

Gísli Súrsson: A Drama and the Woman Question

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Summary

Gísli Súrsson: A Drama is a play by the late-Victorian author Beatrice Helen Barmby. This largely overlooked adaptation of the Old Norse Gisla saga Súrssonar is representative of the nineteenth-century British appreciation of the medieval North. In the thesis, the play is analysed in the light of the late Victorian debate of women's rights. The main aims of this thesis are to reintroduce Beatrice Helen Barmby's authorship and interpret the saga heroines of Gisli Súrsson: A Drama as potential conduits of progressive feminist ideas in Victorian Britain. The analysis is inspired by the new historicist method of approaching literary works through the study of the author's background alongside contemporary social, cultural, and historical realities. The thesis consists of two major parts: the first part introduces Beatrice Helen Barmby's biographical and literary background, her politically active family and the subtleties of the Woman Question of the late nineteenth-century Britain; the second part is an analysis of the play's main female characters Aud and Asgerd and the standpoints of women's rights debate from which those characters can be interpreted, namely division of gender roles and marriage. The results of this thesis show that Gisli Súrsson: A Drama is infused with the consciousness of the women's rights debate and that it favours the reformist side of the debate, where increased opportunities and respect for women are advocated for, but separate gender roles are maintained.

Foreword

A short road-trip to North Iceland in spring of 2018 felt like a dream despite the disastrous whale safari in Húsavík (not even a single dolphin!). When back in Reykjavík, I attempted to soothe my shattered tourist ambitions with a casual visit to a bookshop on Laugavegur, where I came upon Lavinia Greenlaw's edition of William Morris' Icelandic travel memoirs. It all suddenly started making sense: it was not that odd to be a non-Scandinavian somehow drawn by the weird and ambitious project of the medieval Icelanders to describe the whole world. A year later I was finishing a paper in a huge empty house of a friend of a friend's some kilometres away from Strokkur, which once shook William Morris, Eiríkur Magnússon and their fellow tourists' tents. The thought of Victorian adventurers then helped me to wrestle with the seemingly progressive independence of Porgunna from The Story of the Ere-Dwellers. M.A. Marion Poilvez and dr. yoav tirosh from Háskóli Íslands, who taught a great course on *İslendingasögur* in Spring 2019, did not mind me turning Þorgunna from Morris and Eiríkur's translation of Eyrbyggja saga (1892) into a feminist and encouraged me to continue reading the Victorians reading the sagas. I am grateful to them and all the other gifted teachers and professors from the Viking and Medieval Norse study programme in both Reykjavík and Oslo, and especially to Assoc. Prof. Haraldur Bernharðsson for teaching us all the stranger things of the Old Norse grammar and being there for us at all times.

My special thanks to professor Jon Gunnar Jørgensen from the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Oslo, supervisor of this thesis, who encouraged me from the very beginning and who later provided clever academic guidance during different stages of the writing process by making me aware of both bigger and smaller inaccuracies. I am also indebted to the Scandinavian Studies Centre at Vilnius University, my Nordic springboard, and especially dr. Rasa Baranauskienė, who introduced me to the Old Norse and who has remained an academical and personal inspiration since, and the current Head of Centre, Assoc. Prof. Ieva Steponavičiūtė-Aleksiejūnienė, for constantly providing me with opportunities and encouragement. Warmest thanks, ačiū, takk to many dear friends (in alphabetical order): Augustė Jasiulytė for believing in me more than I believe in myself; Birgit Djupedal for listening to me rambling about First Wave feminism and for sharing the lockdown food, drinks and snacks as well as passion for nineteenth-century British novels; Gabrielė Nemanytė for teaching me detective tricks when digging into British genealogies; Ieva Šakelaitė, fellow enthusiast of university education and the Humanities, best listener and advisor, for giving me priceless feedback generously coated in encouraging praise; Kate (Yu Yan) Ng for being my

I borrowed the single Norwegian library copy of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, for following the process since with genuine interest and eventually proof-reading and making the text sound better and more English; Solveiga Černiauskaitė for thinking of and worrying about me; Vaida Jankūnaitė (lokistroki), the irreplaceable companion of Icelandic road-trips, harshest and most honest textual critic, for being my extra voice of conscience, reason, and confidence. Many thanks to all other friends and relatives who would follow up and inquire about my state of mind during the writing process combined with lockdown. Finally, I want to thank my parents Viktoras and Jurgita for supporting me in ways both moral and monetary, no matter what, and sister Milda for being my very best friend.

All remaining mistakes and inaccuracies in the text are entirely my own.

And I suppose the days of you being at least gracious to me about feminism are long gone, but I won't complain, since it won't make any difference and since the history of feminism teaches one never to expect graciousness anyway. . . .

Ali Smith, How to be Both

Beatrice Barmby, The Vines, Yoxford, Suffolk, writes: — It may interest some of your readers to hear that the nightingale has already been heard in the neighbourhood of Yoxford, Suffolk, probably driven northward earlier than usual by the severe weather on the Continent.

Bradford Daily Telegraph, 18 March, 1892

He liked to hear
the first cuckoo of spring
then write to *The Times*.
I'd usually heard it
days before him
but I never let on.
Carol Ann Duffy, from *Mrs Tiresias*

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Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the Old Norse literature had already reached far and wide in the British Isles. The Victorians interpreted and used the images of the medieval North in linguistic, cultural, political, and national identity-related discourses. As the early nineteenth century faced a decline of the prestigious status of Greek and Latin after the discovery of Sanskrit as an ancient Indo-European language, the academic concern turned to all other tongues previously considered less worthy of interest, including Germanic. The 'discovery' of Old Norse naturally lead to studying and appreciation of the medieval Icelandic literature, history, and culture. By the second half of the century, English Icelandophiles had produced numerous works of scholarship, translation and Old Norse-inspired fiction and poetry.

The cultural interest attracted British visitors to Iceland. When the Southern Europe trips where no longer exotic enough for the culturally inclined, Iceland appeared on the map as a preferred destination for adventure- and wisdom-seekers. In the beginning, tourists were often attracted by Iceland's natural wonders (geology, flora and fauna) and the land's suitability for pleasurable outdoor activities (mountain-climbing, fishing, and horse-riding). Later, literary tourism boomed, and visits to the holy-like locations of the Old Norse sagas were included in many of a traveller's to-see list, in the same manner as the previous obsession with Southern Europe would lead visitors to the hunt of ancient Roman ruins.² Some travellers expected to see the remains of the saga world, like William Morris, while others might have developed the interest for Old Norse history and literature as a result of their Icelandic trips, like E. J. Oswald.

For Beatrice Helen Barmby (1868–1899), author of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama*, Iceland was as well far more attractive than the European South. The barren island in the middle of the Atlantic, which she did not get a chance to visit during her short lifetime, loomed superior to the soft and warm Southern cradle of the continental culture:

O bleak and cold, O isled betwixt the seas,
O home of snow and lava and spring flowers,
How have I longed for thee through all my hours,
And felt thy message in the northern breeze,
And yearned to see thee, though I saw not these
Great lands to southward, set 'mid rosy bowers,
That which was Greece, and white Italian towers,
Far-fabled isles, and fair Hesperides (vii)³

¹ Wawn 2002: 63.

² Ibid: 287.

³ From here on, I will reference *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama. Ballads and Poems of the Old Norse Days and Some Translations* directly in the text using brackets (bibliographical information can be found under Primary Source in Literature). All other sources are quoted in the footnotes.

Many English minds of the nineteenth century contrasted the North and the South in order to unite Iceland and the British Isles as fellow members of the Nordic region. The Victorian notion of the Icelanders as a brotherly Northern sea-faring people, whose rough and stoic character had been shaped by the familiar winds of the Atlantic, inspired the search for common history. The romantic idea of national character as shaped by the climate preceded the Victorian period, but its impact is still felt in Beatrice Helen Barmby's poetic description of Iceland from the late nineteenth century.

The literature of the Vikings presented the Victorians with a wide range of interpretational possibilities. It became a source of political, cultural, literary, linguistic, and gender roles-related arguments.⁴ Among many other things, it provided arguments for socialists and anti-monarchists due to Iceland's special, supposedly independent and democratic political standing in the Middle Ages, gave way to Aryanism and celebration of the pan-Germanic heroic past, induced the linguistic revival of the scholarship on Germanic languages, and – most pertinently for this paper – allowed the Victorians to reflect on masculinity and femininity, male and female societal roles, and the interplay of those roles in general. By comparing their contemporary notions of gender to those (which they thought were) represented in the Old Norse literature, the Victorians could define and repeatedly re-define masculinity and femininity.

Beatrice Helen Barmby's Gísli Súrsson: A Drama. Ballads and Poems of the Old Norse Days and Some Translations (1900), a compact volume of medieval Iceland-themed verse, is representative of the lengthy and enthusiastic British fascination with the ancient North. The volume includes a play – a dramatic adaptation of Gísla saga in three acts – alongside poems and translations from Old Norse. To my knowledge, Beatrice's work has not been researched. Even though Gísli Súrsson: A Drama and her other writings attracted positive attention from the contemporaries in Great Britain, Iceland, and beyond, references to Beatrice in modern scholarship are few and compact. Her name is sometimes mentioned in discourses related to Gísla saga (for example, in Lethbridge 2000) or the Victorian reception of sagas (as in Wawn 1994 and 2002), while Gísli Súrsson: A Drama is included in the list of female playwrights in the Appendix of Katherine Newey's Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain (2005). However, I started off with elementary information on the author being so sparse, that it necessitated some peeks into the British birth registers and censuses in order to retrieve her family background.⁵ The reasons why Beatrice's authorship has been forgotten might be

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⁴ See the sub-chapter "Setting the Victorian Agenda" in Wawn 2002: 30-32.

⁵ In one of the 1990's numbers of *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, an American-Canadian newspaper for Icelandic expats, Leeds-graduate Helen M. Haldane mentions to be writing Beatrice Helen Barmby's biography and asks the readers

literary, cultural, or even coincidental (see page 24). Nevertheless, I believe that her authorial additions to the long list of Old Norse-inspired British literary works are worth reclaiming from obscurity – at least for the sake of the Old Norse and Victorian literary scholarship.

The play *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, which is the main focus of the current paper, centres around a heroic narrative of outlawry, honour, kinship, and love. The setting is that of the pre-Christian Iceland of the late tenth century, where a feud escalates between four foster-brothers Gísli, Thorkel, Thorgrím, and Véstein. In the beginning of the narrative, the blood-brothers Gísli and Thorkel share a single household. Gísli is married to Aud, and Thorkel to Ásgerd. The play opens with a conversation between Aud and Ásgerd. Thorkel overhears wife Ásgerd's longing speech about Aud's brother and Gísli's best friend Véstein, whom she had been in love with. Thorkel is then overcome with jealousy. The feud unfolds when Thorkel's companion Thorgrím kills Véstein. Gísli takes revenge by murdering Thorgrím and is outlawed. During the outlawry, he repeatedly seeks refuge at wife Aud's cottage and communicates with brother Thorkel, who is reluctant to help. Eventually, Thorkel is killed by Véstein's sons. The play culminates in Gísli's demise during his final fight against Thorgrím's relatives. For a more extensive summary of the play, see Appendix 1.

The sexually reserved and prejudiced Victorians, it would seem, did not constitute the perfect audience for the comparably generous amount of strong and vivid female characters in the Old Norse sagas. One cannot help but imagine a proper Victorian lady reading of Icelandic shield maidens, cruel whetting wives and independent-minded female companions of proud and stoic saga heroes. Would such a lady be appalled, surprised, or slightly jealous of the heroine from a thousand years back? Would she in any way be inspired and feel supported by the women from "Across the waste of barren centuries," from a "monotony of ill / That ebbed and flowed set in the ice-bound seas" (107)? Would she be willing to identify herself with the resolute daughter of Angantýr, Hervör, who masters the male business of warfare and reclaims her father's sword from his burial mound (in other words, fights and gets what she wants)?

Up came Hervör to the hill, Sang her charm and gained her will. (136)

Several complications apply for elaborating on such dreamy images of ladies from the past, the Victorian and the Old Norse. First, the image of a reserved, frail, and highly suppressed middle-class Victorian woman in a long elaborate frock and a piece of embroidery in her lap, even

for any information about the unsuccessful Canadian publication of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* (Helen M. Haldane 1990). My search for the author of this newspaper message has unfortunately not given any result yet.

though frequently encountered in literature of both the Victorian era and later times, is a mere simplification. The nineteenth century, notwithstanding its frills and embroideries, also faced fiery debates of what received the name of the Woman Question – a re-evaluation of women's role in society and their social, educational, and political conditions.⁶ It is true that the Victorian era has received harsh criticism in subsequent times for its social inequality and hypocrisy, but it has also been praised for its high morality, aesthetic sense and revolutionary spirit. To begin with, the Victorians were detested by the supporters of modernity and reform. Then, they became a source of national pride and nostalgia. The American-British scholar Cora Kaplan touches on the changing relationship with the Victorian past in the introduction to her essay collection on modern cultural reception of the Victorian era, *Victoriana* (2007):

For while the high literary modernism and the popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century defined itself through *an explicit or tacit rejection* of the cultural preferences and social mores of the Victorian world, distance from the period has not only produced detailed – and controversial – historical analyses of its customs, practices and influence, but has gradually lent it over time *the charm of antiquity and the exotic*, so that increasingly, in the new millennium, even its worst abuses seem to fascinate rather than appal. . . . Certainly the postwar left's characterisation of the Victorian as the bullying bourgeois patriarch responsible for the twin cruelties of capitalism and empire, has less purchase on the general historical imagination today that it did some twenty years ago, and has become the subject of vigorous debate in the humanities.⁷

The "vigorous debate in the humanities" mentioned by Kaplan has affected the modern understanding of Victorian sexuality and gender. Scholars have been concerned with "the relationship, whether close, distant, or confused, between the prescribed ideal of womanhood and the actual reality." New layers of meaning have been uncovered, humanizing and sexually charged content has been deciphered between the lines, and conceptions of Victorian masculinity and femininity have been broadened and re-evaluated. The silent middle-class lady immersed in her embroidery, it appears, had more to say, feel, believe in, and confront about her gender, sexuality and social position than has been assumed.

It is also important to note that the Victorian era, which, strictly speaking, extends throughout the regency period of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), is a wide timeframe encompassing much social, political, industrial, and cultural change. 'The Victorian woman' could as well be born in the late eighteenth century as in 1899. Different generations of women had different experiences and upbringings, thus different value systems. There were also great

⁶ Delap 2011: 319.

⁷ My italics. Kaplan 2007: 6.

⁸ Vicinus 2013: xi.

distinctions between social classes: a working-class woman from Manchester would lead a life incomparable with that of a middle- or upper-class lady of London. To make the current paper not lose its focus and plausibility in the deep and unspecific trap of 'the Victorian period' or 'the Victorian woman', throughout the discussion I will mostly be focusing on the middle-class women of the second half of the nineteenth century. This is due to the author Beatrice Helen Barmby herself representing the late nineteenth century and the middle class, her father being a respected Church minister. In addition, the heroines of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama*, as well as in the Old Norse *Gisla saga*, are clearly representing the upper social levels, as vague as those levels might be compared to nineteenth-century England. Lastly, feminism-related Victorian sources questioning the position of middle-class women are much more abundant than concerning any other social class due to the middle classes' extreme fixation with gender roles (see page 34).

