

Love in a Cold Climate—With the Virgin Mary

MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS

There is a wealth of literature devoted to the Virgin Mary and her miracles in Old Norse, most of it Icelandic. Much of it is prose, and a great deal of that has been gathered together in the compendium edited by C. R. Unger as *Mariu saga*.¹ While there have been a number of excellent studies of Marian prose texts,² a great deal of research is still needed to trace the sources of these texts, and, above all, to assess how Icelandic authors treated their source material, most of it available from the common stock of Christian Latin or European vernacular literature on the subject of the Virgin and her powers. Just as the Icelandic treatment of foreign sources and vernacular adaptations of European romances has been illuminated in the second half of the twentieth century by Marianne Kalinke, among others, so the voluminous Marian literature of medieval Iceland awaits further investigation, in order to throw light on this literature's role in the expression of indigenous religious devotion and the exploration of the medieval Icelandic psyche through adaptations of well-known miracle stories involving the Virgin's intervention.

1. C. R. Unger, ed., *Mariu saga: Legender om jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn efter gamle haandskrifter*, 2 vols. (Kristiania [Oslo]: Brøgger & Christie, 1871).

2. Gabriel Turville-Petre, "The Old Norse Homily on the Assumption and *Mariu Saga*," *Mediaeval Studies* 9 (1947): 131–40, rpt. in his *Nine Norse Studies* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), pp. 102–17; Ole Widding "Om de norrøne Marialegender," *Opuscula* 2.1, *Bibliotheca Arnemagnæana* 25.1 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1961), pp. 1–9; Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, and L. K. Shook, "The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist," *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963): 294–337

Less well known than Marian prose in Old Icelandic, and certainly less studied, is a group of skaldic poems devoted to the Virgin and her miracles. Although they cannot be dated precisely, most of this corpus of poetry was probably composed in the fourteenth century, while some devotional verse in honor of the Virgin and various saints comes from the fifteenth century. The very late poetry has been edited by Jón Helgason,³ while the texts of the fourteenth century and possibly earlier date appear in Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* (1912–15), E. A. Kock's *Den norsk-isländska skalde-diktningen* (1946–50), and now in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. VII: *Poetry on Christian Subjects* (*SkP*, 2007) edited by Margaret Clunies Ross, as well as in several separate editions dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Schottmann⁴ offers the most thorough and systematic analysis of this poetry to date, but there are also important insights into its sources and content in Paasche, Lange, Wrightson, and in *SkP* VII.⁵

The extant Marian poetry in skaldic verse-forms, all of it anonymous, can be divided into two groups. The first and smaller group comprises poems of devotion to the Virgin, which concentrate largely on presenting some of the central Christian liturgical and symbolic expressions of her powers in elevated skaldic diction. To this group belong the elaborate and very clever *Máriudrápa* (“*Drápa* about Mary”) as well as *Drápa af Máriugrát* (“*Drápa* about the Lament-of-Mary”). There are also many Christian skaldic poems on other religious subjects, such as lives of the saints and the celebration of the importance of Christ's cross, which include mention of the Virgin and

3. Jón Helgason, ed., *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði: Íslandske digte fra senmiddelalderen*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1936–8).

4. Hans Schottmann, *Die isländische Mariendichtung. Untersuchungen zur volkssprachigen Mariendichtung des Mittelalters*, Münchner Germanistische Beiträge herausgegeben von Werner Betz und Hermann Kunisch 9 (Munich: Fink, 1973).

5. Fredrik Paasche, *Kristendom og kvad. En studie i norrøn middelalder* (Christiania [Oslo]: Aschehoug, 1914), rpt. in his *Hedenskap og kristendom: studier i norrøn middelalder* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1948), pp. 29–212; Wolfgang Lange, *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000–1200*, Palaestra 222 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1958); Kellinde Wrightson, *Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse on the Virgin Mary: Drápa af Máriugrát, Vitnisvísur af Maríu, Maríuvísur I–III*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series 14 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2001). Marian poetry in *SkP* VII is edited by Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, Katrina Attwood, and Kari Ellen Gade.

