</sup> Dillmann claims that in the scene in which Kormakr meets Þórveig in the guise of a “hrosshvalr,” no particular walrus or whale is meant, but rather a strange creature characterized first and foremost by its huge eyes; in other words, the creature displays the main distinguishing trait of people involved in sorcery.<sup>41</sup>

### The description of Bersi, Kormakr’s adversary and foil

Bersi is in many ways Kormakr’s adversary in that he makes the right decisions with respect to the rules of society. Indeed, he is introduced as “góðr drengr” (a decent person, p. 17). One way in which Bersi gains the advantage over Kormakr is that he respects Þórveig, “who was very skilled in magic” (p. 17) and follows her advice. When Bersi is offered the opportunity to marry Steingerðr, he considers her a good match, but with a “drawback” (p. 18). This “drawback”

38. Cf. Francois-Xavier Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne. Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises*, Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi 92 (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2006), pp. 61–2.

39. Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne*, pp. 423–5.

40. Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne*, pp. 186–7.

41. “People thought they recognized Thorveig’s eyes when they saw it [i.e., the animal]” (p. 45). Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne*, pp. 249–258.

obviously refers to Steingerðr's relationship with Kormakr. Bersi is told that he need not fear Kormakr because Kormakr has "made a point of dissociating himself from this affair" (p. 18). The fact that the match is made "very much against Steingerðr's wishes" (p. 19) is important, as is the fact that steps are taken to prevent news of the wedding plans from being spread around the district. It is typical of *Kormaks saga*, however, for a woman to try to take matters into her own hands, and here Steingerðr asks Narfi to tell Kormakr about the plan. Narfi is not exactly a trustworthy messenger (he is described as impetuous, foolish, boastful, and petty), and attempts are made to delay his journey. He therefore arrives too late to inform Kormakr of the wedding plans. The description of how he brings Kormakr the news is spirited, comical, and has a certain crescendo, displaying admirably the narrative abilities of the composer of the saga. For Kormakr, it is important to know if Steingerðr was in agreement, and when he asks if Steingerðr knew about this in advance, Narfi replies: "Not until the very same evening, when people had arrived at the feast" (p. 20). This information becomes important for events later in the saga. Bersi is valorous and comports himself well in most things, but when Steingerðr decides to divorce him, her being forced into the marriage against her will seems to be a sufficient reason.

#### The role of women in *Bersa þáttr*

The segment focusing on Bersi is, in the opinion of various scholars, a digression from the saga's main plot. There are, nevertheless, various elements that connect it with the saga's primary theme, the love shared by Kormakr and Steingerðr; in this segment, too, events are to a great extent determined by the will and opinions of women. Chapter 12, for example, relates that the sons of Þórðr Arndísarson and Ásmundr, Bersi's son, participate in a ball game that ends badly:

[. . .] the sons of Thord often came home blue and bloody. This displeased Thordis, their mother, who asked Thord to raise the matter with Bersi [. . .].

[. . .] Bersi now felt sure that Thordis had been behind the claim that Thord put to him. (p. 31)

Here the reaction of a mother's discontentment with the treatment of her sons sets events in motion. The men are of a different opinion and consider her demands for compensation out of the question. As a consequence, Bersi is insulted, and the friendship between him and Þórðr suffers a setback. At the Alþingi, Bersi fights with both Steinarr, Kormakr's uncle, who demands compensation from him on behalf of Kormakr, and Þórðr, a former friend. Bersi receives bad wounds that will not heal, and to add insult to injury, Steingerðr turns her back on him: "As a result of these events Steingerd conceived a dislike for Bersi and wished to divorce him" (p. 36). She parts from him with words of contempt. Steingerðr appears coarse and heartless, but her reaction is probably due ultimately to her having married Bersi against her will. Her father is supportive of her when she makes the decision, which may be proof that a woman's consent was important for a successful marriage.