Quite complex is also the notion that the Old Norse society gave more liberty and praise to exceptional women than the continental Christians. Indeed, the saga women do attract attention and awaken interest due to their vividness and intensity (what this paper is also a humble example of). As Carol J. Clover puts it:

From the outset of the scholarly tradition, readers have been startled and not infrequently appalled by the extraordinary array of "exceptional" or "strong" or "outstanding" or "proud" or "independent" women — women whose behaviour exceeds what is presumed to be custom and sometimes the law as well.⁹

Clover's controversial article "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe" (1993), from which the quote is taken, will be referred to later in the text. For now, it is important to note that the *exceptionality* of those saga women might suggest quite different things for different readers. The sole existence of strong female characters could allow one to imagine the pagan society as more liberated and less suppressed than the modern, as described in E. J. Oswald's travelogue below. On the other hand, those extraordinary female characters can be interpreted as mere exceptions from a rule (*exceptional* in the literal sense) and suggest a patriarchal suppression as well-ingrained as would only allow man-like women to surface (as argued by Clover). Therefore, I talk of the saga heroines' 'potential' to inspire or appal the Victorians, as no readership is uniform or easily definable, and especially so when it precedes the current moment by almost two centuries.

Why did Beatrice create a dramatic adaptation of this particular saga, the saga of Gísli Súrsson? The answer to this question would certainly require a more thorough research on her

⁹ Clover 1993: 366.

authorship and personal life than this paper can contain. However, one of the reasons might have been the saga's sensitivity towards gender and women's role in society, not to mention its vivid female characters. The Old Norse *Gísla saga Súrssonar*¹⁰ has long been considered an important source for studying gender representation in both the Old Norse society and the whole saga corpus. The ambiguous, less 'correct' behaviour of the main characters of *Gísla saga*, in Jeffrey Turco's playful rephrasing of the title of Judith Butler's revolutionary book on gender as performance, "plainly spell gender trouble in medieval Iceland."¹¹

Gísla saga belongs to Íslendingasögur (the sagas of Icelanders, or Family sagas), a saga genre comprising around 40 lengthy narratives about Icelanders of the tenth century. Islendingasögur are preserved in medieval vellum and post-medieval paper manuscripts, some of the oldest fragments dating back to the mid-thirteenth century. Gísla saga is believed to be written down in the second half of the thirteenth century, while its earliest (fragmentary) manuscript survives from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The genre of Íslendingasögur itself is a post-medieval scholarly classification of sagas according to similarities in narrative form, subject matter, location, timeframe, and main themes. 14

For the Victorians, *Íslendingasögur* were sources from a much deeper past than for today's readership. It was believed that this saga genre more or less faithfully depicted the so-called saga age around the end of the tenth century. George Webbe Dasent's 1866 translation of *Gísla saga*, which Beatrice was most probably familiar with, provides the reader with maps and an informative timeline stretching from the regency of the Norwegian king Harald Fairhair in the early tenth century to the death of "Snorro the Priest" (Snorri goði, Gísli's nephew) a hundred years later. The introduction also includes a detailed history of Gísli's sword Graysteel, its age being calculated with great seriousness. *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* is not an exception of the historically inclined reading of the sagas. The 'historical' timeframe is followed with care, and time cues are given in the beginning of the play ("The time is the second half of the tenth century A.D.") and before each act.

The main **research questions** which resurface in the paper are the following: How are the main female characters of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama*, Aud and Ásgerd, portrayed? What character traits do the heroines possess, how do they behave, and would such disposition and

¹⁰ Hence referred to as *Gisla saga*.

¹¹ Turco 2016: 283.

¹² Vésteinn Ólason 2005: 101.

¹³ Lethbridge 2010: 127.

¹⁴ Vésteinn Ólason 2005: 102.

¹⁵ Dasent 1866: xxxvii.

behaviour resonate with the issues of women in the late Victorian era and the so-called Woman Question? Finally, does the play present women of the Old Norse society as examples of liberation and independence in terms of the social and political debates of the nineteenth-century England? And if not, what exemplary womanly behaviour do they represent?

My main **method** is to interpret the Old Norse heroines of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama* through the main issues of the women's rights debate in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. This method is inspired by the somewhat improvised practices of new historicism, and especially by Stephen Greenblatt's book *Shakespearean Negotiations*. In the book, Greenblatt analyses Shakespearean plays as products of their contemporary society, and not only of the divine geniality and skill of Shakespeare himself, as the 'old' historicists would approach them. The principles of New Historicism which are most important for this paper are discussed below (page 17-18). I am aware of, and hopefully will become even more so as the writing progresses, that my reading of a late nineteenth-century reading of a late medieval saga, which is in itself a reading of a society far older than that of the Icelandic scribes of *Gisla saga*, is an undertaking as full of subjective evaluation as can be conceivable.

The paper is divided into two major parts. The first part deals with the biographical, cultural and historical context of the production of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*. I introduce the new historicist method, which has been inspirational for the structure, style, and approach of the current paper, before presenting a short biography of Beatrice Helen Barmby and describing her Old Norse interest and authorship in broad strokes. Then, I discuss the dramatic nature of the adaptation alongside its humble, yet positive contemporary reception. This presentation of the play is followed by a chapter on Beatrice's father J. Goodwyn Barmby and his first wife Catherine Barmby's feminist views, which are put into context as broadly representative of the two axes of the First Wave feminism, revolutionary and reformatory.

The second part of the paper is an analysis of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* with its main focus on the play's female characters. The analysis is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss the Victorian concepts of masculinity and femininity and unite them with the traits of the Northern character which were important for the nineteenth-century British readers of the sagas. The seemingly subversive character of Aud is explained by merging the Victorian and the Old Norse gendered value systems. The second chapter examines marital relationships in the play and analyses them through the British marriage debate of the late nineteenth century. It also wrestles with the presupposition of easy divorce in the Old Norse society, which is in opposition to the nearly non-existent divorce among the middle classes in Victorian England.

Both chapters utilise Victorian sources in order to view *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* in its contemporary context.

As for Icelandic names and toponyms, I have used the anglicised forms of Aud, Ásgerd, Thorkel, Thorgrím, Eyjólf, the Hawkdale, the Hillock, and Geirthióf's Frith [sic]¹⁶ as they appear in the play, while the names of Auðr, Ásgerðr, Þorkell, Þórgrímr, Eyjólfr in normalised Old Norse spelling refer to *Gísla saga* and its research.

¹⁶ Icel. Haukdalur, Hóll, Geirþjófsfjörð.

I. THE AUTHOR, THE PLAY, AND THE CONTEXT

The Method of Speaking with the Dead: New Historicism

"I began with the desire to speak with the dead," – the first sentence of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* – is both ironic and serious.¹⁷ Ironic in its ridiculous impossibility and limitedness, evoking the supernatural more than the academic, scientific, reasoned; serious in its honesty and recognizability. Is this really what literary scholarship is about, attempting to approach something inapproachable?

The opening chapter of Shakespearean Negotiations acknowledges that during a conversation with the past one can only hear one's own voice. But that living voice of the reader, scholar or critic does not exist without the dead. It is made of past voices, a product of what came before, and a reader is turned into a living, yet dead being: "my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living." Does this suggest that a message sent to the dead returns as a mere echo? It might be possible to enjoy the sound of one's own voice, but the hope to hear a slight modulation – a promise of knowledge and insight – remains. How can we read, analyse and understand a literary work from the past if it is the 'we' that are doing the reading, analysing and understanding? Alongside asking how we read literature of the past, we can as well ask why we read it. Why is literature with little apparent connection to the modern times still relevant outside the sphere of literary history? In other words, why does it still speak to modern readers? It seems there is some specific value, some almost supernatural intensity in, for example, Shakespeare, which allows his works to be qualified as timeless, to traverse the historical time of societal and cultural change from Renaissance to the current moment and still retain their force.¹⁹

In contrast to text-focused approaches of formalism, new criticism, and structuralism, to name but a few, new historicism is concerned with the connections of art and its historical background. It obtains the epithet 'new' from its opposition to the older forms of historicism: new historicist critics go against the notion of history as a mere surrounding decoration, a passive and static environment which is generalisable and explainable. It also challenges the traditional notion of art as representation of historical realities: art is "not simply appropriation but exchange, since the existence of art always implies a return, a return normally measured in

¹⁷ Greenblatt 2000: 1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid: 2.

pleasure and interest."²⁰ In addition, new historicists are aware of their own subjective methods and practice "methodological self-consciousness" in opposition to "a historicism based upon faith in the transparency of signs and interpretative procedures."²¹

The concept of 'social energy' stands out as the main foundation of *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Social energy is what art is made from and for and what it reproduces. It can only be measured by its effects such as its "capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder." Social energy is the source of "The 'life' that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote." It can also be explained by the chapter's keywords 'collective' and 'circulating' ('oscillating'): as a product of a community, art is an exchange of interest, pleasure, and expectations which circulate back and forth between the artwork and its audience.

The current paper's utilisation of new historicist methods (which often can be unhelpfully vague, personal and intuitive, and for which the new historicist 'movement' has been criticized²⁴) can be summarized by the following statements:

- A work of literature is shaped by its author's experience and background in a similar way as the author is shaped by the society to which they belong.
- A work of literature is further shaped by that society which is a body of social energy. A
 work of literature reacts to, reuses, and responds to that social energy. It is a reciprocal,
 back-and-forth connection between the work and its audience.

Gisli Súrsson: A Drama is in itself a manifestation of what Greenblatt describes as 'life' in a literary work: the play is an adaptation of a medieval saga and proves the saga's lasting effect on later readership. Furthermore, the play is not simply a rewriting of a saga to the medium of drama and theatre – it is also a more or less conscious reworking of the saga narrative to suit the late nineteenth-century audiences and a less direct product of those audiences (without them, the work would not be as it is). That is, the author might have formed the play in such a way as to adapt it to the contemporary society, but the author could not possibly distance herself from being a representative of that society.

Adapting Greenblatt's main new historicist postulates, this paper analyses *Gisli Súrsson:* A *Drama* as a work (1) written by Beatrice Helen Barmby, a female author, whose closest

²⁰ Greenblatt 1989: 12.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Greenblatt 2000: 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ One part of the critique focuses on the readiness of new historicism to dissolve large structures and realities into a succession of small details and random insights. The other denounces new historicist critics for impregnating minor occurrences and dubious connections with great meaning (Veeser 1994: 4).

family members were involved in feminist and socialist debates, and who was herself a reader of Old Norse literature, as well as (2) shaped by the realities of the late nineteenth-century England concerning both the women's condition and the beliefs and interpretations of the nature of Old Norse society.

The Vitae of Beatrice Helen Barmby and Gisli Súrsson: A Drama

Beatrice Helen Barmby's parents were J. (John) Goodwyn Barmby (1820–1881) and Ada Marianne Barmby (née Shepherd, 1832–1991). Goodwyn Barmby was a renowned Unitarian minister, outspoken socialist and founder of the so-called Communist Church.²⁵ Beatrice's siblings from the father's first marriage with Catherine Isabella Barmby (née Wattkins, 1816/17–1853), a published feminist activist and supporter of women's suffrage, were Moreville Wattkins Barmby (1844–?)²⁶ and Maria Julia Barmby (1846–1930). After Catherine's death in 1853, Goodwyn Barmby married Ada Marianne in 1861. Ada Barmby's signature appears on the 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition.²⁷

Beatrice's sibling closest to her in age was Mabel Katharine Barmby (1865–1945), also daughter of Ada. Both Mabel and Beatrice were born in Wakefield in Yorkshire, not far from Leeds. Goodwyn Barmby, after serving as minister at Southampton, Topsham, Lympstone, and Lancaster successively, was transferred to Wakefield in 1858 and preached there until 1879. After Goodwyn Barmby's death the remaining members of the family – wife Ada and daughters Julia, Mabel, and Beatrice – moved to Honiton, Devon in South-West England.²⁸ All three sisters remained unmarried.

Mabel Barmby took over the task to publish Beatrice's work after the latter's untimely death in 1899. A compact volume in dark green covers with golden lettering and a swastika was published in England in 1900 with support and assistance of Matthías Jochumsson, famous Icelandic poet and translator, who later translated *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* to Icelandic. The cover's swastika makes a modern reader shudder a little, but the symbol's universal meaning of sun, light, eternity, and national reawakening is most probably connected with the 'historical' and heroic content of the *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*. According to the *Saga-Book* from 1903, the

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²⁵ J. Goodwyn Barmby rarely uses his first name in publications, so I will also be referring to him by his middle and last names.

²⁶ I have been unsuccessful in finding information about Moreville's whereabouts after 1861, when he is recorded as a student in Preston. References to Moreville I was able to unearth were a record of his birth, census records from 1851 and 1861 ("Barmby, Moreville," *1851 England and Wales Census*; "Barmby, Moreville," *1861 England and Wales Census*) and a letter to the Editor of *The Spiritual Magazine*, dated July 6, 1861, in Preston (Barmby 1861). The search for Moreville as Wattkins (mother Catherine's maiden name) has not given any results either.

²⁷ Crawford 2002: 34.

²⁸ "Barmby, Beatrice H.," 1891 England and Wales Census.

periodical of the Society for Northern Research, Mabel also authored the six final lines of the sonnet *To Iceland*. This sonnet, from which I quote in the Introduction of this paper, opens the volume.²⁹ The Icelandic translation *Gísli Súrsson*. *Sjónarleikur*. *Einnig nokkur kvæði* was published in Akureyri in 1902. The play was reissued in Reykjavík in 1966 alongside Matthías' translation of Henrik Ibsen's *Brand*.³⁰

The 1900's volume of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* includes translations of scaldic and eddic poetry and original, Old Norse-inspired verse. The original poems deal with saga content of various episodes from *samtiðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) and *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas). Translations are also produced from various sources: there is scaldic poetry attributed to Sighvatr Þórðarson, eddic verse of *The Waking of Angantýr* from *Heirvarar saga og Heiðreks*, the eddic poem *Atlakviða*, Egill's *Sonatorrek* from *Egils saga*, and other pieces of Old Norse verse. The volume closes with some translations from modern Icelandic. The varied content of the 1900's volume demonstrates that Beatrice was well-read in different genres of the Old Norse literature.

Other published works (also posthumous) by Beatrice Helen Barmby are *Rosslyn's Raid* and *Other Tales* (1903),³¹ which is a collection of three short stories, and novel *The Gods are Just* (1904).³² A separate volume of poems was also published by Archibald Constable & Co, as is made clear by a review in the *Saga-Book* from 1903, but a complete bibliographical description is lacking.³³ Beatrice's translation of *Prymskviða*, *The Lay of Thrym*, is published in the same *Saga-Book*.³⁴ The limited length of this paper does not allow me to discuss the whole body of Beatrice's authorship. A deeper look into her other Old Norse-inspired writings, however, would draw a much clearer picture of Beatrice Helen Barmby as an author and aid the analysis of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*.

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²⁹ "Ah, she has passed away unsatisfied! / And never now her eager feet may tread / Those wild ways haunted by her heroes dead..." (vii). Mabel's authorship of the lines is mentioned in Saga-Book of the Viking Club, Vol. III, unsigned review of Gísli Súrsson. Sjónarleikur: einnig nokkur kvæði by Beatrice Helen Barmby, trans. Matthías Jochumsson, and "Leikritið Gísli Súrsson og höfundur þess," Útvarpstíðindi, nr. 10.

³⁰ I have unfortunately been unable to get hold of the Icelandic translation during the process of writing this paper. Matthias Jochumsson's introduction to the 1903 edition remains a potentially valuable source.

