

Masculinity and / or Peace?

On *Eyrbyggja saga*'s *Máblíðingamál*

In his preface to his classic edition of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson writes that the saga is “fyrst og fremst karlmannasaga” (“first and foremost a saga about men”).¹ Indeed, feuds and disputes between men form the major part of the saga.² One of the first significant episodes of the saga, known as *Máblíðingamál*,³ tells of the witch Katla in Holt and her son Oddr Kǫtluson, the *ójafnaðarmaðr* Þorbjörn digri and his son Gunnlaugr, the knowledgeable Geirríðr in Mávahlíð and her son, the poet Þórarinn svarti. Þórarinn is a central figure in the *Máblíðingamál*. Katla and Geirríðr are presented as rivals. Katla is portrayed as sexual, evil and dangerous, whereas Geirríðr is depicted only as a wise woman.

Young Gunnlaugr spent some time in Mávahlíð learning magic from Geirríðr, and consequently making Katla jealous. When Gunnlaugr is found unconscious and injured near his father's farm, Geirríðr is accused of injuring him by riding him as a *kveldriða* (“night-rider hag”). Oddr Kǫtluson spreads the rumour that Geirríðr was the cause of Gunnlaugr's injury, which was actually caused by his mother's witchcraft. Arnkell goði, Geirríðr's brother defended the charge on her behalf and swore an oath that she was not guilty of the accusations. Geirríðr and Katla, and indeed other women, play a significant

¹ “Þó að sagan sé þannig fyrst og fremst “karlmannasaga” (eins og norska skáldið Kinck kemst að orði).” Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1935, xl.

² On the episodic structure of the saga, sociological and ideological analysis, see Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir 2000, 139–164 and 2006, 208–216. See also McCreesh 1978/79, 271–280; McTurk 1986, 223–237; Bibire 1973, 9–13.

³ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 33–54.

role in the *karlmannasaga*. When introduced in the saga text, Þórarinn, the son of Geirríðr, is described thus:⁴

[M]ikill maðr ok sterkr, ljótr ok hljóðlyndr, vel stilltr hversdagsliga; hann var kallaðr mannasættir. Hann var eigi fémikill ok hafði þó bú gagnsammt. Svá var hann maðr óhlutdeilinn, at óvinir hans mæltu, at hann hefði eigi síðr kvenna skap en karla.

(A big, strong man, ugly and taciturn, but usually self-composed, and he had a reputation as a peace-maker. He was not a rich man, although he had a profitable farm. Thorarinn was so impartial that his enemies said his disposition was as much a woman's as a man's.)

Þórarinn's personality makes him unmanly, at least in the eyes of his enemies.⁵ Recently, medievalists have shown increased interest in men and masculinities. It can be argued that research has always focused on men, the subjects of traditional scholarly discourse were for the most part men, but then, the hegemonic males were seen as generic, human history.⁶ Modern studies see gender as relational and put emphasis on culturally constructed masculinity, difference and diversity. Feminist studies have paved the way for modern studies of masculinities, where men have been studied and discussed as gendered. Feminist scholars have shown that gender roles put restrictions upon women, but scholars are now beginning to ask questions about how men reacted to the demands that were made on them. In his influential book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur discusses the idea of the "one-sex model" in European history, which, according to Laqueur, prevailed in Western culture until the eighteenth century. The one-sex model implied that femininity was simply a lack of masculinity and that women should therefore be understood as a lesser man.⁷

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Carol J. Clover have studied the interaction of power and gender in the Icelandic sagas.⁸ Meulen-

⁴ Quinn 1997, 142.

⁵ For a psychological analysis of Þórarinn's character, see Torfi Tulinius 2006, 961–970.

⁶ Fenster 1994, ix–xiii.

⁷ Laqueur 1990.

⁸ Clover 1993, 363–87; Meulengracht Sørensen 1995, 212–27.

gracht Sørensen pointed out that masculinity and femininity should not only be seen as opposites but also in relation to each other. A man's honour and prestige depended not only on himself but also on the appreciation of the women in his family. The men played an active part in society, but the women watched over their honour and prestige, evaluated them and often encouraged fight and revenge with their *frýjur*. Although there was a clear distinction between manliness and unmanliness in Old Icelandic society, both categories, male and female, were movable. A woman could be encouraged to adopt the mental toughness normally associated with men, but a man would be degraded to the sphere of women if he showed any inclination towards femininity. But while Meulengracht Sørensen sees power as a metaphor for sex, Clover argues that sex can be a metaphor for power. The terms Clover suggests in her dynamic analysis to present the opposites instead of man versus woman are *hvatr* ("vigorous") versus *blauðr* ("soft, weak").⁹ *Hvatr* and *blauðr* can also mean masculine and feminine.

