

Transforming the Trolls:

The Metamorphosis of the Troll-Woman in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*

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Bárðar saga is an intriguing yet puzzling text, which chronicles the life of the *blendingr* (half-troll, half-giant) Bárðr Dumbsson and his family, from an exposition of his ancestry to the death of his son Gestr on the night of his conversion to Christianity. Beginning with the reign of Dumbr (Bárðr's troll-king father) in Norway, the saga tracks Bárðr's settlement at Snæfellsness in Iceland and his self-imposed exile following the disappearance of his daughter Helga. As he retreats into the mountains, Bárðr is cast in a new supernatural mould, embracing his giant heritage in order to become the guardian spirit of the district. Finally, the story turns to his son Gestr and his adventures at the court of King Óláfr Tryggvason. He converts to Christianity at the request of the king, but on the night of his baptism Bárðr appears, accusing Gestr of betraying his pagan ancestors before killing him. *Bárðar saga* follows many features of structure and plot typical to the *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas), the genre to which it is assigned, including the protagonists' settlement of Iceland, district feuds and conversions to Christianity. However, the conventions of this socially realistic genre are fundamentally subverted when a pagan clan of monstrous descent takes centre stage as a set of unlikely protagonists. Consequently, *Bárðar saga* presents us with numerous difficulties in terms of its generic classification, thematic preoccupations and unusual characterisations. However, its rich manuscript transmission suggests continuing popularity almost to the present day, both in literary circles and in popular culture.¹ Nevertheless, the saga's unconventional design has baffled modern scholars, who have found it particularly difficult to reconstruct a 'horizon of expectations' upon which to base an understanding of the piece.²

¹ For details see Jón Skaptason and Pulsiano, P., ed. and trans., *Bárðar saga*, Garland Library of Medieval Literature 8 (New York, 1984), lxxix-cix. Quotes from *Bárðar saga* will be taken from Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ed., *Bárðar saga*, in *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 99-172. In the footnotes this will be represented as 'BS (1991)', followed by the relevant page number. Unless otherwise indicated, the footnoted translations of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* will be taken from the aforementioned Jón Skaptason and Pulsiano, P., ed. and trans., *Bárðar saga*, Garland Library of Medieval Literature 8 (New York, 1984). In the footnotes this will be indicated by the relevant page number in parenthesis, following 'BS (1991)' and the page number from Íslenzk fornrit 13. When other scholarship from this edition is used, the text will be indicated by the abbreviation 'BS (1984)'.

² This term was coined by Hans Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. T. Bahti, (Minneapolis, MN, 1982), p. 28. In a recent round-table discussion on the problem of genre in Old Norse literature, Ralph O'Connor stressed the necessity of exploring 'the expectations which a given text satisfies or frustrates' (Quinn,

This paper is concerned primarily with the characterisation of Helga Bárðardóttir, the enigmatic daughter of Bárðr Dumbsson. It will concentrate on the metamorphosis of the conventional figure of the troll woman, particularly focussing on the saga motif of the love affair between a mortal hero and a giantess. In sagas that feature characters such as trolls in a more conventional form, the figures tend to be presented somewhat two-dimensionally, fulfilling the function of a ‘narrative-vehicle’ for the heroic protagonist in his early rites of passage. Thus, a troll-woman such as Helga would usually be a peripheral and underdeveloped figure in the saga, appearing briefly in the course of the hero’s adventures before disappearing when he continues on to further expeditions or returns to human society. Yet in *Bárðar saga*, Helga is the focal point of this particular narrative set piece. This seems to be an intentional part of the saga’s wider literary design, in which the shadowy figures who typically act along the dim edges of the saga stage are pushed into the spotlight, forcing more-orthodox protagonists out into the wings of the narrative. In her analysis of the relationships between heroes and giants, Riti Kroesen states, ‘Whether [the hero] goes out to meet the giants in order to serve the community or to serve his own ends [...] the sympathies of the original audience must always have been on [his side]’.³ Yet *Bárðar saga* entirely overturns the accepted convention that such stories are written to enhance the glory of the heroic protagonist.

Consequently, the following analysis of the role of Helga Bárðardóttir is based on the broader hypothesis that *Bárðar saga* was constructed as an intentional parody, which pastiches and subverts literary conventions for the purpose of its unusual design.⁴ The theory is speculative, and stands only as long as we accept the initial premise that saga compilers were conscious of generic categories divided along lines similar to our own, choosing to ‘compose their narratives within generic hybrids not because they did not know what genres were, but because they knew all too well’.⁵ It is unlikely that modern scholars can ever be brought to a secure conclusion regarding the position that such a saga occupied for its original medieval

J., ‘Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-table Discussion’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2, 275-96, p.292), while Carl Phelpstead employed the term *vorverstandis* to describe ‘a set of preconceptions about what kind of text it is, how it will resemble other texts with which we are familiar, and consequently what kinds of meanings we may expect from [it]’ (Quinn 2006, p. 278).