³¹ Beatrice is praised in the Saga-Book as "a true daughter of the Vikings" for her style and depictions of fights in *Rosslyn's Raid and Other Tales* (*Saga-Book of the Viking Club, Vol. III*, unsigned review of *Rosslyn's Raid and Other Tales* by Beatrice Helen Barmby).

³² Summary and review: "A Swan Song," *The Daily News*, August 27, 1904.

³³ Saga-Book of the Viking Club, Vol. III, unsigned review of Poems by Beatrice Helen Barmby.

³⁴ Barmby, B. H. 1903.

The Dramatic Adaptation of Gisla saga

Beatrice Helen Barmby most possibly read *Gísla saga* in George Webbe Dasent's (1817–1896) translation, *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw*, published in Edinburgh in 1866. Dasent's translation is based on the so-called shorter version of the saga represented by the manuscript AM 556 a 4to.³⁵ The first extract from *Gísla saga* translated to English is also attributed to Dasent: the episode of Auðr and Ásgerðr's conversation in the *dyngja* is included in his introduction to the translation of *Njáls saga* (1861).³⁶ Andrew Wawn mentions a republication of *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw* around 1900, this one by a publisher in London.³⁷

It is also beyond doubt that Beatrice was able to read *Gisla saga* in the original. She was one of the pupils of Eiríkur Magnússon (1833–1913), an Icelandic librarian in Cambridge and a long-time translation collaborator of William Morris.³⁸ Eiríkur managed to gather a wide circle of students of Icelandic in Britain, where he would give lessons both face-to-face and by mail. Beatrice seems to have been one of the keenest and most ambitious language students. Her contact with Eiríkur lasted from the beginning of the 1890's until her death in 1899 and evolved from a more formal relationship between teacher and pupil to an affectionate bond based on common interests in literature and language.³⁹ A collection of Eiríkur's letters, including correspondence between him and Beatrice, is preserved in the National Library of Iceland.⁴⁰ I was unfortunately not able to access them while writing this paper, but they remain a potential source of background information of why and how Beatrice studied Old Norse. They could also elucidate the authorial motivation behind the adaptation of *Gísla saga* and other important details of her writing process.

The 1900 edition of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* opens with a preface by F. (Frederick) York Powell (1850–1904), professor of history at Oxford University, colleague and friend of the philologist Guðbrandur Vigfússon. F. York Powell was himself a translator and editor of Old

³⁵ Lethbridge 2000: 148, footnote 39.

³⁶ Wawn 2002: 152.

³⁷ Ibid: 172.

³⁸ William Morris (1834–1896) was a famous English poet, designer, political activist, and Icelandophile. The newest study of William Morris' translations and Old Norse-inspired works is Ian Felce's *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018).

³⁹ Wawn 2002: 359.

⁴⁰ Andrew Wawn (2002) summarises the correspondence, but his main focus is on Eiríkur's role of a teacher of the Icelandic language and on his better-known pupils (see sub-chapter "Eiríkur Magnússon's circle," 356-367).

Norse texts.⁴¹ In the introduction, Powell praises Beatrice's skill in the Icelandic language and culture and considers the play superior to other theatrical adaptations of sagas:

Indeed, of all the plays I have read founded upon the sagas – and there are not a few in various tongues – hers seems to me the best, and my judgement is not in this case singular. She has understood how to treat her original, both by selecting only those incidents that are of dramatic value and by interfering with these parts of the original as little as possible ⁴²

This praise also indicates what qualities of adaptation were valued in the late nineteenth century: the more faithful to the original (in this case, the saga) the adaptation is, the better. Such philosophy of adaptation would be considered obsolete today. However, it makes valid the current discussion of Victorian imaginings of the Old Norse culture: if contemporaries considered *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* as faithful to the narrative, tone, and message of *Gísla saga*, it must represent the way those contemporaries read and interpreted the saga along with the Old Norse history. Other dramatic saga adaptations mentioned by Powell are possibly references to authors such as the Danish Adam Oehlenschläger and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen.⁴³

Another important point of the introduction is Powell's strong conviction that the play is worth staging and "evidently actable":

I do not remember any other play of late years by an English hand that has dealt with an heroic subject and yet dealt with it dramatically. If it had been written by a Danish woman or a French man it would have been represented ere this with all the adjuncts that the actor's art could supply. It is certainly not in any way inferior to those plays of Ibsen's earlier period that have in their day met with much applause.⁴⁴

The tone of this paragraph and subsequent sentences suggests that were Beatrice a better-known author, the play would be staged in no time and receive its deserved praise. An anonymous Viking Club reviewer also applauds the play generously, but is unsure whether the complicated action could be rendered on stage successfully.⁴⁵ The reviewer mentions that *Gísli Súrsson: A*

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⁴¹ Lethbrige (2010: 148, note 39) refers to an edition of *Gísla saga* by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell from 1905 (*Origines Islandicæ. A Collection of the More Important Sagas and Other Native Writings Relating to the Settlement and Early History of Iceland*, Vol. II, Oxford: Clarendon).

⁴² Powell, F. Y. 1900: ix-x.

⁴³ Adam Oehlenschläger adapted *Laxdæla saga* in *Kjartan and Gudrun* (1847) and used other Old Norse sources in his drama works and poetry; Henrik Ibsen wrote *The Warriors of Helgeland* (*Hærmændene på Helgeland*, 1858) and The Pretenders (*Kongs-Emnerne*, 1864). See Rohrbach (2017), Zernack (2017), and reference to Jón Karl Helgason's digital bibliography in Literature.

⁴⁴ Powell, F. Y. 1900: xiii-xiv.

⁴⁵ "Whether the play will ever find its way to the stage is doubtful. It is most dramatic, and any actor or actress might be proud to undertake the representation of the leading characters. But in spite of Professor York Powell's opinion that it "was meant for acting, and is evidently actable," we doubt whether the central scene of the slaying of Thorgrim could be represented on the stage, and the scenes would require much skilful rearrangement to adapt them to the modern stage, though not more so than the plays of Shakespeare. But we should much like to see the experiment tried. In the hands of a capable manager it might prove a great success." Saga-Book of the Viking Club, Vol. III, unsigned review of Gísli Súrsson: A Drama. Ballads and Poems of the old Norse Days, and some Translations by Beatrice Helen Barmby, 486.

Drama was read "with musical illustrations" at the Viking Club in January 1903. Apart from that, it most probably did not reach the British nor international stages, even though it was well-known among the Icelandic communities in Manitoba, Australia and Buenos Aires.⁴⁶

The genre of Beatrice Helen Barmby's adaptation of *Gisla saga* is worth discussing at least briefly. The Victorian theatre, like any other form of art and culture, cannot be separated from the contemporary realities, issues, debates, and insecurities of the society in question. The theatre is exceptional as it unites art, entertainment, and commercial profit more excessively than poetry or visual art; it is accessible to spectators of both lower and higher position and income; it is momentary as a happening and a spectacle, thus reactional, and its performative nature allows the theatre to influence and be influenced by the audiences more easily and speedily. The theatre's "three-dimensionality and its combination of verbal and non-verbal elements" was fully understood and utilized in the nineteenth century, as was its nature of a "site for a synthesis of the arts." To consider *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama* as part of the Victorian theatre would mean to evaluate its entertainment value, moral message, the potential (or failure) to fulfil the audience's expectations, the audience's response to the Old Norse themes and the issues of women's condition, and possibly many other broader questions of social energy.

The high probability of the play never being staged makes the research slightly simpler as it permits a strictly textual analysis. There are no stage reviews to consider, no theatre programmes to compare, no additional scholarly debates on the Victorian theatre to attend to. If it were otherwise, that is, if the audiences could have witnessed *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* as a staged performance, textual analysis would hardly be sufficient. The current research, which is strongly based on the cultural and political picture of the late nineteenth-century England, would only have worked if accompanied with a discussion of the expressions and the limitations of the Victorian theatre. In this instance, the author's intention to write a play instead of, for example, a long poem is theoretically too challenging to consider due to the limited length of this paper. However, it is clear that a look at Beatrice's personal correspondence with Eiríkur Magnússon or Mabel's resolute attempts to publish (and perhaps stage) the play in different countries with Matthías Jochumsson's support would require a more thorough consideration of the theatrical potential of the play. For example, it would be interesting to analyse Wawn's qualification of the play as a melodrama, ⁴⁸ which seems to be a rather bold genre description considering the strict setup, techniques and clichés of this Victorian genre.

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⁴⁶ Wawn 2002: 361.

⁴⁷ Newey 2016: 670.

⁴⁸ Wawn 2002: 360.

Apart from Beatrice's obscurity as an author at the time the work was published and the play's practical complexity, it is also possible that the staging was prevented by her gender. Plays written by women were very uncommon compared to, for example, novels, and theatre companies were incredibly reluctant to produce female playwrights' work.⁴⁹ It could be tempting to accuse the late nineteenth-century theatre producers and directors of misogyny by exclaiming, as professor F. York Powell did in his introduction, that it *must* have been staged. But the play's slowly but steadily increasing obscurity notwithstanding the praise it received from the professor, the Viking Club, and newspaper reviewers could also be explained by mere chance or the work's literary quality. Perhaps it is not the timeless Literature whose social energy Greenblatt tries to capture; perhaps the British interest in medieval Icelandic subjects was already ebbing away by 1900. Despite all the possible reasons for why the play has not been analysed or studied on any substantial level, one of the purposes of this research is to reintroduce Beatrice Helen Barmby and her authorship to the study fields of medievalism and the reception of the Old Norse sagas.

The Barmbys and the First Wave Feminism(s)

The Woman Question, which animated many Victorians, cannot be defined by a single question mark. It comprised numerous problems such as of "single (or 'surplus') women, of the status of married women, of authority and the 'struggle for the breeches' of plebeian culture, of political rights, of professional status, of rationality, and of education."⁵⁰ First Wave feminism can be used somewhat synonymously as a reference to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century onset of modern feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to which I will be referring shortly, is considered to be the mainspring of First Wave feminism.⁵¹ Which of the issues of the Woman Question (or First Wave feminism) are most relevant during the lifetime of Beatrice Helen Barmby, and what was her family's background in the feminist debate? In this section, I discuss the writings of Beatrice's father J. Goodwyn Barmby and his first wife Catherine Barmby as well as the pressing topics of feminist debate in the late nineteenth century.

In August 1841, the radical magazine *New Moral World* published a report from the meeting of London Communist Propaganda Society. The report makes public that, at the end of the meeting, "The president, Goodwyn Barmby, Esq., then read a document on 'Marriage',

⁴⁹ Powell, K. 2016: 682.

⁵⁰ Delap 2011: 319.

⁵¹ Sanders 2001: 15.

containing his own individual opinions in a summary way on that subject."52 It is just one of numerous appearances of Goodwyn Barmby's name in New Moral World that year and an indication of his strong public involvement concerning family matters and the Woman Question. In 1841, Goodwyn Barmby was around 20 years old and already a frequent contributor to radical political magazines. He had by then founded the London Communist Propaganda Society after spending a year in France, where he studied the country's politics. The same year he married Catherine Isabella Wattkins (1816–1853) and settled in Marylebone, Middlesex, London. Their two children, Moreville and Maria Julia, were born there in 1845 and 1847 successively. Goodwyn Barmby's work in 1840's included the establishment of The Universal Communitarian Association, later renamed to the Communist Church, the creation of the monthly Educational Circular and Communist Apostle, and the launch of another magazine Promethean, or Communitarian Apostle. He even claimed to have coined the word 'communist' during the trip to France. 53 After the Communist Church dispersed in 1849, Goodwyn Barmby continued to work as a Unitarian⁵⁴ preacher and minister, at the same time writing in magazines and publishing poetry books. He was widely known and read by his contemporaries.⁵⁵

What could have been the statements the president of London Communist Propaganda Society made on the institution of marriage? The same *New Moral World*, in which the society's report appears, provides some examples of Goodwyn Barmby's opinion on marriage, family, and marital love. The weekly periodical belonged to the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists, or Rational Society, started by Robert Owen (1771–1858), socialist, philanthropist, and worker's rights activist. The Rational Society boasted of numerous members and followers who would crowd weekly lectures and purchase thousands of copies of the *New Moral World*. One of Goodwyn Barmby's publications in *New Moral World* is "Societarian Views on the Medical and Surgical professions," the last part of the series of three articles titled "Views of the Subject in Communism or Socialization." The article describes a vision for a utopian communist society and its medical practitioners alongside their duties and roles. The author follows the Owenist thought of the virtues of the "communitive system" versus the

⁵² "London Communist Propaganda Society," unsigned message in *New Moral World*.

⁵³ Lee 2005

⁵⁴ Unitarianism in England appeared in the eighteenth century and was mainly formed by non-anglican Protestants. Many unitarians "denied the doctrine of original sin as the key to man's true nature and agreed that humanity and its environment were best understood by reason, experience and experiment." They were often supporters and activists of anti-slavery, educational reform, and feminism (Watts 1998: 3).

⁵⁵ Shaaban 1992: 126.

⁵⁶ Claevs 2004.

⁵⁷ Barmby, J. G., "Societarian Views on the Medical and Surgical Professions. Chap. III," 1941.

failures of the "competitive system" and describes how "the citizens of any community (whether it be called Platonopolis, Atlantis, Baconville, Moreton, Utopia, Heliopolis, Oceana, or Harringtonia)" could lead happier and much improved lives compared to the utterly cruel and unfair existence of the inhabitants of industrial towns. Describing one of the duties of doctors and surgeons – the instruction on human reproduction, or the Victorian/utopian equivalent of sex education – Goodwyn Barmby expresses his foundational philosophy of marriage as an institution primarily based on a loving relationship:

Fourth. – . . . They [the medical man, the surgeon, and the female accoucheur] would point out to them that only from whole beings of sound heart, mind, and body, could well inspiriting germal embryonic atoms be produced, and totally healthy children spring. They would show them that in this and in pure love, consisted the sacredness of what is now called marriage or bridal, and not in the priestly blessing which is no bliss.⁵⁹

The reference to the superfluous "priestly blessing" must be a variation on the Owenist critique of the authoritarianism and elitism of capitalist institutions, including the Church. It could also suggest that Goodwyn Barmby despised the Christian marriage concept for its fatalist focus on eternity (on his opinion on divorce, see page 52). It must be kept in mind that he is describing a utopian self-driven future society, based on Christian values, but with minimal institutional involvement. The main idea is, it seems, that any marriage, its formation and functioning being in accordance with the rules of the Church, is virtuous provided that there is love.