her role at Christ's Crucifixion. The second, larger group is a collection of versified Marian miracle stories, most of which can be paired with, and probably derive from, versions of vernacular prose miracles published in Unger's *Mariu saga*. What is interesting about these poems is the extent to which they deviate from the prose texts and the various ways in which the skaldic verse-form and diction are used to present their subjects with particular emphases. The skaldic miracle stories include *Brúðkaupsvísur* ("Vísur about a Wedding"), *Vitnisvísur af Máriu* ("Testimonial Vísur about Mary"), *Máriuvísur* ("Vísur about Mary") I-III, and *Gyðingsvísur* ("Vísur about a Jew"), the last-named a fragment about a Christian and a Jew, whose narrative cannot be fully reconstituted from what has survived. Of these poems, all but *Vitnisvísur af Máriu* have known sources outside Scandinavia.

Late medieval European vernacular poetry of religious devotion was often characterized by an emotional fervor of great intensity, especially when addressed to the persons of Christ and his mother Mary. Very little of this kind of affective piety appears in the Icelandic Marian miracle poems. However, they display other qualities of equal interest and, it can be argued, they are equally concerned with the range of human emotions that we can call by the shorthand term "love." The figure of the Virgin acts in these narratives as a focus for the exploration of contemporary Icelandic social and, particularly, sexual relations; and the miracles attributed to her express some of the deepest desires of the protagonists of the narratives of which they form a part, desires whose realization was normally impossible in everyday life. Such a role for the Virgin was predicated on the Christian commonplace that she acted as intercessor with Christ for sinful humanity, and that devotion to her could therefore help even the most hardened sinner, as long as he or she prayed to Mary. This situation is dramatized very effectively in *Máriuvísur III*, a poem based on a well known Marian miracle story, often called "Ave on the tongue" or "The drowned sacristan,"⁶ in which a fornicating cleric, who is drowned in a raging river after visiting his

6. Ole Widding, "Norrøne Marialegender på europæisk baggrund," *Opuscula* 10, Bibliotheca Arnemagnæana 40 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1996), p. 93; Kellinde Wrightson, "Marian Miracles in Old Icelandic Skaldic Poetry," in *Treatises of the Elder Tongue: Fifty Years of Old Norse in Melbourne*, ed. Katrina Burge and John Stanley Martin (Melbourne: Department of Germanic and Russian Studies, 1995), pp. 87–99, and Wrightson, *Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse*, p. xx

lover, and is about to be claimed by a flock of devils, is saved from Hell by the intercession of the Virgin because he recites the “Hail Mary!” as he drowns, and its first words are found written on his tongue when his case is heard before Christ.

Mary’s role as intercessor effectively licensed stories that narrated miracles in which she acted, on behalf of humans or on her own behalf, to explore tabu and socially contested areas of cultural life, partly because she could be represented as championing those who defied social norms, and partly because these same people were often the least powerful members of society. Although the corpus of Icelandic Marian miracles derives for the most part from exemplars known from other parts of medieval Europe, it displays some observable variations and emphases that were almost certainly the expression of local interests and pressures. These characteristics are sometimes more prominent in the poetic versions of the miracles than in their prose counterparts. This may suggest that poets felt they had more freedom within the skaldic verse-form to deviate from their sources, both in terms of their general treatment of themes and in their ability to build particular emphases through the use of kennings and other stylistic devices. Another possibility may be that those skalds who chose Marian miracles as their subjects may have been composing for specific audiences, whose interests influenced the way in which the poets presented their subjects and, indeed, their actual choice of narratives. It has long been suspected that *Máriuvisur I-III* and *Vitnisvisur af Máriu* may have been composed either by the same poet or by different poets working within the same tradition, because they all have the same general structure, all narrate a Marian miracle, and all contain an invocation to Saint Andrew in stanza 2.⁷ These similarities suggest that the poet or poets may have been composing for a church or a religious house that was dedicated to both the Virgin and Saint Andrew, of which there were a number in Iceland.⁸

7. Bernhard Kahle, ed., *Isländische geistliche Dichtungen des ausgehenden Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1898), p. 17; Hans Sperber, ed. *Sechs isländische Gedichte legendarischen Inhalts*, Uppsala Universitets årsskrift 1910, *Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper* (Uppsala: Akademische Buchdruckerei Edv. Berling, 1911), p. xi; Wrightson, *Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse*, pp. xv-xvi; Gade, *SkP VII*, vol. 2, p. 740.

