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HALLGERDR HOSKULSDOTTIR: HER DOMESTIC ECONOMY
AND THE REALIZATION OF HER MIXED MORAL NATURE

Post-war critics generally savaged Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir, understandably to be sure: an academic age characterized by patriarchy, piety, and patristics could hardly choose but condemn as "evil" a woman who married three times, encouraged the killing of her first husband, and refused to help the virtuous third when his need was greatest. I. R. Maxwell describes Hallgerðr as "the known cause of evil" in Njála and asserts that "The evil of Hallgerðr (with Þráinn as its transmitter) and the evil of Valgerðr and Mörðr both go back to the prologue . . ." In the same moralizing vein, Lars Lönnroth claims that the saga represents Hallgerðr as "an evil femme fatale" and that "Hallgerðr turns out to be one of the main forces of evil in the saga." Her modern detractors often cite the saga's last two harsh commentators on Hallgerðr, Rannveig and Skarpheðinn. Those saga characters whose "balanced" observations on Hallgerðr give her story a philosophical context unlike that regarded as "mediaeval" by post-war modernism are usually not cited. We shall hear from them shortly.

The narrator of Njála makes no explicitly judgmental observations on Hallgerðr; an early critic, Hans Kinck, defends her as one whom the saga itself misunderstood. Einarr Olafur Sveinsson enters a plea of insanity in Hallgerðr's defence

arguing that the death of her husband Glúmr was a blow from which "her sick and disturbed mind never recovers." Ursula Dronke argues forcefully that Hallgerðr's degeneration in the course of the saga is "her response to progressive disappointment in marital life." Sveinsson and Dronke, and probably Kinck as well, implicitly and rightly regard Hallgerðr as a developing rather than a static character, as a character partly given and partly formed and deformed by the world and the action represented in Njála.

Njála represents Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir as if she were alive and real, makes her the central character of a narrative we could--if disintegrationism were back in style--entitle Hallgerðar saga; Njála places that action in a socially and economically realistic, ring-of-truth picture of a world, gives us a psychologically plausible account of how Hallgerðr's life went wrong. Njála realizes in narrative, in what seems to be history or biography, both Hallgerðr's best and worst selves, gives as it were the alternative endings of some modern fictions to Hallgerðar saga, denies the happier alternative for the worst, and places this seeming full and truthfull history in the lap of a negative providence, bad luck, misfortune, fate, ögífta or ögæfa, which rough-hews Hallgerðr's end for all her blinded efforts to shape it. Hallgerðar saga is the most pessimistic of the stories which make up Brennu-Njáls saga but to read the saga we must come to terms with all its stories of which Hallgerðr's is first.

I reckon the sagas enfolded in Njála to be Hallgerðar saga, Hrúts saga, Gunnars saga, Njáls saga ok sona hans, Kára saga; the subordinated sagas, the stories of Hallgerðr, Hrútr, and Kári do not narrate their protagonists' deaths with subsequent episodes detailing revenge, settlement, reconciliation, which accompany the main sagas, the story of Gunnarr, of Njáll and his sons. All the sagas of Njála seem governed by prophetic statements which, willy nilly, their protagonists fulfill. More on that topic another time and place. I hope.

Unlike other persons in the saga, and especially the other tragic protagonists, Hallgerðr is explicitly drawn as liable to time's changes and seen in the process of changing. Appropriately, the saga gives her no still photograph description and characterization like Njáls, Gunnars, Skarpheðins. We first catch a brief glimpse of her as a child--as we do of no other character in the saga. In contrast the saga announces Mörðr Valgarðsson's birth then describes his adult character and role in the saga. As a child Hallgerðr is tall, long-haired, and beautiful, as a young woman about to be married, she is presumably taller, but her long hair now reaches farther down her full-grown body. Skarpheðin's final taunt, the saga's last words on Hallgerðr, reminds the audience that she is well into middle age, her fifties by Sveinsson's (Njála p.lxi) reckoning. The saga's other major figures seem always at the same stage of life. For decades Gunnarr is as a man in his prime, for decades Njáll is old. Gunnars actions never suggest the ero-

sion of physical prowess middle age entails; Njáls never suggest the prowess of youth or of middle age: he never performs any physical work, never takes part in battle. The audience of Njála sees Hallgerðr as a character in formation, a given nature subjected to the forces of her social and cultural environment and subject to that inadequately explained, force, ôgipta or ôgæfa.