However, "pure love" does not suffice as the only ingredient of a successful marital union. Neither does healthy offspring require only the parents' bodies to be healthy – the married partners must also be of "sound heart, [and] mind." What Goodwyn Barmby means by this can be elucidated by another of his *New Moral World* articles from 1 May, 1841, "The Man-Power, the Woman-Power, and the Woman-Man Power". The overarching theme of the article is a demand for equal rights of women and men. The text is accompanied with a circular diagram, such drawings being characteristic to the author's writings. A circle, reminiscent of the earth's sphere, is divided into the North pole, the South pole and the equator. The northern pole represents the Man-power, the southern pole – the Woman-power, and their meeting point at the equator merges the two into the Woman-Man power. As could be expected from a Victorian writer, the southerness, the warmth of the Woman-power is based on the sensitive and tender female qualities, while the northern Man-power evolves around intellect and aggression. The binary of female and male qualities remains, as Goodwyn Barmby does not

58 Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Barmby, J. G., "The Man-Power, the Woman-Power, and the Woman-Man-Power," 1841: 269.

attempt to disqualify the "inborn nature" of the sexes: "the woman-nature and the man-nature give birth to the woman-power and the man-power." However, he utilizes the traditional differences in favour of his equality argument and advocates for the unification of Man-power and Woman-power in every individual. The combined Woman-Man power, in his opinion, would solve the unjustness of the contemporary world and create hope for the equal communal society of the future:

In the union of gentle might with strong energy; in the union of that strength of intellect which has been ascribed solely to man; with that mild lovingness of feeling which has been ascribed solely to woman: in the bosom of every individual, whether male or female, we shall obtain an equilibrium of the woman-power and the man-power – these mystical terms by which we endeavour to express that might of gentleness, that force of intellect, and that strength of body, which opinion (and often fact) has long sexed, but which we wish to behold in the future united in every human individual, without relation to sex. In fine, to be a true communist, or Socialist, the man must possess the woman-power as well as the man-power, and the woman must possess the man-power as well as the woman-power. Both must be equilibriated beings.⁶¹

The reason why the rough male character has dominated historically is explained in the fashion of the Enlightenment (or Darwinism): the people of the olden days depended on physical force to fight and prevail. However, the intellect-driven progress has put the civilized mind, not the physical force in the forefront. The Man-power largely prevailed, even though occasional intervals of Woman-power could be observed. Here, the imperial European mindset also comes to light: the progress has reached different stages in various parts of the world, "Thus, in the present day, many tribes in the East historically represent the patriarchalism of the days of Job and Abraham." With time, some individuals will unite their dual, masculine and feminine, natures more quickly and readily, and influence others. As more people become complete in such a way, the social system will also change, in Goodwyn Barmby's view, to communism. The author points out that there always have existed exceptional characters whose "mission is the rehabilitation of our planet, and their preaching the gospel of community." As an example of such he highlights Percy Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft.

In his writings, Goodwyn Barmby frequently uses direct quotations from Percy Shelley's poetry. The article on Woman-Man power also opens with a citation from Shelley's *Revolt of Islam*. The romantic poet's philosophy of equality, progress, and all-saving love were one of the main sources of inspiration for Goodwyn Barmby.⁶³ However, the mention of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is especially important for this paper. The mere reference to her

⁶² Ibid: 268.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶³ Shaaban 1992.

name in the article indicates the author's radical views. Even though Wollstonecraft was a pioneering spokesperson for women's rights and found some support among her contemporaries, her and her family's questionable reputation⁶⁴ and the radicalism of her work eventually made her an underground name. Indeed, some of her later defenders were the Owenites.⁶⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft was too strongly associated with impropriety in the mainstream circles that Goodwyn Barmby's reference is, if not ahead of its time, then at least an indication of highly unorthodox views.

In her ground-breaking A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft combines the anti-royalist thought of the French revolution with a call for total gender equality. Vindication emphasizes the crucial importance of thorough and equal universal education and blames the ignorance and weakness of women on the lack of such learning. Women have the same potential to educate themselves as men do because they have souls: the combination of the God-given human nature and trained mind is a right of both women and men. In the introduction to the edition of the Vindication from 2010, Sheila Rowbotham writes that Mary Wollstonecraft "does not then simply want women to acquire the capacity for reason, but imagines that the characteristics ascribed to the two sexes will alter and meld into a new culture."66 This concept of the future progress fuelled by enlightened individuals of both sensitivity and reason is reminiscent of Goodwyn Barmby's dual model of Woman-Man-power. Wollstonecraft writes:

Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being that another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?⁶⁷

In contrast to Wollstonecraft's description of abominably weak and stupid middle-class ladies, the masculine in Goodwyn Barmby's article is strongly associated with the negative, and feminine with the positive. The two natures for him are like "Satan and God, war and peace, or terror and tenderness," "the woman-power... higher than the man-power, inasmuch as love is higher than wisdom." The Woman-power is the future, the core of the community (a noncapitalist social unit in the communist sense), until "the civilization expires." The moral and

⁶⁴ Long after Mary Wollstonecraft's death, her questionable reputation kept resurfacing. The infamous love affair between her second daughter Mary Godwin, author of Frankenstein, and Percy Shelley also contributed to it.

⁶⁵ Rowbotham 2010: xxiv.

⁶⁶ Ibid: xviii.

⁶⁷ Wollstonecraft 2010: 70.

religious tone is connected to Goodwyn Barmby's millennialism, a belief in the second coming of Christ, widespread among Owenite radicals.⁶⁸

Wollstonecraft's more reality-focused *Vindication* shows that the combination of the middle-class female softness, gentleness, and frailty is both the reason and the result of their inferiority: "For this distinction [of sex] is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why the understanding is neglected, whilst accomplishments are acquired with sedulous care: and the same cause accounts for their preferring the graceful before the heroic virtues." Women, especially the majority of middle-class ladies, "have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit." The traditional male virtues of her time are much more desirable – the 'male' mindset must be aspired for if the women's condition has to improve: "all those who view them [women] with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine." Wollstonecraft's thesis is thus more complex and much more personal than Goodwyn Barmby's. A woman of controversial reputation, she was considered to have the masculine sharpness of mind and opinion; in the society of her contemporaries she remained an anomaly, a woman with a male mind. During her trip to Scandinavia in 1795, she writes of her new-born Fanny, daughter of Gilbert Imlay:

You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her – I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard – I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit – Hapless woman! what a fate is thine!⁷³

The citation reinstates Wollstonecraft's philosophy of the duality of human nature consisting of "heart and principles," soul and mind, feelings and reason. Wollstonecraft is reluctant to provide Fanny with the education and training that, as her mother, she would wish her daughter to attain, because she dreads the cruel reception of such mind in a female body. Her fears must be connected to the treatment she received herself for her radical views and scandalous relationships, allowed for men, but at that time unforgivable for women. Wollstonecraft's

⁶⁸ Taylor, B. 2004.

⁶⁹ Wollstonecraft 2010: 76.

⁷⁰ Ibid: 80.

⁷¹ Ibid: 11.

⁷² Reader's letter (1796) in Wollstonecraft 2009, p. 164, Appendix 5: "We have on several former occasions paid our willing tribute of respect to the strong – or, if the fair traveller will accept the epithet as a compliment, the masculine – mind of this female philosopher"

⁷³ Wollstonecraft 2009: 36.

radicalism is expressed in her belief of women's potential to become equal to men, despite her lack of hope stemming from the setup of contemporary society.

Even though the Owenites read and respected Mary Wollstonecraft, their approaches to women's question were not all in agreement with Wollstonecraft's radical idea of women and men as fundamentally equal. One of them was Catherine Wattkins, who later married John Goodwyn Barmby. Catherine frequently contributed to *New Moral World*, under the pseudonym of 'Kate', on topics of women's suffrage and equal rights. After marrying Goodwyn Barmby in 1841, she started signing her articles as Catherine Barmby. In *New Tracts for the Times*, one of the earlier publications by her husband, her tone is stricter and more practical than his in "The Woman-Man Power". An article from 1843 demands "the emancipation of woman . . . 1st politically, 2nd ecclesiastically, 3rd domestically". Catherine argues for women's right for participation in politics and voting because they pay tax as anyone else; for women's abilities to educate and "to illumine and hallow the feelings of goodness"; and for their freedom to pursue domestic "labours for which she is most particularly adapted" (that is, to have a right to judge on household matters). Catherine Barmby closes the article with a metaphor: "The carriage moves steadily when its wheels roll together; so will society's progression be uniform in its course, when its interests co-operate."⁷⁴

A similar, though slightly more religious message is expressed in Catherine's poem "The Woman and the Man!" from the quarterly *Promethean*. The woman in the poem is praised for her sensitivity and beauty which fall victim for the man's oppression and lack of respect:

Where, where is Woman! on the earth, With light, and life, and breath, Behold her in cimmerian dark Wearing a cypress wreath. Her very gentleness her fall, Her beauty e'en her foeman, Her love her ceaseless enemy, Oh! where, alas, is Woman.

The Hour-glass of her destiny
In golden sands hath share;
But a shadow comes athwart the glass,
And the golden sands so rare
Are hid in gloom, far from the sight,
As woman's wealth of spirit,
Is hidden by base circumstance,
For caves hide pearls of merit.⁷⁵

The perfect woman of the poem is pure, innocent and good. The society fails to respect and protect her, and the shadow of a man looms above her. Thus the "wealth of spirit" which she possesses cannot be expressed fully. As a companion to an enlightened and protective man, she is the enemy of her own loving and forgiving character – she is constantly belittled, but bears with it. It would seem that Catherine bemoans women's soft character as both the reason and

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⁷⁴ Barmby, C. 1843.

⁷⁵ Barmby, C. 1842.

the product of their inferiority, as Wollstonecraft does. However, when the remaining three strophes of the poem blame the man for failing to perceive the woman's divinity in her soft and loving nature, a different message appears. The poem celebrates women's sensitivity instead of condemning it. This abstract message is elaborated in the 1843 article, where Catherine advocates for increased respect, liberty, and education for women as professional child-bearers and housekeepers "by calling the domestic sphere women's 'absolute province', allotted by God and thus inalienable."

Today, Catherine Barmby's views would be considered anything but feminist. Seen from the nineteenth-century perspective, however, they are if not revolutionary, then progressive and reformatory. It is important to emphasize that Victorian feminist thought is by no means uniform. Complex and often conflicting, it unites contradictory opinions on women's rights, duties, nature, and needs. In the survey of the First Wave feminist movement, "Privilege and Patriarchy: Feminist Thought in the Nineteenth Century," Mary Maynard shows how varying feminist opinions could be at that time. By applying the term 'feminist', the author acknowledges it was not in use in the nineteenth century. She nevertheless employs it as a recognition of the crucial importance of the First Wave feminists and as a reference to their struggle for women's rights as not only involving campaigning, but also conscious concern about women's situation and needs. Such use of the term acknowledges "that Victorian feminism was concerned not just with 'women's rights' but also with their 'emancipation'. Gerda Lerner has described this as 'freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination; autonomy.' "77

In the article, Mary Maynard points out four main issues of the women's condition discussed in the period: equal rights, the concept of family, employment and economic dependency, and sexuality. She goes on by expanding them into four axes of debate, where both ends of a single axis represent more or less opposite feminist views. The issue of women's rights can be crudely divided into, on the one hand, the fight for improved *rights* for women on a par with men and, on the other, improvement of *opportunities* that would allow women to better fulfil their "womanly duties." Regarding the relationship between men and women, some believed in total, natural equality, which had been eschewed on false premises throughout history, while others argued for woman being different from man and having her own female strengths. In Maynard's words, the former argument represents women who "make little of their

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⁷⁶ Watts 1998: 116.

⁷⁷ Maynard 1989: 223.

⁷⁸ Ibid: 234.

sex," while the latter describe feminists who "make much of their sex." The third axis of debate concerns the public and private sectors of occupation, where some feminists aim to challenge and undermine the existing and prescribed gender roles, while others are in favour of the sexual division of labour based on the same argument of separate male and female strengths. Lastly, there are also conflicting opinions on whether women should ask for total autonomy from men or rather for protection.

Those differing standpoints on the four main themes of the nineteenth-century feminist debate are closely connected to the four main issues mentioned in the beginning of the previous paragraph. The imaginary axes illustrate that the conflicting opinions were more fluid and versatile than they were adversarial and incompatible. They also suggest an existence of diverging feminist thoughts (in plural), some of them radical and revolutionary, and others less critical of the underlying setup and of contemporary society. To generalize it further, one can talk of 'radical feminism' as opposed to 'reformist feminism'. The former's standpoints require the total undermining of existing systems (for example, the notion that men and women are different by nature) in order to achieve equality – such is the nature of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism. The latter is concerned in improving women's condition by favourably adjusting the existing social order without denying certain concepts on which the society is built (for example, acknowledging that women are more suitable to work in the private sphere of home, but fighting for extended rights, autonomy and responsibility, and heightened respect) – this one is more reminiscent of Catherine Barmby's writings. The differences between radicalism and reformism can also be imagined as an axis or a continuum, where different levels of radicalism and reformism, some even combining the two approaches, are acknowledged.

As Maynard shows, the only somewhat unified aim of the feminist movement in the nineteenth century was to improve the women's condition, but the views on what such an improvement would encompass were greatly divergent. Even the fundamental concepts of womanhood and woman's position in society took different forms among feminists. However, all nineteenth-century activism for women's rights can without doubt be called revolutionary, because it was equally challenging and controversial for women to ask for increased personal freedom as it was to demand equal treatment of men and women in the public life.⁷⁹

The survey of John Goodwyn Barmby and Catherine Barmby's contribution to the women's emancipation debate makes it clear that Beatrice Helen Barmby must have had direct access to progressive ideas concerning women's rights. Her mother Ada Barmby's enlistment

⁷⁹ Ibid: 236.

in the Women's Suffrage Petition of 1861 and aunt Julia Maria Barmby's role as honorary secretary of the Wakefield Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage⁸⁰ also bear witness to the involvement with the Woman Question among Beatrice's closest family members. It would be too bold to suppose that her relatives' opinions remained unchanged throughout their lifetime or that Beatrice followed their beliefs. However, it is clear that both her family background and the fiery women's rights debate of the late nineteenth century must have influenced the author of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* in some way. In the following sections, I will analyse the play's direct and indirect references to the Woman Question by considering the following issues: (1) the Victorian divide between the feminine and the masculine (gender roles and duties), and (2) marriage and marital relationships.

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⁸⁰ Crawford 1999: 34.

II. GÍSLI SÚRSSON: A DRAMA AND ITS HEROINES

Icelandic Man-Power and Victorian Woman-Power, or the Other Way Around?

The general understanding of the masculine and the feminine spheres in the Victorian England was much unlike Goodwyn Barmby's utopian duality-turned-unity model. The clear separation of private (female) and public (male) spheres constructed some responsibilities and character traits as exceptionally womanly, while others were ascribed solely to men. The interior space of home was women's responsibility, whereas the competitive outside world of profession, politics, travelling, and science belonged to men. The Victorian society is clearly not exceptional in this sense, as a similar social setup described Europe for centuries, if not millennia: the woman as soft and welcoming guard of the hearth, the man as a provider of all other comforts to be brought in from the outside world. However, the growing Victorian middle-class was especially keen on creating new structures of order: they did not share the more economically driven concerns of the working classes or the upper classes' monetary freedom, which also allowed more liberalism in other spheres. The expanding, increasingly wealthy middle class was most challenged by the shift of the previous industrial, social, and religious norms. Desire for clarity urged them to define gender roles more distinctly, as Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall explain in the Introduction to Sexuality and Subordination (1989):

What were emerging were new and powerful ways of ordering the disruptive forces of sexuality, not by legislation or ecclesiastical penalties, but through the qualities appropriated to masculinity and femininity. New kinds of sexual order were embedded within the family, within the separate worlds of men and women. The appropriate ordering of family life did not lie in the following of aristocratic patterns of fashion, and freer sexual morality, nor in the customary obligations and communal assumptions surrounding the courtship, marriage, and childbearing of different communities of labouring people. Rather, the bourgeois family was distinguished by the values of order, frugality, and propriety. One side of this lay in the refinement of manners, the adoption of patterns of gentility, always contrasted with the rougher manners of an earlier age, and associated with the civilizing and moralizing influence of women. Another side lay in the silencing of sexuality in public. 81

It is apparent from literature of the nineteenth century Britain that the middle classes were especially concerned with proper, correct ladylike and gentlemanlike behaviour. Both women and men had to be brought up and educated properly, but in different ways. Mary Wollstonecraft, the advocate of nurture, and not nature determining one's character and mind, would assumedly not have been content with the notions of the later generations. The sexes were separated by an almost unpassable void which symbolised natural diversity and rightful

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⁸¹ Mendus and Rendall 1989: 5.

dissimilarity. This dissimilarity supposedly allowed the man to receive from the woman what he did not possess, and vice versa, and established the compatibility of opposites in romantic and/or marital relationships.