8. See Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland. Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, *Studia Hagiographica* 78 (Brussels: Sociéte des Bollandistes, 1994), pp. 78–80, 126–9, 172–233

What is certainly true is that many Marian miracle narratives represent her as helping either women or the clergy, both social groups whose interests were often subordinated to those of dominant secular male authorities in medieval Iceland, as in many other parts of Europe. Although the issue of ecclesiastical independence from secular authority was a major point of tension in most medieval European societies, there were some specific issues that affected the clergy in Iceland in particular ways. One of these issues was the ideal of clerical celibacy vis-à-vis the reality of informal clerical marriage or companionship (*fylgilag*), in a society where independence of the Church from secular society was very hard to maintain. Auður Magnúsdóttir has shown how, in the later Middle Ages and right up to the Reformation, priests in Iceland more often than not entered into informal marriage-like relations with women, which were officially opposed by the Church but in practice tolerated.⁹ On the other hand, clerical celibacy must have been very hard or even impossible for most ecclesiastics to achieve in such a society, even though it remained an ideal for the Church.

The little-known anonymous skaldic poem *Brúðkaupsvísur* presents a rather revealing dramatization of a young man's inner conflict between his inclination towards a life of celibacy and devotion to the Virgin and the social pressures his relatives bring to bear on him to marry a human bride. Because of the Virgin's intervention, he is able to resist their importunity, even though he comes within a whisker of being married off, and, with the support of a bishop, escapes to the wilderness (its location unspecified) for a life of solitude and devotion to the Virgin. The poem is an Icelandic version of a legend of the Virgin that exists in a number of medieval European collections, both Latin and vernacular. This legend also occurs in several versions in Old Norse, the closest to the poem being the D-version in *Mariu saga*,¹⁰ though some motifs are closer to other Norse versions.¹¹ The D-version of the prose legend states unequivocally that the young man is a *klerkr*, "a cleric, scholar," whereas the poem is not so clear: in some places he is simply a wealthy young man who has devoted himself to Mary

9. Auður Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och Fruar. Politik och Samlevnad på Island 1120–1400*, Avhandlingar från historiska institutionen i Göteborg 29 (Göteborg: University of Göteborg, 2001).

10. Unger, ed., *Mariu saga*, pp. 118–20

11. Schottmann, *Die isländische Mariendichtung*, pp. 355–6

and spends hours each day singing her praise (sts 3–4), and he is also said to be devoted to book-learning (sts 5–6). It is likely, though, that the poet intended to represent him as a priest, though evidently one whose family expected him to marry.¹² What is certain in the poem is that he was devoted to the Virgin:

Æstri unni meyju mest
Máriu siðknár,
og mætri sig snót
sjálfan gaf, bóka álmr. (6/1–4)

Prose order: Siðknár álmr bóka unni mest æstri meyju, Mária, og gaf sjálfan sig mætri snót.

Translation: The well-mannered elm tree of books [MAN] loved most the highest Virgin, Mary, and gave himself to the glorious woman.

Brúðkaupsvísur, which is in the difficult *hálfhnepp* meter, has been preserved in one early sixteenth-century compilation of religious poetry (AM 721 4to) and in three paper manuscripts deriving from it. It was not included by Finnur Jónsson in *Skjaldedigtning*, presumably because he considered it to date from after 1400,¹³ but Jón Helgason, who edited it in *Íslenzk miðaldarkvæði* II, was of the opinion that the original poem could be as early as the thirteenth century, pointing to old forms of pronouns, adjectives and verbs.¹⁴ It has been edited for Volume VII of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* by Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, and I am grateful to her for allowing me to draw on her edition in this discussion. Without denying the existence of the older forms Jón Helgason drew attention to, opinion on the age of the poem has to be balanced by the knowledge that

12. A kenning for the protagonist later in the poem (*kennir krossmarks* “knower of the sign of the cross” 12/1–2) suggests that the poet must have thought of him as a priest. Schottmann, *Die isländische Mariendichtung*, pp. 355–6, considered the poet’s apparently inconsistent characterisation of the young man as a consequence of his drawing on several prose versions of the story, but it may equally be a reflection of the uncertain marital status of clerics in late medieval Iceland.