Steingerðr's abandonment of Bersi is followed by the story of two new women in his life, Steinvör, his mistress, and Þórdís, his wife. The audience is told that "Steinvor stayed with Bersi, which displeased Thordis [. . .] Bersi brought Halldor home with him and gave him to Steinvor to foster. This displeased Thordis" (p. 41). As pointed out by O'Donoghue, the jealousy displayed by Bersi's wife's indicates that he is more interested in Steinvör.<sup>42</sup> The love triangle formed by his taking two women into his home leads Bersi to plan a conspiracy against Þórdís, which provides him with an opportunity to kill her brother Váli. Bersi, a representative of social values, now behaves ignobly and, like Kormakr, lets his feelings control his actions. In the light of this narrative, Steingerðr's decision to abandon Bersi receives a certain amount of support. Yet at the same time it is possible that the writer used the situation to display the consequences of a marriage built on economics, rather than on love and passion.

Steingerðr has scarcely left her husband before a suitor shows up: "Thorvald Tintein asked for Steingerd's hand in marriage, and she was granted to him with the consent of her kinsmen and with no protest from her" (p. 27). When Kormakr learns of the marriage, he keeps his

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42. O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative*, p. 98: "Her jealousy suggests an attachment between Bersi and Steinvör which the saga narrative discreetly fails to mention."

knowledge of it hidden. Evidently, he has also decided to change course in life, because he is on his way overseas. However, he goes first to visit Steingerðr and asks her to make a shirt for him. As readers of the Sagas of Icelanders know, such a request has a specific and unambiguous meaning, and Steingerðr takes his request extremely badly.

### The influence of women on the saga's course of events

Despite the fact that the social position of women in the Free State period in Iceland put limitations on the influence that they could exercise, *Kormaks saga* gives many examples of women affecting the course of events.<sup>43</sup> Steingerðr, for instance, often resorts to her own devices, the most telling example being when she tells Kormakr to ask for her hand in marriage.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as Poole points out, women are more active in the skald sagas than in other Sagas of Icelanders: “In general the skald saga women are shown as no mere passive vessels but as acting deliberately, whether to thwart or to support their lovers' schemes.”<sup>45</sup>

Another unusual feature of *Kormaks saga* is that a love verse is spoken by a woman.<sup>46</sup> Kormakr recites a half-verse in which he asks Steingerðr whom she would choose for a husband. She completes the verse by replying that she would choose him, even if he were blind, for then the gods and the fates would treat her well (“Bræðr mynda ek blindum, / bauglestir, mik festa, / yrði goð sem gerðisk / goð mér ok skop, Fróða”).<sup>47</sup>

As Poole observes: “While there may be some mentions of women skalds and even sporadic attributions of love verses to women, notably Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga*, we do not hear a great deal about love relationships from the women's point of view [. . .].”<sup>48</sup> Steingerðr is

43. Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 90: “Women's opportunities for direct influence in the economic and public spheres were limited. As a rule, women did not take the initiative.”

44. “Steingerd now asked Kormak to cultivate her father's friendship and obtain the promise of her hand in marriage, and for Steingerd's sake Kormak gave Thorkel gifts” (p. 17).

45. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 22.

46. See, however, Guðrún Nordal's discussion in “Tilbrigði um *Njálu*,” *Ritið* 3 (2005), p. 67, of the verses spoken by Unnur in *Njáls saga*.

47. *Kormáks saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson in *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 223.

48. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 22.

an extremely active participant in events throughout the saga. When her brother-in-law fights a duel with Kormákr, “Steingerd said she wished to go to the duel, and that was what happened” (p. 56). She then reveals her independent spirit and decision-making abilities when Kormákr gains the upper hand in the fight. He wipes his sweat triumphantly on her mantle and asks her “to leave with him,” but she snubs him, saying that “she would be the one to decide who accompanied her” (p. 57). Clearly, she is now the one in charge, not her fickle and poetic lover.<sup>49</sup> After Kormákr has returned to Norway, Steingerðr asks Þorvaldr Tinteinn to go abroad with her, evidently so that she might follow Kormákr; Þorvaldr’s reply—“He said that that was not advisable, but nevertheless could not refuse her” (p. 60)—shows it is she who ultimately decides. Again, when Steingerðr decides to follow Kormákr to Norway, her own initiative in doing so is clear, although the saga, as Sävborg rightly points out, never makes her motivation explicit:

Steingerðs önskan att fara utomlands motiveras aldrig. Med hänsyn till att närmast föregående episod skildrat Kormákr’s avfärd till Norge samt till hur ovanligt det är i *Íslendingasögur* att kvinnor alls tar initiativ till utlandsfärder synes det likväl rimligt att tolka hennes önskan som en längtan efter att återse Kormákr, och det handlar därmed om ett underförstått kärleksuttryck.<sup>50</sup>

The episode is certainly unusual and not in accord with *Laxdæla saga*’s account of Guðrún’s wish to go abroad with Kjartan.<sup>51</sup> It appears that the author of *Kormákr’s saga* had other ideas about women’s wishes to journey abroad as well as decisions by women in general.

49. It appears, however, that from this point on their relationship blossoms, because shortly afterward the saga states that “Kormákr was now always meeting Steingerd” (p. 57).

50. Sävborg, “*Kormákr’s saga*,” p. 94: “Steingerðr’s motives for going abroad are never fully explained. Considering the fact that the previous episode describes Kormákr’s departure for Norway and how unusual it is in the Sagas of Icelanders for women to take the initiative regarding journeys abroad, it seems all the same reasonable to interpret her wish as a longing to see Kormákr again, and consequently as an implicit expression of love.”

51. As Helga Kress, “Mjök mun þér samstaft þykkja”: Um sagnahefð og kvenlega reynslu í *Laxdælu sögu*,” in *Konur skrifa til heiðurs Önnu Sigurðardóttir* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1980), p. 104, has pointed out, there are several examples in *Laxdæla saga* of women who are supposed to stay at home, and do so, while their husbands/lovers travel abroad.

*Kormaks saga* as a comedy

*Kormaks saga* contains descriptions so comical that it seems likely that the saga was intended primarily as entertainment. One of the traits of a comic narrative is that people from low social levels play key roles; either they themselves are funny or they act as foils for comic characters or situations. In *Kormaks saga*, the maidservant plays an important role in that she helps bring the lovers together, among other things by putting into words what they themselves are not prepared to say plainly:

The slave-woman said to Steingerd, ‘That good-looking man’s coming now, Steingerd.’

‘He’s certainly a brave-looking man,’ Steingerd said. She was combing her hair.

Kormak said, ‘Will you lend me the comb?’

Steingerd handed it to him; she was the finest-haired of women.

The slavewoman said, ‘You would have to pay a high price for a wife with such hair as Steingerd has, or such eyes.’

Kormak spoke a verse [. . .].

The slavewoman said, ‘So you two have taken a liking to each other.’ (p. 10).

In the account of the fight between Kormakr and the sons of Þórveig, it is the situation itself that is comical. Narfi “sneaked about on the fringes of the fighting” (p. 15), and when Steingerðr’s father tries to join in, Steingerðr grabs his hands and prevents him from doing so:<sup>52</sup>

At that moment Steingerd came out and saw what her father was about; she seized him in her arms and he got nowhere near to supporting the brothers. (p. 15)

Other amusing episodes concern Þórveig, who controls the fate of the men and rewards those who do her bidding (Bersi), but punishes those who don’t (Kormakr). When Þórveig causes Kormakr’s boat to

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52. Cf. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 22: “Steingerðr, in *Kormáks saga*, grabs on to her father in order to prevent him adding his strength to an attack on Kormákr.”

fill with water under him, she says that “it was just a little trick” (p. 22). Kormakr simply cannot restrain himself and follow the rules; his curiosity is overwhelming, and when seeking help from Þórdís he manages to ruin everything she tries to do for him. Despite all of the humor, the conclusion is shameful: “‘It’s going to prove all too true, Kormak, that helping you will be far from easy. It was my intention now to avert the evil destinies that Thorveig had cast upon you and Steingerd; the two of you might have enjoyed each other’s love if I had slaughtered the third goose without anyone knowing about it.’ Kormak said, ‘I don’t believe in such things’” (p. 55).