The notion of 'manly' reason versus 'womanly' sensibility which Mary Wollstonecraft protested seem to get even more deeply ingrained in the middle classes of the nineteenth century Britain. In *Villette* (1853), Charlotte Brontë puts such wisdom in the girls' school teacher M. Paul Emanuel's lips (whose words bear a strong ironic and provocative note):

'Women of intellect' was the next theme: here he [M. Paul Emanuel] was at home. A 'woman of intellect', it appeared, was a sort of *lusus naturæ*, a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker. Beauty anticipated her in the first office. He believed in his soul that lovely, placid, and passive feminine mediocrity was the only pillow on which manly thought and sense could find rest for its aching temples; and as to work, male mind alone could work to any good practical result – hein?⁸²

M. Paul Emanuel summarises the model of the middle-class wife and her "passive feminine mediocrity" which eventually got immortalised in Coventry Patmore's long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854–1862). The poem's title has since acquired a life of its own, as 'the angel in the house' has frequently been used synonymously with the suppressive Victorian womanly ideal. The polarity of the feminine and the masculine in the poem is outlined in an article by Carol Christ (1977) on the poem's rendition of male characters. According to Christ, *The Angel in the House* ascribes all the 'divine' attributes of woman ("love, intuition, beauty, virtue") to the realm of passiveness. The ideal woman's lack of ambition allows her to remain calm and composed, while her moral growth is finalised in marriage, in which she remains unmovably loving and forgiving. On the other hand, the man's activeness, aggressiveness, ambition, craving for achievement is natural, but only does him harm. By portraying the female virtues as delightfully passive, the poem "frees woman from the obligation of accomplishment that man finds so burdensome." The ambiguity of the argument arises when the poem solely ascribes aggressiveness (especially sexual) to men. Woman is superior to man in her divine

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⁸² Brontë 1974: 323.

⁸³ The post-Victorian infamy of the poem most possibly comes from Virginia Woolf's critique of it. In a speech from 1931, Woolf declares: "Articles have to be about something. Mine . . . was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her . . . [t]he Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: 'My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.' " (Woolf 1942).

⁸⁴ Christ 2013: 149.

virtues, but also inferior to him because she always receives and does not *act*. 85 The only way men can 'acquire' women as muses and worship-worthy ideals and thus find refuge from their own despicable, competitive nature is through domination: courting, proposing, and marriage.

However, the role of a housewife, as long as she could manage the household comparably independently, was far from unwanted in the late nineteenth century. The woman's skill in nursing and educating children, organising the housework and caring for her husband, with temples aching or not, was still considered a great skill and an important responsibility. Joan Perkin emphasises that "domesticity was popular with many middle-class women" and that other available, more independent occupations such as governess where considered far from attractive. Revertheless, the gender divide also brought huge expectations directed towards both women and men. The writer Mona Caird's compassion for the hopeless societal positions of unmarried women will be mentioned in the next chapter. From the more radical, if not modernised perspective, the middle-class women were deprived of *life* due to their differences from men, as observed by the omniscient narrator of E. F. Forster's *A Room With A View* (1908):

Why? Why were most big things unladylike? Charlotte had once explained to her why. It was not that ladies were inferior to men; it was that they were different. Their mission was to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves. Indirectly, by means of tact and a spotless name, a lady could accomplish much. But if she rushed into the fray herself she would be first censured, then despised, and finally ignored. Poems had been written to illustrate this point.

There is much that is immortal in this mediæval lady. The dragons have gone, and so have the knights, but still she lingers in our midst. She reigned in many an early Victorian castle, and was the Queen of much early Victorian song. . . . She has marked the kingdom of this world, how full it is of wealth, and beauty, and war – a radiant crust, built around the central fires, spinning towards the receding heavens. Men, declaring that she inspires them to it, move joyfully over the surface, having the most delightful meetings with other men, happy, not because they are masculine, but because they are alive. Before the show breaks up she would like to drop the august title of the Eternal Woman, and go there as her transitory self.⁸⁷

Despite the fact that Forster's novel is set just after the reign of Victoria, the passage perfectly expresses the basic late Victorian notions of who and what a woman is: she is not inferior, but different; hers is the role of a companion, a muse. Words such as 'mission', 'immortal', 'Queen', 'the Eternal woman' paints her place in the society as pivotal, divine, untouchable. The way the narrator compares her with dragons and medieval knights is a comic, yet grave call for modernity and change which has affected all but the lady. In order to lead a life-like

⁸⁵ Ibid: 152.

⁸⁶ Perkin 2003: 249.

⁸⁷ Forster 2009: ch. IV.

life, a lady must shoo away society's expectations and ignore the 'illustrating poems', of which *The Angel in the House* is one. Do the heroines of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* do that at any point?

The gender divide, though emphasised among the Victorian middle classes, was clearly not their invention. ⁸⁸ The Old Norse sagas also draw a clear line between the private and the public. In an article on gender in *Gísla saga*, Jeffrey Turco points out that Þorkell's subversive behaviour is emphasized when, during the conversation scene between Auðr and Ásgerðr, he is the only man who remains inside. He trespasses the women's realm of the private by loitering too close to their actual workroom, *dyngja*. ⁸⁹ Auðr also acts subversively as regards gender roles in at least two episodes: the violent refusal of Eyjólfr's bribe and the participation in the final fight of Gísli. The two episodes are also reproduced in the play and will be discussed later in the chapter.

In order to assess whether the female characters of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama* are created according to the model of 'Woman-Man power', the ideal of 'the angel in the house' or something in between, it is necessary to step back and acknowledge the adaptational nature of the play once more. Responses to the publication of the play praise Beatrice Helen Barmby for a faithful and sensible recreation and adaptation of the saga. Of similar opinion are the Icelandic newspaper reviews. ⁹⁰ Then, the women in the play could be read as quite exact interpretations of the saga, which was accordingly believed to be a direct representation of the medieval Icelandic society. The apparently independent and/or subversive female behaviour in the play represents the belief of *how it all worked in the past*. The distance between now and then – especially the heathen 'then' – permits more strangeness, and the Icelandic woman's liberality becomes less shocking. On the other hand, the play could also be suggesting *how it all should (or should not) be in the present*. Beatrice's work creates a distance which, if surpassed by relatedness and sympathy, could turn into a clearer moral and ideological message.

But how strange and ancient was medieval Iceland for the Victorians? Even though it was a desolate, faraway land of exotic qualities, it was likewise a place of common Nordic, North-Atlantic heritage. For example, F. York Powell compliments Beatrice on the flawless portrayal of "that *Northern stoicism* that was to our English and Scandinavian ancestors the true way of manliness and womanliness." The Old Norse sagas, as traces of heroic past, were often

⁸⁸ Mendus and Rendall 1989: 4.

⁸⁹ Turco 2016: 283.

⁹⁰ For a review of the English volume in Icelandic press see *Eimreiðin*, nr. 3. For reviews of the Icelandic translation, see *Bjarki*, nr. 43-44, and *Eimreiðin*, nr. 2. See also later article introducing the Icelandic radio play, "Leikritið Gísli Súrsson og höfundur þess" (bibliographical information can be found in the section "Reviews in newspapers and periodicals" of Literature).

⁹¹ Original italics. Powell, F. Y. 1900: xiii.

applied by the Victorians when attempting to capture their national character. This identification with Germanic tribes of the middle ages and their 'spirit' is expressed by Mr. Thornton, a mill-owner from Northern England, in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel about the country transformed by industrial revolution, *North and South* (1855):

'Wait a little while,' said Mr. Thornton. 'Remember, we are of a different race from the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything, and to whom Mr. Bell might speak of a life of leisure and serene enjoyment, much of which entered in through their outward senses. I don't mean to despise them, any more than I would ape them. But I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England to what it is in others; we retain much of their language; we retain more of their spirit; we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion. Our glory and our beauty arise out of our inward strength, which makes us victorious over material resistance, and over greater difficulties still. We are Teutonic up here in Darkshire in another way. We hate to have laws made for us at a distance. We wish people would allow us to right ourselves, instead of continually meddling, with their imperfect legislation. We stand up for self-government, and oppose centralisation.'

'In short, you would like the Heptarchy back again. Well, at any rate, I revoke what I said this morning – that you Milton people did not reverence the past. You are regular worshippers of Thor.'92

In this conversation, the industrious northerner Mr. Thornton identifies himself with the Teutons, an ancient Germanic tribe of the Baltics, instead of the continental peoples of classical antiquity, whose culture is represented by the interlocutor, professor Mr. Bell from Oxford. In Mr. Thornton's understanding, the practical, strong, persevering, and freedom-loving nature of his barbaric (in the neutral, historical meaning) nature is in direct opposition to the pleasure-seeking culture of the Greeks. A similar juxtaposition is also found in the Icelandic travelogue of E. J. Oswald, to which I will return when discussing divorce (see pages 52-53; a short extract is quoted in the Appendix 2). She does not hide her appreciation for the women of the Old Norse myth and her disregard for the classical Aphrodite and Athene: the stories about 'Frigga,' 'Freya' and 'Iduna' are clearly superior to "the impure legends that have gathered round the names of the divinities honoured by ancient Greece and Rome."

Strength, justness and perseverance is one of the main tropes of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*. If Gísli is the perfect example of a stoic hero who "has stood up for all that makes true life . . . has really lived and lived nobly," what kind of a female character is Aud? Why is the laziness and insensitivity of Thorkel so emphasized in the play? Who is Ásgerd compared to the virtuous Aud? The division of gender roles, which brings specific male and female qualities with it,

⁹² Gaskell 1973: 334.

⁹³ Oswald 1882: 50.

⁹⁴ Powell, F. Y. 1900: x.

seems to be combined in the play with the heroic virtues of both men and women of the Old Norse sagas.

The idyllic opening scene of Gísli Súrsson: A Drama would not be out of place in a Brontë sisters' novel. The image of Aud and Asgerd working on their sewing inside the house during a warm summer's day resembles a depiction of daily undertakings of Victorian middle-class ladies. Their conversation is also important as it immediately establishes considerable differences of character and values between the women. To Ásgerd's discomfort, Aud attends to her sewing with a song about "bloody showers of the gale of war" (1). Asgerd would rather hear "some song of love and death," even though it may bring her sadness and tears, as she would be reminded of her unrequited love for Aud's brother Véstein. She bemoans her faith – married to Thorkel, whose showiness she despises, Ásgerd cannot help appreciating Véstein. Aud is not willing to show too much sympathy and ascribes Ásgerd's behaviour to weakness: "oft we lay those sorrows down to Fate / Which our own weakness causes" (2). Ásgerd juggles with the concepts of fate and ill luck as the main causes of her unhappiness, while Aud remains cold as steel, realistic and very practical. When the women become aware that Thorkel has overheard their conversation, Aud advises Ásgerd to resolve the conflict with an honest explanation. It is evident that Aud values truth and directness, as she wants Ásgerd to apologize and account for her falling "out of love with love" after Véstein's rejection and accepting Thorkel's offer in order to "pleasure kith and kin" (4). Aud's advice is for Asgerd to remain humble, realise her own choices and accept her position as Thorkel's wife:

-Say that you'll be true woman and true wife. Maybe he'll help you to it. (4)

When Gísli finds out the reason for Thorkel's irritation, he also encourages Ásgerd to cast aside her feelings and live through the sorrow by behaving well and worthily, "though the heart crack" (8). This is Gísli's expression of proper behaviour: composed, stoic, and righteous. There is no place for self-pity in the hearts of Gísli and Aud. They both know what is right and just, and act accordingly. Ásgerd is taken away by her misery, Thorkel – by his fury and jealousy, while Gísli and Aud remain unmovably resolute throughout the play. For example, Gísli's sense of justice prevents him to see other solutions to the conflict, which starts with the murder of Véstein, than to kill his murderer Thorgrím. After the killing, Gísli willingly takes over the role of an outlaw without giving it a second thought. For Gísli, the law is earthly, not divine, and thus not perfect: "I broke the law, the law shall break not me" (61). He incorporates the

⁹⁵ In the so-called shorter version of *Gísla saga*, it is unclear whether Vésteinn's killer is Þorgrímr or Þorkell (see Lethbridge 2010: 135, and Turco 2016: 278, footnote 7). The play's Véstein is unambiguously killed by Thorgrím.

free Nordic spirit which Mr. Thornton looks up to in *North and South*: the Norse and the British northerners both "hate to have laws made for us at a distance" and cherish "self-government."

The way in which Aud's character emerges is through juxtaposition (which often manifests itself in dialogues) with other characters: Aud like Gísli, Aud unlike Ásgerd. It is, however, not a proof of Aud's manliness that she is *like* Gísli or shares the same set of values with Gísli, or that she is unlike Ásgerd. Aud's unorthodox individuality is best expressed in at least two episodes, where she takes charge of the situation and makes seemingly independent and controversial, 'unladylike' decisions: Eyjólf's attempt to bribe Aud to betray Gísli, and her participation in the final fight of Gísli against Eyjólf and his followers. In the first episode, Eyjólf arrives at Aud's cottage and makes an offer of silver in exchange of Gísli's whereabouts. Aud lures Eyjólf by appearing interested at first, but then, after being given the bag of money to inspect their quality, she smites Eyjólf in the face with the bundle. Eyjólf, suddenly all covered in blood, is clearly humiliated and threatens Aud to kill her, but his men make him leave: "enough / Of scandal here without more sin to boot" (80). In the second episode, Gísli, Aud and Gudríd, the couple's foster-daughter, stand on a cliff and are being attacked from below. Both Gisli and Aud fight back; Aud famously strikes one of the climbing men on the hands so that he falls down. Gisli exclaims how delighted he is to be so "well wived" (99). To hinder more injury, the enemies must hold Aud and Gudríd tight.

In scholarship of saga literature, both episodes of the Old Norse *Gísla saga* have been used to argue for Aud's exceptional, subversive behaviour. A woman who physically abuses her abusers seems to be an exception of a general rule in both saga literature and medieval European literature in general. The bribing episode is used by Carol J. Clover to introduce her argument in the famous article "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe." By quoting Eyjólfr's insult towards Auðr ("Hafið hendr a hundinum ok drepi, þó at blauðr sé²⁹⁶), Clover establishes the idea of the distinction between the adjectives *blauðr* and *hvatr* as representing the social system of the Old Norse society. Dictionary entries and English translations of the two adjectives in context associate *blauðr* with the feminine and *hvatr* with the masculine. At first sight, Eyjólfr indeed seems to refer to Auðr's gender by calling her *blauðr*: kill her, even though she is a woman. But Clover twists the episode by suggesting that Eyjólfr's categorisation of Auðr as *blauðr* refers to "bodily femaleness," even though her behaviour characterises her as *hvatr*. That is, the distinction between *blauðr* and *hvatr*, though sometimes referring to sex as in this episode, is much more often used in describing attributes

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⁹⁶ Gísla saga 1946: 83. Translation: "Seize the cur and kill it, though it be a bitch" (Gisli Sursson's saga 1997: 41).