When Hrútr, Höskulds half-brother and Hallgerðr's uncle, a wise and even prescient figure, learns that Höskuldr has promised his daughter to a suitor, Þorvaldr Ósvífrsson, he announces or prophecies that "hvárigu mun í þessu kaupi gipta, honum né henni" (cap. 10, p. 32 'there will be no luck in this marriage for him or for her'). The husband's bad luck in the marriage soon manifests itself: Hallgerðr's foster-father, Þjóstólfr, kills him. When Höskuldr, hears of the unlucky husband's demise, he recalls Hrút's prophecy "at hēr mundi til mikillar ôgiptu draga um kaup þessi" (cap. 12, p. 36 'that this marriage would bring terribly bad luck'). Hrúts claim that Hallgerðr was the victim of misfortune in her first marriage finds confirmation in his reputation for wisdom. Hallgerðr's second suitor, the admirable Glúmr, answers his older brother's objection that Hallgerðr contrived her first husband's death saying "Má, at hana hendi eigi slík ôgæfa í annat sinn" (ch 13, p. 42 'It may be that such bad luck will not befall her a second time').

If in the largest view, ôgipta or ôgæfa, rules over the

unhappy course of Hallgerðr's three marriages, the concrete details play themselves out in a story the audience hears as psychologically, socially, and even economically realistic. Hallgerðr's marriages are: a misalliance in which the bride is disparaged, a love-match, and a misalliance in which the groom is disparaged; the stories of the marriages center on three blows to Hallgerðr's cheek, and three widowings. Hallgerðr does not realize that in escaping the misalliance by the help of her sorcerer uncle, Svanr, and violent foster-father, Þjóst-ólfr, she has made a Faustian bargain.

As the daughter of notable family, Hallgerðr expected and evidently had been promised a suitable marriage. She felt entitled to a marriage with a man of honor, one whose social status, conduct, or life-style were consistent with her family's. In a saga which highly values filial piety, respect for fathers, and a patriarchal order, Þorvaldr, Hallgerðr's first suitor and first husband, incurs the audience's dispraise from the outset. When his father objects that Hallgerðr and Þorvaldr wouldn't make a compatible couple, Þorvaldr rides roughshod over Ósvífr's wise advice: "Þar mun ek at leita . . . ok mun mik ekki tjóa at letja" ("that's what I'm going for and there's no use objecting" ch 9, p. 30). The narrator does not give father Ósvífr a word in direct discourse during the negotiations for the marriage which begin brusquely: "Þeir ræddu þegar erindi sín . . ." (they immediately stated their business . . .). Though Ósvífr is included in "þeir," his part

is silence; the audience hears only Þorvaldr who announces that the defect Höskuldr declares in his daughter is, for him, no impediment to the marriage. A comparison of this episode and the discussions which lead to Hallgerðr's marriage to Glúmr discovers the mores of the Icelandic republic in this vital social matter. Glúmr treats his older brother's reservations with respect as he requests Þórarinn's sponsorship in his suit for Hallgerðr; the brothers visit Höskuldr and spend the night before bringing up their business, Þórarinn, not Glúmr, answers Höskulds admission that Hallgerðr's first marriage worked out badly. Glúmr speaks only after Hallgerðr has been brought into the negotiations. When he speaks, Glúmr simply reports to Hallgerðr the substance of the bargain proposed, the marriage contract. The narrator observes that Glúmr's report corresponds precisely to what his seniors have proposed. Þorvaldr is a model of bad form; Glúmr a model of good.