Sixteen uniform verses, the so-called *Máblíðingavísur*, are attributed to the quiet and peaceful Þórarinn svarti.¹⁰ As Roberta Frank has pointed out, he "seems extraordinarily sensitive to what women were expecting of him."¹¹ The *Máblíðingavísur* contain seven references to women, beginning by stating that the poet warded off reproaches from women and ending with a plea to a woman that he did not break any law when he killed his enemy. Several scholars have discussed the age of the verses in relation to the prose text of the saga. Based on their vocabulary, the verses were believed to be old enough to be authentic and the narrative surrounding them a good example of oral tradition. Using linguistic evidence, Russell Poole has argued that the verses cannot be any older than the 11th or 12th century. The verses possibly formed a part of a narrative about Snorri goði and

⁹ Clover 1993, 377. See also Bandlien 2005 and Bagerius 2009.

¹⁰ The verses are also fragmentarily preserved and referred to in the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók*. *Íslendingabók: Landnámabók* 1968, 115. Snorri Sturluson quotes the opening lines of the first verse in his *Háttatal* and ascribes them to Þórarinn.

¹¹ Frank 1990, 77.

were later interwoven into the *Eyrbyggja* text.¹² Vésteinn Ólason finds Poole’s dating convincing, but he also argues that details of the narrative strengthen the belief that it is based on oral tradition.¹³

The verses are found in chapters 18–22, according to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition.¹⁴ The prose text tells of Þorbjörn digri, who was “mikill fyrir sér ok ósvífr við sér minni menn” (“an unbalanced man who bullied weaker men”).¹⁵ He had many horses grazing up on mountain pastures and used to choose a few of them for slaughter each autumn. One cold autumn his horses could not be found. Oddr Kǫtluson asked Spá-Gils, who had a sixth sense for solving thefts, for help. Spá-Gils said that the horses did not stray far from their usual pasture implying that the horses may have been stolen:¹⁶

[S]agði Oddr ok, at hann hefði svá mælt, at þeir væri líkastir til hrossatöku, er sjálfir váru févana ok höfðu þó aukit hjónum ór því, sem vanði var til; í þessum orðum þótti Þorbirni kveðit á Máhliðinga.

(Oddr added that Spá-Gils had said that those most likely to be horse thieves were those who were short of money themselves, but who had a larger household than usual to provide for. It seemed to Þorbjörn that this wording implied the people of Máhlið.)

Þorbjörn accused Þórarinn of the theft and established a so-called *duradómur* (“door court”)¹⁷ where he brought the charge against him. At that moment his mother, Geirríður, stepped out and said:¹⁸

¹² Poole 1985, 244–285.

¹³ Vésteinn Ólason 1989, 198–200.

¹⁴ Forest S. Scott has pointed out that scholarly editions of *Eyrbyggja saga* have relied mainly on a single paper manuscript, AM 448 4to (Aa), a copy made by Ásgeir Jónsson in Copenhagen in 1686–88. All surviving manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga* are fragmentary. Scholars who have studied the structure of *Eyrbyggja* have “measured the saga by means of the chapter numbers found in Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s edition in *Íslenzk fornrit*.” Although there is no great difference between the chapter divisions of Aa and the vellum manuscripts, they are not identical. Scott 2003, xiii. Scott’s edition of the *Máhliðingavísur*, at 58–59.

¹⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 29; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 142.

¹⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 34; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 145.

¹⁷ A *duradómur* is not mentioned in other sagas but is referred to the *Gulapingslög*. The door court was held at the home of the defendant.

¹⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 36; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 145.

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Ofsatt er þat, er mælt er, at meir hefir þú, Þórarinn, kvenna skap en karla, er þú skalt þola Þorbirni digra hverja skömm, ok eigi veit ek hví ek á¹⁹ slíkan son.

(That judgement is all too true, she said, that you, Þórarinn, have as much a woman's disposition as a man's, when you tolerate every disgrace from Þorbjörn the Stout. I do not understand why I have such a son.)

Þórarinn and his men ran out intending to break the court and a fight followed. The women tried to separate the men and threw clothes upon their weapons. A woman's hand was found in a hayfield near the farm where the battle had taken place. Þórarinn found out that his own wife had been injured in that way; her hand had been cut off. When Þórarinn discovered this, he ran after Þorbjörn and his men. Þorbjörn remarked that Þórarinn had fought boldly but Oddr said that Þórarinn had accidentally cut off his wife's hand, and they all laughed and ridiculed him. Þórarinn then killed Þorbjörn. When Þórarinn returned home his mother was waiting in the doorway. The first verse is a reply to the mother when she asks how the fight had gone:²⁰

Varðak mik þars myrðir
morðfárs vega þorði
hlaut orn af ná neyta
nýjum, kvinna frýju.
barkak vægð að vígi
valnaðrs í styr þaðra.
Mælik hól fyr hœli²¹
hjaldrsgoðs af því sjaldan.

(I warded off reproaches from women, where the warrior dared to fight; the eagle had the luck to avail himself of a new corpse: I did not flinch from the swordplay there in the battle; I seldom make boasts in the presence of a person who praises the god of battle.)²²

¹⁹ *Skylda eiga*, *Melabók*, AM 445 4to, AM 309 4to. Scott 2003, 56.

²⁰ *Fyrbyggja saga* 1935, 38.

²¹ *Mælik ljóð fyrir fljóði*, AM 309 4to. Scott 2003, 59.

²² English prose translations of the *Máblíðingavísur* are according to Poole 1985, 244–85.

Þórarinn begins by telling that by taking part in the fight he had defended himself against women’s reproaches.²³ He draws a traditional picture of the battle, the eagle was well fed, but ends by saying that he didn’t boast about it before the people that wished for war. In this context the image of the vulture becomes ironic. Geirríður then asks if Þorbjörn had been killed and Þórarinn replies with another verse:²⁴

Knátti hjörr und hetti²⁵
 hræflóð, bragar Móða,
 rauk of²⁶ sóknar sæki,
 slíðrbeittr staðar leita.
 Blóð fell, en vas váði
 vígtjalds náar skaldi
 þá vas dæmisalr dóma
 dreyrafullr, um eyru.

(The skald’s lethally sharp sword struck home beneath the hood; blood spouted forth over the warrior: the blood streamed down over his ears and then his mouth was full of it, but his sword came close to the skald.)

The verse seems to please Geirríður who responds by saying: “tekit hefir þá brýningin”²⁷ (“the whetting paid off, then”). The verse describes the terror of the battle, flowing blood and a sharp sword, and Þórarinn claims that his life was in danger.

The morning after the battle Þórarinn recites a verse, which is a reply to the worrying words of Þórarinn’s wife, Auður, who fears the aftermath of the fight. Þórarinn tells her that he is going to seek help from Vermundr, his brother in law.²⁸

²³ When Þórarinn is mentioned in the following text, I refer to the voice of the poet in the saga, not the “historical” Þórarinn.

²⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 39.

²⁵ “i hofi” *Melabók*, “i hofði” AM 309 4to. Scott 2003, 58–59.

²⁶ “Rann um” *Melabók*, AM 309 4to. Scott 2003, 58–59.

²⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 39. “tekit hefir þá brýningunni” *Melabók*, AM 309 4to, AM 447 4to. Scott 2003, 60–61.

²⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 40.

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Myndit vitr í vetri
vekjandi mik sekja
þar ák lífhvotuð leyfðan
lōgráns, um þær vánir,
ef niðbræði næðak
nás valfallins²⁹ ásar (alfalldins)
Hugins létum nið njóta
nágrundar, Vermundi.

(The cunning man who instigates the robbery of my legal rights would not outlaw me this winter — there I have praised my protector, because of those expectations — if I reached the warrior Vermundr; I caused the raven’s kin to benefit from the battlefield.)

Þórarinn travels to Vermundr and the following eight verses are supposedly recited at his farm. Vermundr asks Þórarinn for news and he answers by reciting verses where he describes the attack on him and the dangerous battle.

Blood and a hand are dramatically emphasized in the concluding lines of the next verse, and the kenning used for sword, “Hrundar handa hnigreyr” (“the valkyrie’s hand-reed”)³⁰ reminds the audience of the severed female hand found in the field: “roðin sák Hrundar handa / hnigreyr, lōgum dreyra”³¹ (“I saw swords red with blood”). In the next verse the poet concludes by telling that he had been unwilling to break the truce: “sleitka líknar leiki lostigr” (“I did not break the sport of comfort willingly”).³² Guðný, Þórarinn’s sister, asks him if he had cleared himself of the women’s taunts. Her question corresponds to Þórarinn’s reply to his mother in the first verse. He paints a disgusting and appalling picture of the fight in close-ups, making use of traditional poetic language: “hrafinn naut líkanna” (“the raven enjoyed the dead bodies”), in a similarly effective way as

²⁹ “alfalldin”, *Melabók*. Scott 2003, 64.

³⁰ “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 148.

³¹ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 41.

³² *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 42; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 149.

the first verse. Another battle-verse follows, where danger is emphasized from the very beginning.³³

Then Vermundr asks: “Hvárt vissu þeir hvárt þú vart karlmaðr eða kona?” (“Have they found out yet whether you are a man or a woman?”)³⁴ His words express an approval, by now other men must have realized that Þórarinn behaved correctly as a man and accepted him, even those who had humiliated him with their laughter. He adds yet another verse to prove further that he had fought off any suggestion of cowardice.³⁵ The following verse is difficult to interpret but the latter half tells that cowardly men, who abused the law, had accused him of having hurt his own wife, but he also remarks “eggjumk hófs” (“my aim is moderation”).³⁶

In the next two verses (12–13) Þórarinn describes two other men who also took part in the battle, one brave, but another a coward. The latter is said to have run crying away from the battle. The poet uses non-military kennings to describe him: *merskyndir* (“mare-driver”) and *bifstaups bjóðr* (“cup bearer”). Although peaceful, he shows his contempt for a man who fled from the fight.³⁷

Some time has passed when Þórarinn and Vermundr travel together to see Arnkell, Þórarinn’s uncle. While travelling, Þórarinn recites a verse.³⁸ In the first half the poet addresses Vermundr and thinks back to the happy days they had together before the killing of Þorbjörn. An unidentified woman is addressed in the second part. *Máhlíðingavísur* contain seven references to women. The poet begins by telling that he warded off reproaches from women and ending with his plea to a woman that he did not break any law in killing his opponent. All these references show the importance of fulfilling the expectations of women. As Roberta Frank has pointed out, the

³³ Vésteinn Ólason points out that skaldic imagery describing battle is indeed horrific if understood literally, Vésteinn Ólason 1989, 201. However, the characterization of Þórarinn and his poetry is unique, as Vésteinn also demonstrates.

³⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 43; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 149.

³⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 43–44; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 149.

³⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 44; “The Saga of the People of Eyri. 1997, 150.

³⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 45–46; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 150.

³⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 47; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 151.

first half of the verse describes happy male bonding, in the latter half the poet turns to the judge of his action, a woman.³⁹ In the closing words of the verse he tells that he dislikes strife: “leið erum randa rauðra regn” (“The rain of the red shields is repugnant to me”).

When the two travellers arrive at Arnkell’s farm, Arnkell welcomes his guests and asks their news. Þórarinn replies with a verse which describes the atrocities of the battle, emphasizing fear in the first half: “Vas til hreggs at hyggja /hrafn-víns á bæ mínum” (“It brought fear, to think of storm of the raven’s wine at my farm”).⁴⁰

The next verse is a response to Arnkell’s remark: “Reizk hefir þú nú frændi, svá hógværr maðr sem þú ert” (“You really must have been angry, kinsman, since you are usually such a moderate man”). In this verse the poet claims that he avoids feuds. Men have accused him of easy living, but “opt kemr ævifúrs æðiregn ór dúri” (“a cloud-burst often comes in still weather”). The concluding words of the verse tell that a woman will now hear of his message.⁴¹

In his article “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages,” Vern Bullough writes:

Though what constitutes manhood has varying definitions according to a society or culture or time period, the most simplistic way of defining masculinity is as a triad: impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as provider to one’s family. Failing to do so challenges a man’s masculinity and can even be seen as feminine weakness.⁴²

In the beginning of the *Máhlíðingamál* narrative, Þórarinn is accused of neglecting his duties as a man. It is implied that he doesn’t provide enough for his family and he is said to have accidentally chopped off his wife’s hand, therefore also seriously neglecting his duty to protect her. He was supposed to take care of the lives of his family and upholding the family’s honour. Their honour is in danger when he is accused of cowardice.

³⁹ Frank 1990, 77.

⁴⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 47; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 151.

⁴¹ *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 48; “The Saga of the People of Eyri” 1997, 151.

⁴² Bullough 1994, 34.

Þórarinn needs to establish his masculinity, before other men and before women. The women watch over and judge his behaviour. Interestingly, his wife, Auðr, is peaceful like himself, but his strong-minded mother takes on the role to egg him on. He states clearly that he dislikes the behaviour which is expected of him and battles are not shown in a glorious light in the *Máhlíðingavísur*. The poet seeks balance in trying to be a man of peace and reconciliation and taking care of his masculine honour. Paradoxically, he has to prove himself by means of violence. Masculinity is the central theme of the *Máhlíðingamál* narrative and the verses are interwoven accordingly.

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