"regardless of sex." Supporting her argument by the two antonyms' untranslatability to modern language, Clover states that sex was not the overruling factor deciding women's status in the Old Norse society. It was rather the character, behaviour, reputation, and honour that decided whether a person, either man or woman, would be considered *blauðr* (soft, weak, cowardly) or *hvatr* (bold, brave). The author does not declare that the sexes were arbitrary or non-existant in the Old Norse society: her main argument is that there existed a single ideal, which was masculine (*hvatr*), while the feminine qualities (summarised by *blauðr*) were considered lacking, inferior, "women being viewed as "inverted, less perfect, men." 97

Since its publication in 1993, Carol J. Clover's article has attracted much scholarly attention and is frequently referred to in the Old Norse gender scholarship. Even though Clover has been criticised for selectiveness of sources, 98 her observations are intelligent and, if not taken too literally, serve as an approach (among others) to reading the sagas. The dual distinction between man and woman, strength and softness, útan stokks and innan stokks has been so ingrained in European culture that to claim that women were considered 'lesser men' is a way to explain patriarchal oppression. It is not sufficient to suggest that women were neglected the same rights as men because they were women; they were oppressed because they were not men. As George Eliot ironically puts it:

A man's mind – what there is of it – has always the advantage of being masculine – as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm – and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality.⁹⁹

At first sight, Aud does not represent the image of the passive and feeble Victorian lady. Her aggressiveness while defending Gísli is pagan in the uncivilised sense of the term. Aud's behaviour seems to qualify her as male – *hvatr* in reference to Clover's article. Furthermore, Aud incorporates the celebrated Nordic values of stoicism, perseverance, and justness, which are usually ascribed to male heroes of the Old Norse sagas and are in contrast with the passiveness, tact, and loveliness of the angel in the house. In this case, Clover's argument of the masculine ideal and the feminine non-ideal, though often criticised by the Old Norse scholars, ¹⁰⁰ is useful for the analysis of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*. It seems that Aud and Gísli, both possessing the *hvatr* values, are juxtaposed with Ásgerd and Thorkel, who are both more reminiscent of the *blauðr* type.

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⁹⁷ Here, Clover quotes Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, 1990, 26 (Clover 1993: 377).

⁹⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2017: 234.

⁹⁹ Eliot 1976: 44.

¹⁰⁰ For a recent in-depth criticism, see Mikael Miles, "Den avhängiga: Kvinnoförakt som förutsättning för ett enda genus på 1200-talets Island?", *Collegium Medievale*, 2006, 65-82.

The character of Thorkel immediately arouses suspicion as differing from the male norm. At the beginning of the play (and the saga), Thorkel's afternoon nap in a pompous outfit exemplifies his ineptitude as a productive male member of the household. Thorkel himself acknowledges rumours that "He never stirs a finger," while "Gísli does the work, / Farms, fights or drudges all the livelong day" (9). Gísli encourages Thorkel to ignore the neighbours' chatter:

There be some men were made to ride to moots, And think deep thoughts, and sit among the chiefs, And guard the people's peace; and some, again, To fight, farm, drudge – and such as these am I. (9)

Unfortunately, Thorkel fails at both representing his kin in local assemblies and in keeping the peace. He turns the outlawed Gísli down twice when he asks Thorkel for support (Act II, Scene V; Act III, Scene I). Thorkel is ready to provide Gísli with money, but reluctant to be *seen* helping or try to defend his brother openly. Thorkel will not risk his reputation and his own life by supporting an outlaw, be him his kinsman or not. He declines all Gísli's pleas, because he is well-off and successful with "the West-Quarter men": "stand back, I say. . . . You lost your chance, you'd ruin mine for spite!" (63). He exclaims that Gísli got what he deserved, to which the outlawed hero replies: "I had no friend to do my sins for me" (64). This is the most fatal duty of Thorkel he fails in: he disrupts the peace which he was supposed to protect, while Gísli slaved in the fields. The fact that he does not kill Véstein by his own hands further proofs his character as cowardly and selfish, the opposite of the brave Gísli, who is nevertheless forgiving towards his brother.

The play's, as well as the saga's, fatal narrative is not brought about by the women's conversation alone – Thorkel's afternoon nap is an "intrusion of a man into the sphere of female domesticity." It would be tempting to argue that this intrusion – a subversion of the proper gender divide – is the main cause of the tragic events that follow. However, the play's Gísli does never blame Thorkel for his jealousy or rude treatment of Ásgerd (for example, when he prohibits her to accept Véstein's precious foreign gifts (20)). It is the poor Ásgerd that receives all the oral flogging from her friends. As in the opening episode, where Aud recites war verse, while Ásgerd pleads for something softer and lovelier, she is portrayed as cowardly and tearful. Even Aud exclaims "Brave she cannot be!" when Véstein wants to send Ásgerd a message to show how sorry he is and to encourage her to be faithful to her "fair husband and . . . kind" (28). Ásgerd is also despised by Gísli because of her faltering affections, as he expresses in his words to Aud: "You'll love me still; you are not of Ásgerd's make" (59). This comment

¹⁰¹ Turco 2016: 285.

suggests that Ásgerd, after accepting Thorkel's proposal, has not accomplished her wifely duties of love and faithfulness, and that the choice was therefore for her free to make. However, the coarsest attack on Ásgerd's behaviour comes after Véstein's death. Gísli does not hold his grudge back and blames Ásgerd openly for the disaster she has caused:

Look, you did ill to love him living – dead, No man can rob you of him. He is yours, That you may live the happier for his life, And live the humbler that you wrought his death. (35)

Ásgerd's feeling-driven actions further emphasize Aud's cold judgement and unwavering intellect. Aud resembles the future ideal of woman's masculine reason, while Ásgerd would represent the unfortunate outcome of Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of women, when she encourages them to train minds instead of senses: "I may be allowed to infer that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I must again repeat, that sensibility is not reason." 102

Does Aud transgress the limited women's sphere and enter to the zone of the masculine at any other point? Apart from the two aforementioned violent episodes, which are both more or less desperate attempts to defend her husband, she is portrayed as intelligent and learned in medieval tales and poetry. The pagan, illiterate Icelandic society, as seen from the Victorian point of view, valued orally transmitted knowledge and considered scalds and storytellers as bearers of deep eternal wisdom. Therefore, Gísli will not pronounce his bloody undertaking of killing Thorgrím out loud, but shall trust his wife's skill in logical, old wisdom-based inference:

You will know all ere long. You are learned, wife, You know old songs and stories. . . . So. Now that sorry song the Westmen sing Of Brynhild's wrath and love, and Sigurd's death, And how King Gunnar slew his sister's mate, — How runs it? (45)

Hovewer, Aud's overall position in the play would be difficult to be described as subversive, modern or revolutionary. She is, if not quite the angel in the house, then at least simply in the house. Aud is the powerful guardian angel of her and Gísli's home at the Hillock, when Eyjólf and Börk arrive to accuse Gísli for murdering Thorgrím (Act I, Scene VI). Her strong hand manages the household firmly, so that noone "shall . . . boast they held us from our work" (56). After Gísli is outlawed and Aud moves to a cottage in Geirthióf's Frith, her home is the only warm refuge for Gísli. The cottage is the ultimate private space where Gísli is fed, tended to

¹⁰² Wollstonecraft 2010: 85.

and where he can rest and hide from his foes. And is the one who rules there and receives him with joy, as Forster's lady who "reigned in many an early Victorian castle."

In the character of Aud, two worlds are combined: she has all the Northern heroic qualities of bravery and sound mind, so enthusiastically celebrated by Mr. Thornton in *North and South*, while retaining the powerful, yet limited role of the provider of the safe space of home. This role manifests itself in its clearest form in the cottage in Geirthióf's Frith, where she receives the outlawed Gísli repeatedly. Aud expresses what Goodwyn Barmby would call the Woman-Man power: a blessed combination of "that might of gentleness, that force of intellect, and that strength of body." Ásgerd, according to other characters of the play, is incorporated gentleness without strength, sensitivity without reason, while Thorkel attempts to execute Man-Power by lacking boldness, resolution, and honesty.

To return to the adaptational nature of the play, a certain distance between the saga age and the Victorian era allows Beatrice's contemporary audience to accept those qualities in Aud which otherwise would be unacceptable in a woman. Aud represents the Northern heroic qualities of the past – the active qualities that in the Victorian period were associated with men. It is then, I imagine, up for the audience to decide whether those qualities would seem desirable and should be encouraged in both men and women. In other words, Aud has the potential to demonstrate the advantages and likeability of progressive character which merges Woman-power with Man-power. On the other hand, she retains the respected female position in the private sphere. But what allows Gísli and Aud to remain so virtuous, heroic and manly, while Thorkel and Ásgerd fall into the trap of insincerity, jealousy, deception, hate, and eventual effeminacy? The answer is marriage.

Families of Gísli Súrsson: A Play. 'Is Marriage a Failure?'

The debate on the condition of mainly middle-class married women was especially heated during Beatrice Helen Barmby's time. A major impetus for the escalation of the debate was an article on marriage which appeared in *Westminster Review* in 1888. Its author was novelist and essayist Mona Caird (1854–1932), an advocate of the so-called New Woman, a late nineteenth century symbol of progressive femininity. Often writing on the theme of marriage, the New Woman novelists and poets were concerned with "everything from political reform, sexual freedoms, and economic and social independence to literary publishing." ¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Hughes 2006: 481.

Caird's article in *Westminster Review* (the same newspaper that published Harriet Taylor in 1851 – see below) criticises the contemporary form of marriage as "an insult to human dignity." According to her, the institution is built upon false and degrading notions of female inferiority. A married woman is totally deprived of both her "body and soul": her body, as a means of reproduction and pleasure, is owned by her husband; self-expression in anything else than motherhood and housekeeping is inaccessible; her economical independence is non-existent. The fact that marriage is frequently the only way for a woman to survive economically is not her own problem – it is the poisonous setup of the society that provides her with no other financially efficient way of living.

Caird is in no opposition to marriage as such. She rather wishes it to become a union that can infuse lives with "the rich and many-sided happiness which they [men and women] have the power to bestow one on another." According to her, this can be achieved by ensuring equality and freedom in and of marriage. This undertaking, she explains, will be a lengthy and complicated process of changing the underlying conceptions of the purpose of womanhood, by educating women and men together and on equal terms, by considering housework and child-bearing an activity as crucial, valuable, challenging, and worthy as any other business (and even an occupation to be paid for), and by allowing people to have the freedom in arranging their marriage. Caird is in general a great believer in individuality:

Give room for the development of individuality, and individuality develops, to the amazement of spectators! Give freedom in marriage, and each pair will enter their union after their own particular fashion, creating a refreshing diversity in modes of life, and consequently of character.¹⁰⁷

Caird's later essay collection *The Morality of Marriage, and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman* (1897) takes the form of a lengthy anthropological, historical and sociocultural study of the oppression of women. Here, alongside the freedom of self-expression emphasized in the article from 1888, Caird draws attention to the importance of mutual love by quoting Sarah Grand's novel "Ideala" (1888): "only the love that lasts can sanctify marriage, and a marriage without such love is an immoral contract." Love is the crucial part of the contract, even though it does not eliminate the contract's unjust nature – it only renders it less visible. Therefore, Mona Caird urges women to be disobedient. Even though they have their means to influence their husbands "by smiles and wiles and womanly devices," those small

¹⁰⁴ Caird 2012: 1631.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid: 1631.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid: 1633-1634.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid: 1632.

¹⁰⁸ Caird 1897: 118.

victories are won due to somebody else's – the man's – mercy and kindliness to show favour, not because of the woman's own authority. The only power the woman is allowed to possess is "the power not of a free being, but of a favourite slave." ¹⁰⁹

Mona Caird's view on marriage was far from acceptable for the mainstream society. Many of her contemporaries found it rather infuriating, if not totally ridiculous. The Daily Telegraph responds to the essay shortly after its initial publication by accusing Caird of misinterpreting historical details and simplifying "the extremely difficult and very ancient problem" of marriage. Readers' responses flow into both the Westminster Review and The *Telegraph*, the latter receiving over 27 000 letters in less than two months. Some readers' letters alongside a few essays were published in 1888 by Harry Quilter, journalist and art critic, in the collection Is Marriage a Failure? Even though Mona Caird's main arguments were lost in the stream of personal confessions and heated disapprovals, the debate continued. She was interviewed in the Pall Mall Gazette, where the original essay was reprinted, and her critique of marriage was even printed by the American Cosmopolitan. The memorable phrase Is Marriage a Failure? could still be found printed on postcards well into the 20th century however, more as a joke than a radical slogan. 110

The widespread influence of Caird's essay among contemporary readers was due to its appearance in a social climate slightly more accommodating to such arguments. The debate was, of course, not entirely new: Mary Wollstonecraft had already criticized the poisonous inequality in marriage in her Vindication of the Rights of Women, while the mid-nineteenth century saw writers such as Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill¹¹¹ arguing for the social liberation of women and criticizing the institution of marriage. However, the middle classes of the late nineteenth century England were more susceptible towards, or at least more interested in, the questions surrounding the New Woman and the Woman Question. 112

In a speech which appeared in the Westminster Review in 1851, Mona Caird's radical predecessor Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) attacks the image of a soft, supportive wife. She disagrees with the idea that motherhood is incompatible with participation in public life, and that taking up a profession or becoming a politician would unnecessarily and even harmfully harden the woman's character. 113 Denying women other occupations creates hordes of unhappy

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Rosenberg 2004: 9-12.

¹¹¹ For example, in *The Subjection of Women* from 1869. For Mill on marriage and the women's role, see Mendus 1989. Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill were close friends and collaborators.

¹¹² Heilmann 1996: 70.

¹¹³ Taylor, H. 1853: 9.

women raising unhappy children, and totally neglects spinsters; the latter are entirely exempted from meaningful roles in society. Meanwhile, the softness of character is not relevant for a contemporary society based on competition – "the notion of guarding women from the hardening influences of the world could only be realized by secluding them from society altogether." The base of Taylor's argument is that the humiliating condition of women as auxiliary beings is not helping, but harming men. A union between an educated, ambitious husband and an ignorant, vain wife (it is how she is *taught* to be) does not produce a happy home and family. There is no opportunity for intellectual growth for either of them, as the husband learns nothing substantial from his wife, while the wife has no tools to understand her husband's interests. Educating women to become companions for their men, as is advocated for by "the moderate reformers of the education of women; a sort of persons who cross the path of improvement on all great questions; those who would maintain the old bad principles, mitigating their consequences" (i.e., reformist feminists), does not allow a strong, challenging, invigorating friendship between spouses to emerge and be sustained. The reformers claim to have achieved the following:

For the first time in the world, men and women are really companions. A most beneficial change, if the companionship were between equals; but being between unequals, it produces, what good observers have noticed, though without perceiving its cause, a progressive deterioration among men in what had hitherto been considered the masculine excellencies. Those who are so careful that women should not become men, do not see that men are becoming, what they have decided that women should be – are falling into the feebleness which they have so long cultivated in their companions. Those who are associated in their lives, tend to become assimilated in character. In the present closeness of association between the sexes, men cannot retain manliness unless women acquire it.¹¹⁶

Companionship in marriage is impossible without the two companions sharing similar freedom, virtues, and educational background. To achieve such compatibility, it is crucial to allow women to have ambition and cultivate self-expression on a par with men. Otherwise, marriage will remain "corrupting equally to both; in the one it produces the vices of power, in the other those of artifice." For both Caird and Taylor, love and friendship are crucial, but not standalone ingredients of a happy marriage. They argue that a marital union can be rewarding and prevent the spouses' "progressive deterioration" *only if* they are given equal opportunities and freedom.