13. See also Wrightson, *Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse*, p. xv.

14. Jón Helgason, *Íslenzk miðaldarkvæði*, pp. 127–36

it also contains some metrical irregularities, misunderstandings of certain kenning types, and uses some items of vocabulary not otherwise attested in Icelandic until after the Middle Ages. In the new edition, the poem has been treated as of fourteenth-century date and normalized accordingly, and the early features Jón Helgason pointed out have been judged to be poetic archaisms.¹⁵

The plot of the poem hinges on the Virgin's power to support the young man in the teeth of his family's wish to have him get married. Initially, as someone who had promised the Virgin to follow a chaste life (6/5–8) and often “sang beautiful services with love each day” (*saung fagrar tíðir með ástúð hvern dag* 7/5, 8) in her honor, he held out against continual urgings of people (*lýðir* 9/1) to marry, but finally capitulated to a certain unnamed man, “when a very strong wish of his kinsmen then was for it” (*er fíkjum ríkr vili frænda varð um það þá* 9/6–8). He was then betrothed to a wealthy young woman (st. 10) and the poet quickly moves on to describe the bridegroom-to-be and his wedding party (*fúss flokkur rekka*, “an eager party of men” 11/1) setting out for the marriage ceremony itself. However, the young man remembers that he has not performed his customary chanting in honor of the Virgin that day, so he slips into a church to do so, leaving the wedding party outside waiting. During the service he is overcome by drowsiness, brought on apparently by the Virgin herself, and he falls asleep. Mary appears to him in a vision (st. 13) and she is not pleased: “she was seemingly frowning at him” (*hun var ófrýn sýnum við honum* 13/1–2). She upbraids him (sts 15–20) in no uncertain terms, calling him fickle and inconstant for leaving her, to whom he had dedicated himself, and from whom he had obtained favors, for a mere human bride. She states bluntly that he has to make a choice between herself and the human fiancée (st. 18).

The six stanzas of the Virgin's speech are the emotional center of the poem and will be analyzed further below. Their effect on the young man is immediate: he wakes from his sleep (st. 21), takes his vision much to heart, and immediately cancels the wedding feast (st. 22), to the considerable dismay and anger of his men, who fear loss of face, “this journey of men will seem very bad, if you do so” (“*Sjá ferð*

15. I acknowledge the advice of my fellow editor, Kari Ellen Gade, in arriving at a plausible date for *Brúðkaupsvísur*.

fira mun virðaz fráleit, ef þú gjörir svá” 23/5–6). They immediately contact a bishop (st. 24), seeking ecclesiastical authority for their position and expecting the bishop to support them against the young man. Unfortunately for them, after the bishop has asked him why he has broken his promise, and the young man has told him about his earlier vow of devotion to the Virgin, the bishop comes down on his side, encouraging him to “keep every word that you have said to the queen while you are alive” (“*Haltu hvert orð sem hefir mælt við dróttning, meðan ert lífs*” 26/1/2):

“Betri mun þier vera vitr
– víst hyggjum það—Krist
– ástin hennar má mest –
móðir en hvert fljóð.” (26/5–8)

Prose order: ‘Vitr móðir Krist mun vera þier betri en hvert fljóð, ástin hennar má mest, hyggjum það víst’.

Translation: ‘The wise mother of Christ [= Mary] will be kinder towards you than any woman; her love may achieve the most; we think that for certain.’

The reason for the bishop’s change of attitude to the young man, whom he had previously called fickle (*hverforðr* “fickle in words” 25/4), is not clear in the poem, but is explicit in the D version of the prose text, which explains that he is able to demonstrate to the bishop’s satisfaction that he had betrothed himself to the Virgin Mary before he was betrothed to his human fiancée, even though his family did not know of his secret vow (Unger, *Mariu saga*, p. 120). For this reason the bishop agrees that he should keep his original promise (*heit*) to Mary and lead a chaste life in this world. He promptly departs for the wilderness, because he wants to be alone and devote himself to Mary: so ends the narrative part of *Brúðkaupsvísur*. In the remaining stanzas (28–33) the poet speaks in his own voice about his love for the Virgin, and how all people should ask for her mercy. He indicates that composing poetry in her honor will most likely bring rewards from her to him and concludes with a conventional prayer for salvation for himself and all men.