### Who told the saga and what was its audience?

In order to gain a proper understanding of ancient texts, one must consider their contents. What do these narratives reveal? The answer may lead to evidence about the context in which a text was created, who participated in its creation, and/or who partook in hearing or reading it. Poole points out that many of the Sagas of Icelanders are concerned with journeys and the complicated relationships between kings and Icelanders, but that in *Kormaks saga* these elements are passed over quickly, even though the saga’s subject matter seems to direct the audience toward such material:

*Kormáks saga* . . . does little more than skirt past these topics, even though, to judge from other sources, the potential for a full realization of the pattern must have existed in the wider community’s repository of knowledge about Kormákr.<sup>53</sup>

One may consequently ask why the saga’s composer seems uninterested in material that is prominent in other comparable narratives.

Oral tradition and the saga audience are necessarily intertwined. Those who told sagas and those who listened were connected by unbreakable bonds, but were they men, women, or both? Most current scholars emphasize the fact that the Sagas of Icelanders developed from oral tradition.<sup>54</sup> If the sagas were recited orally, their contents were, as Poole argues, almost certainly changed at each recitation: “There

53. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 17.

54. See, e.g., Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” p. 293.



is increasing evidence that the skald sagas, like many other sagas, as we see them now, represent just one selection and arrangement of story materials that would have varied in substance and sequence from performance to performance.”<sup>55</sup> Recently, Gísli Sigurðsson has reiterated the importance of working from the central assumption that oral legends lie behind the sagas. He claims that in order to explain the interaction between oral tradition and written literature one has to have a working hypothesis, and that, therefore, there is “much to recommend the revised version of the ‘*þáttr* theory’ proposed by Carol Clover (1986), which appears to be broad enough and to rest on solid enough foundations to bring scholarship some way forward toward a valid reassessment of our attitudes toward the sagas.”<sup>56</sup>

I consider it important to approach *Kormaks saga* from the premises described by Gísli Sigurðsson: “Instead of squabbling about whether particular works come from oral tradition or are purely written literature, we now speak of works being grounded in oral tradition; and instead of bickering about whether formulas and formulaic narrative themes are evidence of oral origins or stylistic tics on the part of the writers, we now attempt to assess their aesthetic value . . .”<sup>57</sup> Scholars agree that the sagas were built on oral tradition, but who preserved them and told them? Is it possible that the sagas reflect different narrative environments (for example, stories preserved and told by men versus stories told and preserved by women)? Is it possible that a saga’s point of view may provide evidence of its having been preserved and told by women, as is perhaps the case with *Kormaks saga*? The Sagas of Icelanders appear to be directed at both readers and listeners, and almost everything indicates that the audience was mixed socially, that is, composed of people from different segments of society.<sup>58</sup> The manner in which both women and magic, or, in particular, sorceresses and prophetesses, influence events is a noticeable feature of *Kormaks saga* and likely reflects the fact that women were no less engaged in sorcerous activities than men.

55. Poole, “Introduction,” p. 12.

56. Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition. A Discourse on Method*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 330–31.

57. Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 44.