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¹¹⁴ Ibid: 12.

¹¹⁵ Ibid: 16.

¹¹⁶ Ibid: 15.

¹¹⁷ Ibid: 18.

What view towards marriage is expressed in *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, and how can it be connected to the feminist thought of the second half of the nineteenth century? Love and compatibility of spouses is an important focus of the play from the very beginning. The two women's opening conversation is given important weight in the play as the starting point of the narrative – it gives rise to the feud which at last brings about the main hero Gísli's outlawry and death. It is, of course, reasonable not to reproduce the usual beginning of an Icelandic saga, a detailed genealogical introduction, in a work of drama. In the saga, however, the tension between the four foster-brothers Gísli, Thorkel, Véstein, and Thorgrím is alluded to earlier in the narrative. After the picturesque ceremony of giving oaths and mixing blood, Thorgrím announces his bond to Véstein to be lesser than that to Gísli and Thorkel – Thorgrím will not bind himself to Véstein by equal obligation as to the two others. Accordingly, Gísli will not swear allegiance to Thorgrím because of the latter's enmity towards Véstein. It is the first inclination of the conflicts that await:

Gísli mælti þá til Þorkels, bróður síns: "Nú fór sem mik grunaði, ok mun þetta fyrir ekki koma, sem nú er at gert. Get ek ok, at auðna ráði nú um þetta."

Then Gisli said to Thorkel, his brother, "This is what I thought would happen. What has taken place here will come to nothing. I suspect fate will take its course now." 120

In the play, however, the audience is initially introduced to the two women and Thorkel without the backstory of the tension between the foster-brothers. Thorkel's jealousy is given no other ground than that of Ásgerd's romantic admiration of Véstein. The scene is thus established for the audience to reflect not only on the differences between the two women, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also on the marital relationships between Aud and Gísli, and Ásgerd and Thorkel.

When it becomes apparent that Thorkel has overheard the women's exchange, Ásgerd quickly crafts a plan to soften her husband's heart with affection. Ásgerd's speech finally does arouse Aud's sympathy, as her marriage with Thorkel is suggested to be a brutal one. Ásgerd will not speak honestly with her husband because she cannot say she loves him, and if she were open about not loving him, the reply would be "a good beating" (4). A moment later, when explaining Thorkel's strange behaviour to Gísli, Aud justifies Ásgerd's speech alluding to the latter's unenviable position:

¹¹⁸ "Svá munum vér þá fleiri gera," segir Gísli ok hnykkir ok sinni hendi, – "ok skal ek eigi binda mér vanda við þann mann, er eigi vill við Véstein, mág minn" (Gísla saga 1946: 11). Translation: "Then others may do the same," said Gisli, and he withdrew his hand, too. "I will not burden myself with ties to a man who refuses to bind himself to Veistein, my brother-in-law" (Gisli Sursson's saga 1997: 7).

¹¹⁹ Gísla saga 1946: 12.

¹²⁰ Gisli Sursson's saga 1997: 7.

Nay, do not blame us, Gísli. Women's lives Are hard enough who may not choose their mates, And sometimes they must ope their lips on it, Or the pain chokes them. (6)

Aud expresses solidarity and understanding of Ásgerd's situation and takes over the blame (before being sent back to the kitchen by Gísli). When Ásgerd and Gísli are left alone, Ásgerd wonders at Gísli's composure and lack of jealousy in his marriage with Aud, and he replies: "Sister, there is a spring you know not of, / And call it love or trust, it matters not, / 'Tis ever one to me" (7). This suggests that Gísli and Aud's marriage is well-built on both love and trust, while Thorkel and Ásgerd's boasts of neither of the two comforts. The two couples are clearly contrasted: Gísli and Aud are compatible in their calmness and wisdom, while Thorkel and Ásgerd are more easily moved by emotion and impression. Accordingly, the former pair seem to lead a successful marriage based on common understanding and trust, while the latter cannot allow themselves to be honest with each other, either because of a risk of domestic violence in Ásgerd's case or a breach in honour and dignity in Thorkel's.

Why is Asgerd and Thorkel's marriage so doomed that it leads to the slaughter among foster-brothers? It is unsuited as a practical arrangement because it lacks the main ingredients emphasised by both Goodwyn Barmby and Mona Caird – love and trust. Furthermore, Ásgerd being the inferior part of the arrangement, as suggested by a reference to Thorkel's violence, their marriage becomes harmful for both parties. As in the quotations of Mona Caird above, only love can protect a marriage from becoming a degenerating condition for both husband and wife. While love can cover up the inequality in marriage, no love followed by lack of equality becomes disastrous. Having no other choice, Ásgerd has to develop her psychological skills in manipulation to acquire power over her husband. After sweet words and praise seem not to work on Thorkel, Asgerd employs a more threatening tone and talks of separation (on references to divorce in the play, see below). She recycles Gísli's words about a spring "called trust or love," accusing Thorkel of unjust suspicion, so that Thorkel runs after her begging for forgiveness (12-13). Ásgerd sets an example of how a wife can employ what Caird calls "the womanly devices" when she manipulates Thorkel's emotions from rage, earlier induced by jealousy, to shame and fear of the wife's leaving him. Thorkel is, however, not goaded into believing Ásgerd has forgotten Véstein, as the proceeding narrative of revenge shows. Ásgerd's sweetness is fake, while Thorkel's jealousy is destructive.

Who is the main victim of this unlucky marriage, one could ask? Does Ásgerd's cunning and artfulness stem from her marital misery and oppression? Or is Thorkel the unlucky one – an ill-fated man stuck with such a fake and unloving wife? The Norse male heroes can be seen

as victims of their so-called 'ladies', as formulated by Jane Welsh Carlyle (1801–1866), renowned letter-writer and wife of the essayist and Icelandophile Thomas Carlyle: 121

I feel there was a savagery about some of the Icelandic *Ladies* which made one shudder even to think of! One wd not like to think that the *Arch Enemy* himself would be capable of some of the deeds ascribed to these *Ladies*! No wonder that the advice is given 'Believe not a maiden's word' (nor her Mother's neither) . . . some of the men were very beautiful characters if they had been rightly mated.¹²²

Thorkel's jealousy could indeed be justified by Ásgerd's unwifely, unladylike behaviour. However, if the reader were to apply Harriet Taylor's theory of the degenerative nature of an unequal marriage, the blame would not fall on Ásgerd, but on the institution of marriage itself. Thorkel's role as the superior member of the union corrupts him and, notwithstanding the love for his wife, makes him treat Ásgerd with violence. His lousy, fiery, and unreserved character could also be interpreted as a result of the poisonous relationship, while Ásgerd's trickery could be ascribed to her pitiful position as a wife with no substantial freedom.

The play's Gísli is of a different opinion on "the Icelandic *Ladies*" than Jane Carlyle is. In a long monologue in Act III, Scene II, Gísli visits his abandoned house, the Hillock, at night and imagines future stories circulating among people. He sees his outlawry as if from a distance, remembered and talked of "carelessly in times to be," where storytellers would praise his braveness, pity his unavoidable crimes of murder, and compliment his wife's faithfulness:

And thrice a year, maybe, his wife Would see him coming o'er the hill, And run to kiss him. You may still Trust women when the men give way. (70)

This is probably a specific reference to Aud, rather than a comment on women in general. On the surface, Aud is indeed the "perfect wife, brave, shrewd, never-failing, the one person that always from the very beginning is aware of the full worth and beauty of Gísli's character and treats him as he deserves to be treated." However, Gísli does not take her proper 'wifeness' for granted – she is his true companion rather than Mona Caird's "favourite slave."

This becomes evident by Aud and Gísli's reflection on their marriage towards the end of the play when Gísli finds final refuge at Aud and foster-daughter Gudríd's cottage before his final capture. Gísli's mind is disturbed, he is plagued by dreams, mumbles unconsciously, recites obscure poetry, and appears so wretched that Gudríd wonders: "Is it the God's wrath or

¹²¹ Wawn 2002: 145.

¹²² Original italics; Wawn (2002: 154) quotes from Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, JC to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 5 March 1882.

¹²³ Powell, F. Y. 1900: xi.

man's magic, mother, / When men go – mad?" (90). Aud attempts to calm Gísli down by reminding him of their happy past. Gísli is waken up from the ill drowse by Aud's voice, "music in my ears," and remembers the beginning of their marriage:

GÍSLI.

As if a man should root
A flower from the soft earth, and bear it far
From all it clings to, – such these weddings be,
And thence come shame and murder.
AUD.

Not with us.

GÍSLI.

No; for I took my flower in my warm heart, And kissed it gently not to dash the blooms, – As I do now. (91)

This exchange suggests that marriage is in itself challenging and cruel, and especially for the bride. However, disastrous conflicts can be avoided if the woman, who is compared with an uprooted flower, will be treated by her husband with love and care and thus 'recover'.

Another critique of marriage customs and laws of Victorian Britain that can be extracted from *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* centres around divorce. Even though no divorce is brought about in the play, 124 the looming possibility and apparent simplicity of separation is palpable. Two references to divorce can be found: after the scene in the bower, Ásgerd threatens Thorkel with separation (12); later on, the soon-to-be-outlawed Gísli suggests Aud to divorce him (58). In both episodes, it is suggested that the women are free to separate from their husbands, retrieve their dowry and return home to their kinsmen. Contrastingly, official divorce in Victorian middle-class families was rare and extremely problematic to bring about. It was especially challenging for a woman to sue her husband for divorce and win the case. Absolute divorce, i.e. separation with the right to remarry again, in contrast to judicial separation (a separation 'from bed and board' not allowing remarriage), was for the first time permitted in 1857 by The Matrimonial Causes Act. The only accepted reason for divorce, adultery, was nevertheless judged at double standards. A husband's accusation of infidelity against his wife sufficed, while a wife had to prove her partner's adultery as well as produce evidence for other significant

¹²⁴ In *Gísla saga*, Gísli's sister Þórdís divorces Borkr after she attacks Eyjólfr, Gísli's murderer and Borkr's cousin, under the table with a sword (Gísla saga 1946: 98, Jochens 1999: 58). This episode is not included in the play, where the narrative ends with Gísli's death. *Gísla saga* itself is a narrative of huge tension between family and kin, in which Þórdís chooses kin before marital family when she discloses Gísli as her first husband Þórgrímr's murderer (Karras 2003).

offences such as physical violence, neglect, and other instances of cruel treatment. The double standard was first abolished in 1923.¹²⁵

Clearly, there was little chance to end a marriage when the spouses had, like Ásgerd, "fallen out of love with love" (4). Even here Goodwyn Barmby's vision of love as the main building block of marriage takes a radical form. In the first number of *The Educational Circular and Communist Apostle* (1841), he preaches:

When love endeth marriage is dissolved, and divorce begins. No persons therefore should be forced to remain together in a state of nominal marriage or essential adultery, when love has ceased between them. . . . I announce love to be the sacred bond of marriage . . . I affirm that divorce begins when love ends. 126

If we were to take this quotation literally, the play's marriage between Thorkel and Ásgerd would appear to be a perpetual divorce. But the idealistic view of Goodwyn Barmby is reciprocated by Beatrice Helen Barmby in at least one way: divorce, or the threat of divorce, exists in Gísli Súrsson: A Drama. The Icelandic sagas indeed opened up a world which was more liberal and respectful towards women at least in once case – a world in which marriage was a condition from which one could easily escape, should it turn out to be unfulfilling or unjust. The late nineteenth-century English readers of sagas thus came to believe that the medieval Icelandic marriage laws were comparably liberal. That being said, little is required for a society to appear more liberal towards divorce than the society of Victorian England.

A comparably extensive compliment on the women's position in medieval North is recited in a travelogue from 1882 by E. J. Oswald, *By Fell and Fjord, or Scenes and Studies in Iceland*. Oswald's guidebook does not only provide the reader with tips for sightseeing, accommodation, and successful interaction with the locals. It also introduces the history of Iceland, its literary heritage, language, and describes the overall poeticism of the mystical, barren country. Writing from a female traveller's perspective, the author describes the most convenient types of travelling attire and encourages other female travellers to bring their own saddles from home, ¹²⁷ as all the travelling in the country is made on horseback. Oswald's

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¹²⁵ Hammerton 1990: 271.

¹²⁶ The Educational Circular and Communist Apostle, no. I, November 1841, 4-6, as quoted in Shaaban 1992: 132. ¹²⁷ The same suggestion is made by Ether Brilliana Harley Tweedie in A Girl's Ride in Iceland from 1889, where Tweedie recommends other travelling ladies to mount the horse in the male manner (facing the road and the head of the horse, not the side): "I determined therefore to throw aside conventionality, and do in 'Iceland as the Icelanders do.'... Perhaps my boldness may rather surprise my readers; but after full experience, under most unfavourable circumstances, I venture to put on paper the result of my experiment.... I am quite sure had we allowed conventional scruples to interfere, we should never have accomplished in four days the 160 miles' ride to the Geysers, which was our ultimate achievement" (Tweedie 1889: 67-68).

comments on the Old Norse literature as part of the cultural and historical content of the travelogue leads her to praise the medieval condition of women and the liberality of divorce:

Divorce had to be taken into consideration, for it was very easy in heathen times. A few angry words, or a slap on the cheek, were grounds enough – the wife could in such a case call witnesses, declare herself divorced, and go away with her dowry. The wife, it is said, often threatened to divorce her husband, if he would not act according to her wishes; for it was not difficult to find a pretext, although divorces were not, after all, nearly so frequent as one might have supposed from their facility – a certain discredit was attached to them. . . . Such a law might liberate a good many couples in this country now. ¹²⁸

Oswald is suggesting that even though divorce was comparably easy to obtain, it was not as frequent as one would imagine. This claim could express Oswald's argument against the supporters of strict divorce laws and the Christian notion of the eternal pact of marriage: easier divorce does not bring an avalanche of severed families and separated households, but rather allows some to be released from harmful relationships. The 'discredit' of divorce reinstates the pagan Icelanders' image as a rightful and moral society which, alongside law, regulates itself according to strong moral codes. It is clear that Oswald's opinion towards lighter divorce laws is positive, as "good many couples" could profit from similar legislation. The reference to "this country" is, however, ambiguous: it could be both modern Iceland, of which Oswald continues to talk in the same paragraph, or her native Britain (see Appendix 2 for a lengthier citation).

Easy medieval Icelandic divorce, if by itself a criticism of contemporary Victorian society, is less ambiguously used in the play to emphasise Aud's love for and wifely devotion towards Gísli. When he announces his upcoming outlawry and begs Aud to divorce him and return to her family unharmed, she is appalled:

By all Gods that are, And by my wifely honour, and all vows That bound us, you're not worth my kissing, – no! Not worth one sigh at parting! (59)

Aud's "wifely honour" is described by her attachment to and her unwavering support of Gísli. To return to the discussion of similarities between the characters and values of the two spouses, it could be argued that Aud supports her husband because she believes he has done the right thing breaking the law. On the other hand, the current dialogue from Act II, Scene VI suggests that Aud supports Gísli *despite* the circumstances. Their relationship seems to be a central accomplishment of their lives. And while Gísli engages in his 'extra-curricular' activities of killing and outlawry, it seems that Aud's main personal purpose is to be the ideal faithful wife:

¹²⁸ Oswald 1882: 49.