Brúðkaupsvísur is not noteworthy for its literary merit, but it is nevertheless a fascinating treatment of a touchy subject, the conflicting claims of spiritual and earthly love. Yet, ironically, both kinds of love are represented in rather similar terms. In the poem earthly love is represented purely in terms of kinship expectations and obligations. The young man comes from a good family and he is expected to marry a woman with good prospects, even though he is both studious, chaste, and devoted to the Virgin Mary. His behavior in jilting the woman, who is never described in any detail, is regarded as shameful by his angry wedding party. That these would have been the social values of medieval Iceland is taken as real, and the bishop's initial response to the young man's behavior is to support social norms. It is only when he discovers that the young man had promised himself to the Virgin before he had been betrothed to his nameless human fiancée that he decides, apparently on the legalistic ground of keeping one's word to the person to whom it had first been promised, that the young man is justified in jilting his fiancée.¹⁶ In addition, but secondarily, the bishop advises the young man that Mary will be kinder towards him than any human woman.

The bishop's last remark, quoted above, highlights a double standard which is unresolved in the poem and perhaps also in medieval life generally. The main reason why the bishop supports the young man against his kin, his prior vows to the Virgin, which amount to a betrothal that takes precedence over his betrothal to his human fiancée, has nothing inherently to do with the main reason why Christians were generally enjoined to love the Virgin, which had to do with her status in the Christian pantheon as the mother of Christ and intercessor with the Godhead for humankind. The Virgin's position was one of power, relative to human women and to humankind in general, although it was itself dependent on her role as Christ's

16. A similar legalistic ground is invoked in another miracle of the Virgin told in skaldic verse, *Vitnisvísur af Máriu*, and comparable prose versions in *Mariu saga*. This miracle story has not so far been attested from other European collections and may be indigenous to Iceland. Here a young couple fall in love and pledge their troth in a church before an image of Mary and Christ. Later, the young man becomes powerful and successful and denies his pledge to his girlfriend, who has become impoverished after the death of her father. She tells their story to a bishop, who summons the man to testify in the church before the same image of Mary and Christ. They act as witnesses and confirm the woman's story, whereupon the man confesses, and he and the woman are reunited.

mother, a kinship relationship, as a consequence of her virginity, unstained by sinful concupiscence.

In much medieval European Christian poetry, love between humans and the Virgin was expressed in similar terms to secular love poetry, and in some cases it is difficult to distinguish whether a poem is addressed to a human lover or to Mary herself.¹⁷ In *Brúðkaupsvísur*, the relationship between the Virgin and the young man is also expressed in terms of human heterosexual relations, especially in her long address to her devotee. The bishop's remark that Mary will be kinder to the young man than any woman, "her love may achieve the most" (*ástin hennar má mest* 26/7), may be read out of context as a conventional assertion of Mary's power to save humans in spiritual need, but, as it is expressed in the poem, and in the young man's experience, which is revealed to the audience by means of Mary's direct address to him in a vision in stanzas 15–20 (and which the bishop is not privy to), her very strong love is dramatised as petulant jealousy and bossy control of her devotee, even though it is earlier described more conventionally as mercy (*mildi* 3/5) towards him.

The young man is established in the early part of the poem as resisting the pressures of normal social life to devote himself to the cult of the Virgin and as being learned, chaste and virtuous (stanzas 5–8). As we have established earlier, it is likely that the poet intended to represent him as a cleric, even though the kennings and other phrases used to describe him are not always clear on this point. His behavior, as represented, is typical of someone who wants to devote himself to the contemplative life, with Mary as the focus of his devotion. He rejects both marriage and, later in the poem, human society generally, without that society being characterised as specifically Icelandic. Nevertheless, the one social institution at the heart of the narrative, marriage, comprising betrothal followed by a separate wedding ceremony, is immediately recognizable,¹⁸ and the Virgin, in her address to the young man, is clearly aware of the two necessary parts to a legitimate Icelandic marriage, and uses that knowledge to her advantage.