58. Cf. Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 188–204.

### Historical facts

Kormakr is named in *Landnámabók*, and *Skáldatal* states that he recited poems about Earl Sigurðr Hákonarson (d. 963) and Haraldr Greycloak (d. 970). *Heimskringla* makes reference to a verse from *Sigurðardrápa* by Kormakr, and Snorri's *Edda* attributes six half-verses, which are clearly from this *drápa*, to Kormakr. Kormakr is mentioned in *Egils Saga*, and in Haukr Valdísarson's *Íslendingadrápa* three characters from *Kormaks saga* are named: Kormakr, Bersi, and Miðfjarðar-Skeggi. Finally, in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* a half-verse is attributed to Kormakr. All of the evidence suggests that a skald named Kormakr existed in Iceland during the Saga Age. But it is peculiar that there seems to be no connection between these sources and the saga about Kormakr. *Landnámabók* speaks of the Skíðungar, the family of Þorvaldr Tinteinn, as a great and important family. The composer of *Kormaks saga* traces Þorvaldr's family nowhere near as precisely as *Landnámabók*, misnaming Þorvaldr's brothers and claiming that the family enjoyed little favor. It is also unusual that the saga places Kormakr at the court of Haraldr Greycloak but does not mention that he composed verses about the king. Here it seems appropriate to bear in mind the views of Gísli Sigurðsson and others who stress the importance of oral sources: "If we take the view that the sagas were grounded in an oral tradition, we have to assume that their audiences already possessed a certain amount of knowledge about the people who turn up in them. Each saga then becomes a link in the unrecorded, 'immanent' tradition as a whole. . . ." <sup>59</sup> The disinterest of the composer of *Kormaks saga* in historical sources indicates that in his opinion and perhaps in the opinion of the audience other events concerning Kormakr were more important and more interesting.

### Conclusion and overview

As noted above, scholars now generally agree that *Kormaks saga* is among the oldest Sagas of Icelanders, and that it is based on oral sources, among them verses that are a part of the material from which the saga was created. The fact that women play a key role in the saga's

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59. Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 330.

events and that some of these are told from a woman's viewpoint, may indicate that in origin (that is, while the sagas were still being orally recited and before they were committed to writing) the role of women in the creation of the sagas was more active than it was later, and that scholars have generally considered it to be. I am reluctant to take a position as to whether the Tristan material directly influenced the saga, but I believe it is likely that ideas about incurable love made their way into the society in which *Kormaks saga* was created.<sup>60</sup>

*Kormaks saga* is, in my opinion, a well-written narrative with lively, precise descriptions, many-sided characters, and a gripping plot. The fact that the saga is comical and tragic at the same—the comical having to do with Steingerðr's ambition and Kormakr's disobedience, and the tragic having to do with the fact that the lovers have no way out—suggests that the narrator's primary concern was to entertain the audience and rouse it to laughter at the same time that he appealed to its sympathy.

What makes *Kormaks saga* both difficult to understand and yet fascinating is that it is told from two points of view. One is the viewpoint of love, which justifies lovers' actions. The other is the viewpoint of society, which prioritizes prestige and honor. These two key concepts in the Sagas of Icelanders are in *Kormaks saga* treated in an unusual way, because the protagonist behaves in ways that are contrary to the ideals of honor. Kormakr is a poet who lets his feelings control his deeds, and social ideals are constantly being stretched to the limit because love is regarded as an unconquerable force. The saga testifies to a great respect for sorcerers, among whom women have a great deal of spiritual power. Only one person, Kormakr, scorns this power—and pays dearly for it—suggesting that *Kormaks saga* is in many ways a moral marker set up to protect against the behavior displayed by its protagonist.

TRANSLATED BY PHILIP ROUGHTON

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60. In the light of the prominent role played by women in the saga, it may be interpreted as a way of showing the consequences of a relationship between a beautiful woman and a man, who does not adhere to the moral guidelines of society, displays no social responsibility, lets his feelings control his actions, and pays little heed to his own honor and prestige. On the other hand, it is clear that the saga gives some weight to the notion that love is an overpowering emotion causing people (in this case both Kormákr and Steingerðr) to lose control of their actions. It is difficult to determine whether such a view had any resonance in Icelandic society in the Middle Ages, but influence from French chivalric romances brought to the north can be detected.

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