The match with Þorvaldr was a misalliance: the proud-minded Hallgerðr spends a married winter with a mean-spirited and unmanly husband who sets a sparse table for himself and his household to save money. The quarrel which authorizes Þjóstólf's intervention breaks out in the spring. Hallgerðr has run through provisions meant to last for the winter and the summer; the flour and dried fish are all gone. Þorvaldr complains "Ekki fekk ek minna til bús en vant er, ok endisk þá allt á sumar fram" (I didn't lay in less for the household than is customary and it used to last through the summer).

Hallgerðr's reply hits a nerve: "EKKI FER EK AT ÞVI, ÞÖTTU HAFIR SVELT ÞIK TIL FJÁR OK FAÐIR ÞINN" (I don't care even if you and your father have starved yourselves to save money). Þorvaldr hits back, hard, "OK LAUST HANA Í ANDLITIT, SVÁ AT BLÆDDI" (and struck her in the face so that it bled). To say he slapped her is to mistranslate. On the expedition to bring back more flour and dried fish, Þorvaldr meets Þjólfsoðls axe and dies having put up a pathetic defence.

As Hallgerðr leaves her first marital home, she opens the chest containing her personal possessions and gives gifts to all the late Þorvaldr's servants; they lament her departure. Her appropriate generosity as she leaves Meðelfellströnd (Staðarfell) is consistent with Hallgerðr's upbringing and the best side of her character, but this doubtless unaccustomed magnificence is not the only reason those servants have for regretting their mistress's leaving: for one winter they ate. The flour and dried fish did not run out months early because Hallgerðr was eating for two. Servants whose pay consists largely or entirely of food and shelter often find those wages too small although their masters frequently complain that their servants are slow in profit but huge feeders. Þorvaldr can't fight (though he can punch out a lady); he starves his servants; after a winter's cohabitation, his wife isn't even pregnant. A misalliance.

Hallgerðr does not know, Sveinsson to the contrary, that the force driving Þjóstoðls violent service to her is sexual

jealousy or that when when she empowers Þjóstólfr to kill her husband Þorvaldr, she has given her foster-father a lasting entitlement to intervene in her domestic life. In life and in death, Þjóstólfr becomes both the instrument and the bench-mark of Hallgerðr's decline, but to Hallgerðr, Þjóstólfr is a helpful champion and the only means of recovering her hopes from that initial, ill-fortuned, misalliance.

The differences between what Þjóstólfr says to Hallgerðr and his comments directed at her doomed first and second husbands reveal his sexual jealousy to the saga audience, but not to any survivor within the saga. When Hallgerðr laments the prospect of marrying Þorvaldr, Þjóstólfr reassures her: "Gerðu gott í skapi: þú munt vera gefin í annat sinn, ok muntú þá eptir spurð" (cap. 10, p. 32 'Cheer up, you'll be married again and you'll be consulted about it'). The promise of another husband, and a say in his selection, can hardly alert Hallgerðr--or the audience--to Þjóstólfr's jealousy. When he challenges Þorvaldr, Þjóstólfr says "ok er sú kona illa gipt, er þú átt, ok skyldi ykkrar samfarar skammar vera" (ch. 11, p. 34 the woman who's married to you is badly married and your intercourse should stop). The word samfarar is plural and can refer to married life generally or explicitly to sexual intercourse. When Þjóstólfr comes home with a bloody axe, Hallgerðr asks "what have you accomplished?" and Þjóstólfr answers with good news "Nú hefi ek þat at górt . . . at þú munt gefin verða í öðru sinni" (ch. 12, p. 35 'Now I have arranged it so that

you will be married again'). The hint given the audience has been denied to Hallgerðr. A very poignant illustration of Hallgerðr's innocence of Þjóstólf's jealousy comes when the foster-father arrives at her second household. Þjóstólfr asks "Ferr vel með ykkur" (ch 14, p. 47 'Is it going well with you two?') and Hallgerðr answers "Vel er um ástir okkrar" ('We love each other very much' or 'our sex-life is very good'). Hallgerðr speaks in fulfilled happiness, Þjóstólfr hears in frustration and jealousy. When Þjóstólfr challenges that second husband, Glúmr--upp in the mountains while they are pursuing skittish sheep and blaming one another for their inability to drive them in--that frustration, jealousy, and anger become clear: "Amælti þá hvárr þeira öðrum, ok mælti Þjóstólfr við Glúm, at hann hefði til engis afla nama bröлта á maga Hallgerði" (ch 17, p. 49 'They blamed each other and Þjóstólfr said that Glúmr had no strength for anything but romping on Hallgerðr's belly').