17. Christiania Whitehead, 'Middle English Religious Lyrics', in *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric*, ed. Thomas G. Duncan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 105–6

18. cf. Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 20–52

By contrast with the poet's depiction of the young man's fairly conventional asceticism, for which he was largely indebted to his source, his representation of the Virgin herself is unusually lively in terms of a range of human emotions, from possessiveness to jealousy. *Brúðkaupsvísur* goes beyond any of the extant prose versions of this miracle story in the detail of its depiction of the Virgin's reaction to the young man's impending marriage. This poet's Virgin comes across as very much a flesh-and-blood woman facing a situation in which her betrothed has threatened to abandon her for another woman, and not at all as the merciful mother of Christ interceding for a sinful human subject. Although the poet mentions this conventional image of the Virgin at a number of points in the poem, particularly at the beginning and end, they remain at the level of convention, while the angry Virgin of the young man's vision is far more dynamic and confronting.

The vision occupies the central part of the poem, beginning at stanza 13, where the poet describes how Mary appears to the young man as he slept in church, seemingly frowning at him and apparently angry and unhappy (*þótti vera reið og óglöð*, “she seemed to be angry and unhappy” 13/6, 8). The poet's emphasis on her anger and distress here goes well beyond the more decorous description of the D-version of the prose saga, where she is said to be “with the appearance of sorrow” (*með hrygðar yfirbragði* Unger, *Mariu saga*, p. 119). In stanza 14, the young man addresses the Virgin directly to find out why she is so sad and angry, and, from stanzas 15–20, she sets out her grievances. In the first place, she says, she is angry with him (*em eg þier reið* “I am angry with you” 15/4) because he is “fickle and inconstant” (*brigðlyndr og lausgeðr* 15/1, 2), wanting to forsake her company. She judges his offences in stanza 16 as “grievous” (*sárar sakir* 16/2, 3). It is clear that she feels jilted and jealous:

“Væn hugðumz vera þín
vinmær allkær,
báru, en þú bregðz mier
bálruðr, um það mál.” (16/5–8)

Prose order: “Hugðumz vera þín væn, allkær vinmær, en þú bregðz mier, báru bálruðr, um það mál.”

Translation: “I thought I was your beautiful, very dear beloved maiden, but you deceive me, bush of the flame of the wave [GOLD > MAN], in that matter.”

These are the words of sexual jealousy rather than spiritual mercy and grace. The Virgin asserts that she is the young man’s true betrothed, and that his proposal to marry a human woman indicates that his love for her is beginning to dissolve (*tekr renna* 17/1). She presents him as ungrateful and guilty of rejection, given that “I caused your prosperity to begin” (*Eg liet þín þrif hefjaz* 17/5). Here, then, the Virgin’s generosity towards her devotee is represented as something that should produce a reciprocal obligation of life-long fidelity, interpreted as chastity in human terms, on the part of her worshipper. This notion is of course perfectly consonant with secular ideas of generosity and gift-giving in early Scandinavian society, as we find them articulated in *Hávamál*, for example, but not so easy to accommodate to Christian ideas of spiritual generosity and mercy.

The Virgin goes on to predict that the young man’s human marriage will not last and that “affection will come to nothing” (*og ástúð eyðaz* 18/3), which she threatens will also be the case with the love between the two of them unless he gives up his fiancée and remembers her. In stanza 19, she suggests that what she perceives as the cooling of his affection might be due to his blaming her for failing to love him, but she assures him that she “wanted to keep on loving [him] very firmly for ever and ever” (*“Eg vilda að halda ástum við þig allfast um aldr”* 19/5, 8). Her parting shot is to renew her request to him for love and friendship (*elsku og vinlags* 20/2, 4), while the wedding feast is delayed (*meðan boðið dvelz* 20/2), because “a wife will not suit you” (*“Víf mun eigi hæfa þier”* 20/5,6, 7) and no suitable human bride will be found for him, however far he travels. She implicitly recognizes that as long as the wedding feast is delayed, the marriage cannot be concluded and that she still has time to win the young man back to her side. Her strategy certainly works. The young man wastes no time in calling off the wedding, indicating his relief: “My mind has changed quickly, yet I am not sad” (*“skap mitt hefir skipaz skjótt þó e*mka eg dapr”* 22/7–8).

Brúðkaupsvísur projects what a modern reader might consider a double standard towards its subject, in that the spiritual love that the Virgin is conventionally expected to show her human worshippers, expressed as generosity and mercy towards them in connection with the

salvation of their souls, is here represented in terms of fidelity in love for her rather than for an earthly woman. Denial of human sexuality is, of course, the ascetic way, which Christianity has always recommended to its most zealous adherents. What is unusual about this miracle poem is that the figure of the Virgin herself is made to invoke secular values of love, loyalty, oath swearing and reciprocity to achieve her ends, and the other religious authority figure, the bishop, is persuaded that the young man should reject his human bride principally because the latter had secretly betrothed himself to the Virgin before his family had engaged him to a woman of their choice. The reasons why the young man is finally permitted to live a life of devotion to the Virgin have therefore everything to do with secular motivations and very little to do with religious fervor, though he himself is said to have been so motivated. Thus clerical celibacy and Mariolatry are sanctioned by secular values applied by two figures of Christian authority, the Virgin herself and the bishop. The secular world, as represented by the young man's family and his wedding party, is disregarded and there appear to be no reprisals for his reneging on his family's marriage plans for him.

This brings us to the point where we can consider the likely appeal of this miracle story to an Icelandic audience. *Brúðkaupsvísur's* point of view, just like the Icelandic prose versions of the narrative and their non-Scandinavian prototypes, is clearly ecclesiastical. The devout young man's life-style is sanctioned and he evades the social pressures of his kin to get married without suffering any repercussions, even though he gets a dressing-down from the Virgin Mary in his vision and is effectively under her thumb. Furthermore, a love relationship with the Virgin is acknowledged by the bishop to be superior to any relationship with human women, on the grounds that Mary will be better to her devotee than any woman, and will show the strongest kind of love. Thus far it appears that the narrative upholds the desires of celibate male clergy, devoted to Mary, against secular authority.

The concluding stanzas of the poem (28–33) bring the miracle narrative back into the poet's world and that of his audience, just as, in the opening stanzas (1–2), the poet called for God's and Mary's help in composing a praise-poem in her honor. Stanzas 28–31 are addressed to the Virgin herself and focus attention on the poet and his own devotion to her, which he has expressed through his composition of poetry. Taking up the idiom of rewards for services rendered that the miracle story itself deals in, the poet announces that he wants to

compose poetry about the Virgin's power and the life of her son more often and indicates that "cheerful women" (*Kát víf* 28/3) shall know this.¹⁹ Although the significance of this reference is unclear, it is possible that the poet is perhaps alluding to a female audience that may have commissioned the poem in the first place.²⁰ Stanzas 29 and 30 stress the Virgin Mary's powers to help mankind in need, something that has been demonstrated in respect of one man in the miracle story. The poet writes conventionally: the Virgin is merciful and kind to all men. He then adopts a convention of a slightly different kind, imploring her support for himself, as a sinner, and then strengthening his position by claiming reward for the poem he has just created: "rewards for poems are greatest for a poem [that has been] recited" (*laun ljóða eru mest fyrir kveðinn óð* 31/7–8).

Thus the idiom of reciprocal gift-giving, which was so important a convention in the repertoire of the skalds, is parallel to the values expressed in the miracle story: the young man's attendance at church to sing the Virgin's praises is paralleled by the poet's poem in honor of the Virgin and, by implication, he expects a similar reward: "the beloved one helps me because of the comfort of poems" (*kær hjálpar mier fyrir líkn ljóða* 32/3–4). Thus the miracle narrative and the frame narrative coincide and reinforce one another's values, which are that both secular and spiritual love depend on reciprocity and reward, even if one partner in the relationship is the more powerful. If the poet was himself a cleric, as seems plausible, the thematic reinforcement of frame and miracle narrative would have been even greater.

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19. Jón Helgason, ed. *Íslensk miðaldakvæði*, adopted a different reading of this line, *þat skaltu vita, víf* "you shall know that, woman." In both readings, however, there is a direct appeal to a woman or women.

20. If so, did they identify with the powerful figure of the Virgin Mary in narratives of this kind, while recognizing that her love for her devotees was couched in heterosexual terms? Did they disregard the standard kind of anti-feminism expressed in the bishop's statement? Such questions can probably be answered in the affirmative.

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