³ Kroesen, R., ‘Ambiguity in the relationship between heroes and giants’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111 (1996), 57–71, p. 69.

⁴ The literary design of *Bárðar saga* has a surprising amount in common with the genre of ‘fractured fairy tales’ of popular modern culture, in which stereotypical, minor characters are transformed into the central protagonists of the tale. Interestingly, the saga shares particular similarities with the recent film *Shrek*, which parodies and subverts literary conventions by placing an ogre at the heart of its unorthodox fairytale.

⁵ Ashman Rowe, E., ‘Generic Hybrids: Norwegian “Family” Sagas and Icelandic “Mythic-Heroic” Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993), 539-54, p. 553.

compiler and audience, since analysing the generic complexities of the literature produced by a dead culture involves some degree of circularity and artificial categorisation.⁶ Consequently, despite the methodology's benefits, a motif-based analysis is limited by the artificial taxonomies that restrict most structuralist methodologies. While it is probable that thematic set-pieces were recognised and manipulated by the original saga compilers, it is nevertheless unlikely that all modern distinctions reflect the precise literary preoccupations and groupings recognised by medieval Icelanders. On the other hand, the possibility that a literary form may stimulate such essentially playful reactions to its thematic and stylistic conventions is not such a remote one. Interpreting the peculiarities of a text's literary design in terms of such a ludic function has much in common with the work of the cultural theorist John Huizinga, whose classic theory of *Homo Ludens* ('Man the Player') emphasises the 'supreme importance to civilisation of the play factor'.⁷ His belief that 'culture arises in the form of play'⁸ resonates with Fowler's observation that prescriptive literary taxonomies can actively stimulate literary creativity, since genre 'offers a challenge by provoking a free spirit to transcend the limitations of previous examples'.⁹ Furthermore, there are other examples of subverted literary motifs within *Bárðar saga* that might have been taken in order to support this hypothesis. These include the figure of the foster-father giant who acts as instructor to the young saga protagonist, as instantiated in the actions of Bárðr himself. Initially, Bárðr fulfils the role of youthful pupil under the tutelage of the giant Dofri. However, once Bárðr has retreated into the mountains, the configuration is turned on its head, and in a highly unorthodox narrative shift, the ostensibly human pupil takes upon himself the role of giant educator as Bárðr is cast in a new, supernatural mould. Of similar significance is the conversion-hero motif as it is presented in the ambiguous figure of Gestr, who not only straddles the worlds of giants and men, but is caught between the pagan and Christian spheres. Initially, his story resembles the conventional *þáttr* trope in which the relationship between a young Icelandic protagonist and the Norwegian sovereign is key, with the Icelander's conversion to Christianity at the Norwegian court at the heart of their affiliation.¹⁰ Yet despite his outwardly human appearance and heroic career path, Gestr's supernatural

⁶ For the debate surrounding this question see particular Harris, J., 'Genre in Saga Literature: A Squib', *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 427-36 and Lönnroth, L., 'Tesen om de två kulturerna. Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar', *Scripta Islandica* 15 (1964), 3-97.

⁷ Huizinga, J., *Homo Ludens* (London, 1949), 'Foreword'.

⁸ Huizinga, J., *Homo Ludens* (London, 1949), p. 46.

⁹ Fowler, A., *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford, 1982), p. 31.

¹⁰ Harris, J., 'Genre and Narrative Structure in some *Íslendinga þættir*', *Scandinavian Studies* 44 (1972), 1-27, p. 3. Harris postulates a common narrative structure comprising an introduction, a journey into Norway, alienation, reconciliation, a journey out to Iceland and a conclusion.

heritage dictates that he must diminish within the human, increasingly Christianised sphere. Consequently, although he does convert, on the night of his baptism an enraged Bárðr appears in his chamber and causes his eyes to burst fatally out of his head.