Hrútr tells Hallgerðr's third suitor, the famous Gunnarr of Hliðarendi, that a match between them would not be equal because "þú ert maðr vaskr ok vel at þér, en hon er blandin mjök" (ch 33, p. 86 'you are a valiant and good man, but she is very mixed'). The saga realizes Hallgerðr's mixed nature, her potential for honor or disgrace: the same or very similar words and expressions describe her conduct in her first two marriages, but words that seem to blame her in her first household seem to praise her in the second, as if the dif-

ferences between admirable and errant behavior were subtle rather than gross. As Þorvald's wife, "Hallgerðr var fengsöm og stórlynd, enda kallaði hon til alls þess, er æðrir áttu í nánd . . ." (ch 11, p. 33 'Hallgerðr was demanding and prodigal. She claimed everything as her own whether it belonged to her or not . . .' HP); as Glúm's wife she was "örlynd ok fengsöm" which parallels "fengsöm og stórlynd" closely, but Hermann Pálsson now translates 'she was lavish and yet resourceful.' In the contexts, very different translations are appropriate to very similar verbal constructions. When Hallgerðr was "fengsöm og stórlynd" in Þorvalds house, domestic economy reached a crisis, but when she was "örlynd ok fengsöm" in Glúm's, domestic economy flourished. The next thing we hear is the birth of her first child. When she protested her first engagement, her father accused her of "ofmetnaðr," or 'excessive pride'; Hallgerðr responded that his distinguished family (also hers of course) had ample 'pride' or "metnaðr" which she legitimately shared. In the second marriage, Hallgerðr's pride in her ancestry appears in its most socially approved form when Glúmr asks what their new-born daughter should be called and Hallgerðr replies "Hana skal kalla eptir föðurmóður minni ok skal heita Þorgerðr, því at hon var komin frá Sigurði Fáfnisbana í föðurætt sína at langföðgatölu" (ch 14, p. 46 'She is to be called Thorgerd, after my father's mother . . . for Thorgerd was descended on her father's side direct from Sigurd the Dragon-Killer.' HP)

When Þjóstólfr appears at Varmalæk, Glúms farm, and asks for a place, Hallgerðr knows that her foster-father has nowhere else to turn; he is a Hebridean, not an Icelander, no one else has to take him in and life depends on being part of someone's establishment. Þjóstólfs unaccustomed and only temporarily successful efforts at reasonably social behavior at Glúms farm attests to an undescribed psychomachia pitting prudence and loyalty to Hallgerðr against jealousy and rage. When he announces that he has killed Glúmr, Þjóstólfr anticipates Hallgerðr's disapproval: "Eigi veit ek, hversu þér mun þykkja: ek segi þér víg Glúms" (ch 17, p. 50 'I don't know how you will take it: I tell you of the killing of Glúmr'). Hallgerðr had laughed in anticipation of her escape from her first marriage; she laughs now, says that Þjóstólfr plays for keeps, and answers his request for advice by telling him to go to her uncle, the great fighter, Hrútr. Her laughter announces that Þjóstólfr must die. Þjóstólfr consents: "Eigi veit ek" he says "hvárt þetta er heilræði, en þó skal ek þínum ráðum fram fara um þetta mál" (ch 17, 50 'I don't know . . . whether or not this advice is good, but I will perform your your instructions in this matter'). We must believe that Hallgerðr felt loyalty and affection for Þjóstólfr, but in a powerful and tragic instant, she decides his fate and sends her foster-father off to death. When he hears Þjóstólfs news, Hrútr knows at once why Hallgerðr has sent her foster-father to him. He draws his sword and executes her sentence.