You'll buid a cot for me, and there I'll dwell, And sit and spin, and sing, and cook for you; And if your foes grow strong, you'll flit awhile, And I bide there and wait till the storms cease And you come home again.

I have one care, although my life-strings crack, To stand beside you. Would you claim them all – The heartache, and the travail, and the love? I take my share despite you, – that's my gain, To bear some little parcel of your griefs. (60)

And indeed, Aud remains inside the home throughout the entire play with an exception of the final scene of Gísli's demise. It would be perhaps too much to expect more than true companionship from Aud – the adaptation of the saga does take freedom to make any substantial changes to the saga narrative, nor does it provide Aud with a set of weapons (apart from a staff (99)), a ship, a profession, or any other material likeness to male privilege. It is though apparent that Aud has freedom to accomplish her wifely duties. As mentioned in last chapter (see pages 43-33 of the current paper), she has the power to manage the household and give orders to servants at the Hillock. She is also the single person, alongside foster-daughter Gudríd, who creates the space of refuge for the outlawed Gísli at Geirthióf's Frith. Aud is the 'domestically emancipated' woman from Catherine Barmby's article (see pages 30-31). Even though the female and male qualities seem to merge in the play, the division of the private and the public is retained. In this case, Aud has the potential of a feminist role-model for the reformist feminists, who argue for improved female opportunities and, in Maynard's terms, make much of their sex.

Aud and Gísli represent everything that Ásgerd and Thorkel are not. Their loving relationship is based on absolute trust, which is stated and reinstated throughout the play. While Ásgerd and Thorkel's vicious, unmanly, un-Nordic character traits are strengthened by their poisonous relationship, Aud and Gísli stick with their value system. Aud and Gísli evidently love each other and are united by close friendship. However, the marriage itself is not an easy and advantageous arrangement – it is a cruel uprooting on the bride's part. Combined with the marriage critique of Card and Taylor, it seems that Aud and Gísli are saved from the deterioration in marriage by their loving relationship, which enhances their personal strengths.

Marriage in *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* is portrayed as an institution which functions provided that there is reciprocal respect with clearly delineated duties for men and women. So long as men conduct themselves as men (work, fight, think, guard, and defend), and women remain faithful, devoted and practical wives, the family succeeds. Aud is equal to Gísli in that

she has her own share of duties and is free to attend to them as she wishes: she is responsible for the home. But she is also different, and her 'masculine' actions are mere expressions of loyalty. Aud is strong and exceptional, but still a woman, and her main duty is to be a supportive companion to her husband. Forster's 'mediæval lady', equal, but different from gentlemen with her 'mission' to inspire and support, is teleported from the Victorian era back to medieval Iceland.

Conclusion

Aud and Ásgerd, the main female characters of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, represent two different ways of being a woman in the Old Norse society as seen from the Victorian lens. Aud is stoic, purposeful and cold-headed like her husband Gísli, while Ásgerd is driven by sensitivity and emotion like Thorkel. Their character traits obtain different meanings in the contexts of medieval Iceland and Victorian Britain. In the Icelandic context, as seen from the Victorian lense, Aud and Gísli incorporate the exemplary Northern character, while Ásgerd and Thorkel lack the heroic qualities. If seen from the Victorian middle-class womanly ideal, which emerges from the gendered division of private and public spheres and prescribes womanly passiveness and loveliness, Aud appears unladylike and aggressive, while Ásgerd can be read as viciously cunning and insincere.

Aud and Ásgerd's contrasting behaviour can be explained by the different conditions of their married life. Aud and Gísli's marriage, which is based on reciprocal love and trust, allows the spouses to embody their best selves. Even Aud's subversive aggressiveness is justified by her role as a faithful and supportive wife. Ásgerd's unsympathetic character traits, on the other hand, are only enhanced by her unhappy marriage to Thorkel. The oppressed and unhappy Ásgerd has no choice but to employ her 'womanly devices' in order to control her husband. Those devices of provocation and manipulation, being so despised in women in the Victorian society, are ascribed by the feminist writers to the harmful institution of marriage. Only a union between equals, they argue, can be beneficial. The marriage of Aud and Gísli can be read as such. The division between the masculine responsibilities útan stokks and the feminine duties innan stokks is retained, but Aud has freedom and authority to fulfil her occupation as wife. She is not Gísli's "favourite slave," but a respected, outspoken and consciously devoted companion.

The Woman Question in *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* surfaces as a literary re-evaluation of female virtue and responsibility. Through a loving marriage with an equally virtuous Gísli, Aud brings the concept of a home-providing wife to a new level. The type of progressiveness which the play seems to advocate is the reformist feminism: the struggle for improved women's rights as women with traditional female responsibilities and occupations. The play vibrates with consciousness of the Victorian issues of marriage, divorce, and the societal role of women. There is a subtle, but firm focus on the saga women's position as equal members of the society respected on a par with men, even though no radical message of total equality between sexes can be perceived.

Over the course of this paper, I hope to have attracted the reader's attention to the forgotten authorship of Beatrice Helen Barmby. As a late nineteenth-century British author, whose main interest lies in the Old Norse literature, she is exceptional among her fellow, mostly male literary Icelandophiles. Judging from a single literary work, it would be bold to state that Aud represents Beatrice Helen Barmby's personal female ideal. It would not be a particularly interesting statement either. My intention was rather to show how and why the women of *Gisli Súrsson: A Drama* could be judged or appreciated in the Victorian era. A deeper look into Beatrice's authorship as well as a broader research of saga women's portrayal by other Victorian authors would almost certainly draw a clearer picture of the Viking woman and the Victorian woman in coalescence or collision.

I did not succeed in finding an outspoken revolutionary feminist in the respected and proud Aud, or "the tender, faithful Auda" (depending on who describes her), but there hopefully is one slightly more radical lady to be discovered somewhere in the medieval "home of snow and lava and spring flowers" (vii).

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¹²⁹ Dasent 1866: xxxv.

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Appendix 1

Summary of Gísli Súrsson: A Drama

ACT I. Scene I. Aud and Ásgerd sit sewing and conversing about Ásgerd's love for Vésteinn. Asgerd's husband Thorkel sleeps in an adjacent room and overhears the conversation. Gísli enters and enquires about Thorkel's ill humour. He advices Ásgerd to endure the pain and do the right thing "though the heart crack" (8). Thorkel returns and hints that he might be moving away to his sister's husband Thorgrim. Ásgerd assures Thorkel that her speech has been a lie. Thorkel rejects her. Ásgerd in turn starts blaming him for being suspicious. Ásgerd's "tactics" work, and Thorkel goes running after her. Scene II. Saturday, October 17th, 962. A feast at Gísli's house. Thorkel has moved to Thorgrím's. Gest prophesizes. Véstein arrives even though he was asked not to. He kisses Asgerd. Thorgrim goads Thorkel into planning a revenge. Véstein brings gifts to Gísli and Aud. Thorkel does not accept gifts for himself or Ásgerd, even though she pleads him to give way. Thorkel takes Véstein's speech for hints and flirt with Ásgerd. Thorgrím suggests Thorkel to stab Véstein. Scene III. Gísli and Véstein talk by the fire while a storm rages outside. Gísli assures Véstein of his faith in him. They discuss Throkel and Thorgrims behaviour. Gisli offers to accompany Véstein the morning after, because "brave men" confront their foes directly and do not kill the sleeping (27). Aud enters and tells them to go to sleep. Gísli has to go out and fix the door of the cowshed. Aud and Véstein continue talking. Véstein asks Aud to tell Ásgerd he is sorry and that she should be faithful to her husband. Véstein is left alone. Thorgrím enters and drives a spear through the sleeping Véstein. Aud finds him; Gísli enters and pulls the spear out; he knows it is Thorkel's workings. Scene IV. Véstein's body is laid out, Gísli mourns. Thorkel and Thorgrím come in armour followed by Asgerd and Thordís. Gísli asks Thorgrím to dig the grave. Thorkel assures Gísli that he is not the killer and moans that his wife cries too much for Véstein. Gísli figures it was Thorgrím. He then reminds Asgerd it was her fault and encourages her to "live the humbler" (35).

ACT II. Scene I. One year after the previous events. Gísli and Thorgrím converse. Gísli makes indirect references to Véstein's death that Thorgrím does not understand. Thorgrím asks Gísli to lend him cups and tapestry, Véstein's gifts, for the harvest feast. Scene II. Gísli's monologue about how he tries to contain himself from taking revenge. He declares himself to be the "Justiciar": "The doom must fall" (42). Scene III. The people at Thorgrim's farm (Sea Farm) sleep after the feast. Gísli arrives and extinguishes the fire in the hearths. Gísli is frightened, but calms himself down by thinking that he is doing his sister a favour by saving her from shame (of her husband Thorgrim being a killer?). Gisli does not trust Fate; he acts himself. Thórdís screams after finding her husband slain. Scene IV. Gísli returns home, Aud is worried and suspecting. They discuss Gunnar and Sigurd and quote poetry, which comforts during good times, but hurts during bad. Sea Farm people arrive to announce about Thorgrim's death. Gisli suggests burying Thorgrim first before trying to trace the murderer. All leave except Thórdís. She curses the killer and pronounces that her "grief is without cure" (50). Thórdís leaves. Aud cries but assures Gísli that she trusts him whatever he does. Scene V. Gísli is working in the woods. Thorkel arrives, accuses him of killing Thorgrim and announces that Gisli will shortly be summoned to the assembly by Börk. Gísli asks for help and alludes to brotherly solidarity;

Thorkel is reluctant to help. Gísli refers to Véstein's death, and Thorkel promises to discuss it all later. *Scene VI*. Börk arrives at the Hillock with his men. Gísli is not home, and they proclaim a "lawful suit" in Gísli's absence (54). Börk hands over the suit to Eyjólf to administer because he lives closer by. Aud warns them that Gísli is "dangerous" (55). Aud comforts the household and advises them not to heed the lawsuit. Aud goes inside, Gísli returns. He is aware of his upcoming outlawry. Aud encourages him to fight and defend himself, but he acknowledges that killing a man in his sleep was unlawful enough and he does not want to deny it. Gísli suggests Aud to separate from him. She declares her love and loyalty to him: "my law is you! / And my home you!" (59).

ACT III. Scene I. Several years after the last scene have passed. Thorkel and the outlawed Gísli talk. Gísli, in disguise, asks for affection and friendliness. Thorkel is afraid that they will be caught, but gives his brother some gold. Gísli prophesizes about witnessing his brother's death. They part on cold terms. Gisli departs, Gest approaches Thorkel and tells a story about two brothers on a bird cliff: "had he sought to save, / He had been the saved himself" (67). Thorkel is left alone and is busy thinking of all his plans. Véstein's sons Helgi and Berg approach him. They compliment Thorkel on his appearance. Helgi asks to see the sword, Berg takes it, draws it and runs Thorkel through with it. Scene II. The ruins of The Hillock. Gísli's monologue about ghosts, dreams, killings, Aud and his sister. "You may still / Trust women when the men give way" (70). Scene III. Aud's cottage, she sits sewing. Gísli arrives and starts questioning his past undertakings. Aud declares her total trust and support. Eyjólf arrives to bargain, Gísli hides. Eyjólf praises Aud and her appearance. He tells Gudríd she looks much like Gísli's race, while Aud is of royal blood as Eyjólf. He is proud, gives unrequested advice, and offers himself as husband to Aud. Gudrid is disgusted, while Aud acts as if she is interested. Eyjólf pours the silver in her lap; she puts it back to the bag and slings it at Eyjólf's face. Eyjólf want his men to fight her, but they refuse. Aud: "You are brave men. I'd thank you, were my thanks / Worth more than words" (80). Scene IV. Gisli is sleeping unpeacefully at Aud's cottage. Aud tries to soothe him, they talk about his ill dreams. Véstein's sons arrive, Gísli is left alone and quotes poetry. Helgi and Berg come in and announce they have slain Thorkel. "One must pay / So many dear lives for a woman's lightness, / And she laughs on through all!" (86). Gísli asks Aud to make the brothers go and seek shelter at her relatives' at Mossdale. Scene V. Gísli rambles, etches something on a wooden tablet and mumbles old rhymes. Aud and Gudríd are concerned he does not sleep and is going mad. Aud tries to recall the good old times. Aud and Gísli talk of their marriage. Gísli continues quoting some dim rhymes. Then he jumps up and leaves, Aud and Gudríd follow. Scene VI. It is early morning, the three walk outside. Gísli still talks about ghosts. Gudríd sees men approaching. Aud tries to convince Gísli to flee because he is weak, but he seems to want to fight and die, and thus repay for his killings. Gísli stands on a cliff, the men gather in a valley below. They exchange phrases, the men start attaching, Gísli kills the first climber, Aud strikes the second. The men hold Aud and Gudríd, Gísli retreats to the edge of the cliff, fights, kills, and is wounded. Eyjólf encourages his men to fight, though they are tired and frightened and ask him to set an example. In the end, Eyjólf runs the wounded Gísli with a spear. Gísli slays another man and then dies. Eyjólf's followers are somehow ashamed. Eyjólf wants to take Aud with him. She utters the last phrases of the play (with reference to the pilgrimage?): "I know my way henceforward! Go you yours!" (104).

Appendix 2

Extract from E. J. Oswald's By Fell and Fjord, or Scenes and Studies in Iceland (1882)

One notable point on this whole literature [the sagas] is the light it throws on the position of women in the North But in historical times, marriages were carefully arranged with the consent of the heads of both the families concerned; and the greatest sensitiveness was shown in the matter of honourable courtship, though the youths and maidens were allowed to meet each other freely. The bride brought her dower with her, sometimes a rich one, as she shared with her brothers. And in case of widowhood or divorce, she reclaimed all the property she brought with her, though, if divorced, she had to leave behind her the property settled on her by her husband, called the morning gift. Divorce had to be taken into consideration, for it was very easy in heathen times. A few angry words, or a slap on the cheek, were grounds enough – the wife could in such a case call witnesses, declare herself divorced, and go away with her dowry. The wife, it is said, often threatened to divorce her husband, if he would not act according to her wishes; for it was not difficult to find a pretext, although divorces were not, after all, nearly so frequent as one might have supposed from their facility – a certain discredit was attached to them. If a man wore a woman's dress, or vice versa, it was ground for a divorce; the same if a woman wore her hair cut straight across the brow like a man. Such a law might liberate a good many couples in this country now

After a woman had been once married, whether she was a widow of divorced, she became a free agent. The married woman was, from the earliest times, the true household leader, the queen or companion of her lord. The sagas tell of the same freedom of the wife in her own sphere, and association with her husband's life and pursuits, which is the ideal of wedded life now in this country. She was not, like the Greek wife, doomed to a narrow life in her own side of the house apart from the interests of the men; still less was she like the plaything of the Eastern harem; and old age did not deprive her of her influence, while it added to her dignity. Her words were often then held sacred, her influence grew paramount, as one to whom the gods had imparted a more than human wisdom. The wise women of the North were old; they did not need to enhance their power by the young beauty of Pallas Athene. A glance at the respective mythologies will show us the contrast between the stories of Frigga, pure and strong, the ideal of the married women, Iduna, the tender goddess of youth and spring, and Freyja, the honourable northern type of Aphrodite, and the impure legends that have gathered round the names of the divinities honoured by ancient Greece and Rome (49-50).