We now turn to the focus of this paper, the giantess-hero love affair as typified by the relationship between Helga and her lover Miðfjarðar-Skeggi. Such love affairs often manifest themselves either in the form of a liaison that develops between the giant-educated hero and his foster-sister, or in the figure of a giantess who suckles, seduces, and assists the human in her care. In a wider survey of the encounters with the female ‘other’ that occur in Old Norse literature, John McKinnell undertakes a structural and thematic analysis of the sexual relationships formed between giantesses and ‘Odinic’ heroes (typically devotees, opponents or literary transformations of the god).¹¹ This is part of a wider theory in Old Norse scholarship, which counts such otherworldly figures – often gendered as female – among beings affiliated with the chthonic sphere. They dwell inertly beyond society in passive possession of otherworldly wisdom or goods, which are sought out by an active male adventurer. Significantly, McKinnell identifies instances in which the theme of the hero-giantess love affair is adapted or parodied to produce genre hybrids or literary burlesques. The possibility that such ‘reversals show that the seductions of giantesses were still a recognised Odinic story-type when the saga was composed’ have important implications for the treatment of the set-piece in *Bárðar saga*, suggesting contemporary recognition of a literary pattern capable of deliberate modification.¹²

Within his analysis, McKinnell identifies the affair between Bárðr and Þórdís (the liaison that produces Gestr) as an example of this Odinic pattern. However, despite structural similarities, the episode is marked out from his other examples by role reversals typical of *Bárðar saga*. McKinnell ignores the fact that Bárðr takes the supernatural role while Þórdís is a human girl; within the scope of this current investigation, such a crucial fact must be acknowledged before the example can be allowed to stand alongside the others. A more appropriate manifestation of the giantess-hero love motif lies back a generation in the liaison between Skeggi (Þórdís’ father) and Helga. In comparison to the peripheral figure of Þórdís, Helga is also a more appropriate character on which to base an analysis, for as the chief catalyst in

¹¹ McKinnell, J., *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹² McKinnell (2005), p. 175.

Bárðr's decision to exile himself from human society, Helga is, as Jón Skaptason and Phillip Pulsiano note, a 'key factor in the development of the saga'.¹³

Following an unfortunate encounter with an ice floe, Helga drifts to Greenland with ambiguous hints of her 'otherness' upon her: 'hon þótti ok með undarligu móti þar hafa komit, ok fyrir þat var hon tröll kölluð af sumum mönnum'.¹⁴ In addition to her sexual relationship with Skeggi, she fulfils a reoccurring role that often occurs throughout the saga corpus as a formidable protectress. The saga states that when 'kómu tröll ok óvættir [...] ok gerðu mönnum it mesta mein',¹⁵ Skeggi is only able to defeat them 'með því, at Helga hjálpaði honum til ok gaf honum nálíga líf'.¹⁶ Thus, as the darker aspects of her father's heritage begin to emerge, Helga is growing simultaneously into her role as a 'giantess lover'. This image contrasts starkly with her initial presentation as a youngster at play among human children: 'Þorkelssynir ok Bárðardætr lögðu saman leika sína'.¹⁷ In comparison, throughout her adulthood Helga's interaction with male humans is couched primarily in terms of her sexuality. For instance, whilst wintering at Hjalli, Helga is spied upon by a man named Hrafn: 'honum sýndist konan fríð mjök. Vildi hann upp í sængina ok undir klæðin hjá henni'.¹⁸

In his discussion of the hero-giantess narrative set-piece, McKinnell reiterates the theory that giantesses are equated with the wilderness, arguing that because they represent the inert and the irrational they cannot function actively without the hero:

Because the giant's daughter needs the initiative and sexuality of the protagonist, it is not surprising that she continues to love him even after he has abandoned her. But he *must* abandon her: using the powers of irrational nature is acceptable, but being controlled by them is not.¹⁹

¹³ *BS* (1984), p. xviii.

¹⁴ *BS* (1991), p. 115 (p. 25): 'the manner of her arrival was thought strange, and so by some she was called a troll'.

¹⁵ *BS* (1991), p. 116 (p. 25): 'trolls and monsters came... and caused great trouble and damage'.

¹⁶ *BS* (1991), p.116 (p. 27): 'with Helga's help, who virtually saved his life'.

¹⁷ *BS* (1991), p. 114 (p. 23): 'Þorkell's sons and Bárðr's daughters played together'.

¹⁸ *BS* (1991), p. 124 (p. 37): 'he thought the woman beautiful. He tried to get into bed [and under the bed-clothes] with her'.

¹⁹ McKinnell (2005), p. 179-80.

This description of giantesses as embodiments of the ‘powers of irrational nature’ encapsulates the typically underdeveloped nature of their characterisations; they function primarily as narrative tools through which the hero may achieve heroic maturity. In conventional manifestations of the trope, the giant’s daughter may be treated with some sympathy, but ‘moral considerations do not arise’.²⁰

In common with other manifestations of this motif, Skeggi does indeed leave Helga and marry another, and Helga continues to love him even after their separation: ‘mornaði hon ok þornaði æ síðan’.²¹ Where the pattern appears elsewhere, the aftermath of such a break-up is concerned entirely with the male protagonist and his career; sympathy for the giantess is brief at best. Yet the love affair as it appears in *Bárðar saga* involves structural subversions comparable to those found in its use of the wisdom-giver or the conversion-hero motifs. Once again the narrative throws in its lot with the *baton sinister* (the heraldic badge of illegitimacy), abandoning the hero to follow Helga into the wilderness.

The saga’s interest in Helga is not only structural; such an upturning of narrative conventions results once again in the comprehensive delineation of a character whose typical saga function would be brief and perfunctory. Indeed, Helga’s personal tragedy is conveyed with a degree of psychological complexity unusual in the portrayal of any saga character.²² The repeated verb ‘una’²³ provides access to her internalised emotions: ‘engu undi hon sér, síðan er hon skildi við Skeggja’,²⁴ and ‘eigi undi Helga hjá föður sínum’.²⁵ Helga also speaks two of the six verses of the saga, particularly significant in literary medium in which poetry may be used ‘to create psychological special effects within a narrative’.²⁶ The elegiac tone of these utterances highlights Helga’s isolation and the hopelessness of her love:

²⁰ McKinnell (2005), p. 180.

²¹ *BS* (1991), p. 122, (p 35): ‘she grieved and faded away ever after’.

²² Heather O’Donoghue states, ‘in saga narrative, focalisation [...] is typically wholly externalised, that is, events are seen from the perspective of a narrator who stands outside the world of the narrative’ (*Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), p. 35).

²³ ‘To be content, to enjoy’.

²⁴ *BS* (1991), p. 122 (p. 35): ‘She had no joy after she left Skeggi’.

²⁵ *BS* (1991), p. 122 (p. 35): ‘Helga did not want to be near her father’ (own trans.).

²⁶ O’Donoghue, H., *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, (Oxford, 2005) p. 9. This follows her earlier assertion that ‘the expression of personal and deeply felt emotion in a [...] strophe may provide a dimension to the men and women in a saga narrative which the saga prose, typically functioning as externally focalized narrative, does not’ (p. 6).

Braut vil ek bráðla leita;
brestr eigi stríð í flestu
mér fyrir menja rýri,
mun ek dálíga kálast,
því at ek auðspenni unnak
alteitum sefa heitum;
sorg má ek sízt því byrgja,
sit ek ein; trega greinum.²⁷

Like a giantess she dwells ‘í hreysum eða hólum’, but her lifestyle is solitary, far removed from the brutal but companionable circles of troll society that Bárðr moves in.²⁸ In contrast to her father, Helga wanders alone - ‘fór víða um Ísland ok festi hvergi yndi’ - and she fades in and out of the narrative, compounding the impression of her aimlessness and abandonment.²⁹

Thus, the saga uses the motif of the giantess-hero love affair to set up inversions of characterisation and structure similar to those discernable in the text’s other narrative veins. Skeggi is relegated to a minor position within the plot: the reader is furnished with little more than a brief genealogy, and the information that he spends time in Norway and marries a woman named Hallbera. There is no question of a burgeoning **Skegga þáttur* developing in order to flesh out these bare bones, while in contrast, Helga is drawn with a complex inner life. *Bárðar saga*’s metamorphosis of the troll-woman motif is part of the text’s larger literary design. It functions as a conscious parody in which deliberately cultivated paradoxes and tensions undercut precisely those audience expectations that modern scholars have struggled to identify. Time and again, *Bárðar saga* turns aside from the expected narrative path in order to trace the careers of less-conventional characters such as Helga Bárðardóttir. With the motif upturned, the conventional protagonist is pushed to the tale’s outermost peripheries, while new life is breathed into the transformed and animated narrative-vehicle.

²⁷ BS (1991), p. 122 (p. 35): ‘Soon I shall seek to leave. / My passion abates not at all / for the spender of treasure. / I shall die pitifully. / For I loved the treasure-embracer / with passionate, warm emotion. / I sit alone and recount my misery’.

²⁸ BS (1991), p. 122 (p. 35): ‘in caves and mounds’.

²⁹ BS (1991), p. 124 (p. 37): ‘travelled far and wide over Iceland, but found no happiness anywhere’.