In Hallgerðr's last marriage, her foster-father and first husband, Þjóstólfr and Þorvaldr, attest to her ill-fortune and her moral decline from their graves. When the newly wedded Hallgerðr and Gunnarr join Njáll and his family in an established exchange of hospitality, Njál's wife Bergþóra sets out to put Hallgerðr in her place and thus to end the exchange of winter visits. Hallgerðr protests that she will not be displaced "því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera" (ch 35, p. 91 'because I do not intend to be corner-crone' an old woman driven into the corner, marginalized'). In the course of their scolding, Hallgerðr mocks Njál's want of a beard; Bergþóra's riposte condemns Hallgerðr's complicity in Þorvald's death: "eigi var skegglaus Þorvaldr, bóndi þinn, ok rétt þú honum þó bana" (ch 35, p. 91 'your husband Þorvaldr was not beardless and nevertheless you contrived his death'). Hallgerðr's response indicates the changes taking place in her: "Fyrir lítt kemr mér . . . at eiga þann mann er vaskastr er á Íslandi, ef þú hefnir eigi þessa, Gunnarr" (ch 35, p. 91 'It's little benefit to me that I am married to the bravest man in Iceland if you do not avenge this Gunnarr'). The Faustian bargain with Þjóstólfr cost Hallgerðr her great love; now the cost includes social acceptability in the Rangá district. Gunnarr's prowess as the greatest fighter in Iceland potentially offers Hallgerðr the honor and status belonging to a woman who stirs up her man to great deeds, but Gunnarr wants to be what Glúmr was, a respected farmer living in peaceful obscurity. Hallgerðr's aim

in the proxy war with Bergþóra is to pit her husband against Njáll and his sons; success would have created a story to rival the Eddic poems for tragic power. The struggle creates a Hallgerðr far from Glúms wife. During the proxy war, Hallgerðr's kinsman and follower, Brynjólfr, hesitates when she orders him to kill Bergþóra's servant, Atli. Hallgerðr scolds: "Minnr myndi Þjóstölfri í augu vaxa . . . ef hann væri á lífi" (ch 38, p. 101 'It wouldn't seem such a big thing to Þjóstölfri . . . if he were alive'). Bergþóra condemns Hallgerðr for her complicity in Þorvalds death, but Hallgerðr's invocation of Þjóstölfri as a role-model for emulation rejects Glúmr, the husband she loved when she realized the best possibilities of her mixed nature. When she embraces the memory of her foster-father, Hallgerðr betrays her great love and her best self. Small wonder she winds up in the arms--so some people say--of Hrappr, a man of Þjóstölf's mettle but of even less class than the late Þorvaldr.

The course of Hallgerðr's moral decline runs from the theft of Otkels cheese (resulting in Gunnars slap) to her refusal to give Gunnarr two locks of that famous hair; let me skip the more familiar topics to link Otkels cheese with Þorvalds dried fish and flour. The background of domestic violence is, with depressing frequency, economic; Þorvalds meanness, miserliness, clashed with Hallgerðr's large-minded lavishness which had, in a strained relationship, a negative side: in some unspecified manner, she apparently claimed

resources without regard to others' rights. Hallgerðr's theft of Otkels cheese, Gunnars anger and slap, take place in an economic decline, a dearth, crop failure and hunger with its resulting tensions and anxieties.

Hallgerðr changes in time and the change she undergoes is the essence of her tragedy; she becomes the thing she scorned to be. Her social environment, some basic given of character, and some malevolent disposition or disposer of things in general we might call fate or bad luck and which the saga calls ôgipta and ôgæfa apparently conspire to move Hallgerðr from an inauspicious beginning to a bad end. Her tragedy is to become what she scorned to be, to lose forever the honor and status she feels entitled to. As to what she becomes, the last word belongs to Njál's most formidable and sarcastic son who dismisses her as a "hornkerling eða púta" (corner-crone, an old woman driven into the corner, a marginalized old woman) or a whore, the mistress of the blackguard Hrappr. Hallgerðr's story is realistic in social and economic terms, it rings true as biography or history, the psychology seems sound, but in the end we cannot choose but feel that some force beyond realism's ken has sported with Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir.