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Gender and Genre: Politics, Texts, and Rannveigar Leizla

Rannveigar Leizla (Rannveig's Vision) takes place in the winter of 1198 in the Eastern Fjords of Iceland. Walking back into the main house from the bathing room, Rannveig falls into a swoon. She lies unconscious the whole day, occasionally writhing in agony, until she recovers consciousness in the evening. Rannveig reports that she has to reveal her visions to Guðmundr Arason 'the Good', later bishop of Hólar, in whose saga the story is preserved, and to a certain Broddi, a priest in the Fljótsdalr district.[1] It was not until four years later that Guðmundr came to Fljótsdalr with his followers, including Lambkárr the deacon (thought to be the author of the earliest life of Guðmundr), and heard Rannveig's story from her own lips (p. 124). Rannveig's vision is described at the point in the saga when it actually occurred in 1198, since the saga is organized chronologically; but the terms in which the saga author introduces the account: 'EN uér urðom þessa aheyrsla af þeim er við uoro staddir af sealfrar hennar orðum þa er hon s(age) G(uðmunde) preste Ara s(yne) þessa uitron' (we heard the following account from those who were present, and from her own words when she was recounting her vision to Guðmundr the priest) (p. 93), suggests that we have - apparently - an eyewitness version of the narrative which Rannveig had shaped in the intervening four years. The purposes of this paper are: first, to investigate the stages by which Rannveigar Leizla comes to assume the forms in which it is transmitted to us - how a woman's oral account becomes a male-authored text, a narrative whose intention is to redound to the greater glory of Guðmundr Arason. Secondly, I ask whether the (very few) surviving accounts of otherworld journeys made by women have any characteristics in common: whether we can develop a gender-specific model of the 'woman's vision'.

Rannveig's Visionary Experience

After losing consciousness Rannveig is dragged by demons across lava-fields overgrown with briars. She sees many torments which she does not describe, but finally the demons lead her to a pit filled with boiling pitch and surrounded by fire. In the pit are both the living and the dead, among whom Rannveig recognizes a large number of chieftains. The demons threaten to throw her in to join them, for having been the mistress of two

[1] The text of Rannveig's vision used is that in S. Karlsson (ed.) Guðmundar saga Biskups I, Editiones Arnamagnaeanae Series B, vol. 6 Copenhage 1983, pp. 92-99; reference is also made to Abbot Arngrímr's account in Biskupa sögur II, Copenhagen, 1878, pp. 9-11.

priests. Moreover, they say, Rannveig is guilty of 'ofmetnaðr ok fegirne' (vanity and avarice). Dragged to the edge of the pit, Rannveig is splashed with pitch on her legs, hands and back: the burns are still to be seen when she recovers consciousness.[2] Terrified she prays to the Virgin Mary and Peter, then calls upon the regional saints, Óláfr inn helgi, Magnus of Orkney and Hallvarðr, patron saint of Oslo.[3] These last three appear and rescue her from the demons. They explain that the various parts of her body have been burnt in consequence of differing (and rather venial) sins.[4] Rannveig is taken off to Heaven to see the rewards of the righteous of Iceland for, as the saints tell her 'eigi ero a øðrom løndum at iafn miclum maN fiolða fleire heil(agir) menn enn aIslandi' (in no other country is there a greater proportion of holy men than in Iceland). Heaven is full of radiance, fragrance, smooth valleys full of flowers and lofty palaces, not all equally magnificent. Rannveig sees Peter and Mary, and the saints point out to her the abodes of the various Icelandic bishops, ranked in order of saintliness. One building, from which music issues, is reserved for Guðmundr Arason, who, they tell her, will be the greatest upholder of the land, and will be placed no lower in heaven than Archbishop Thomas (à Becket) of England (d. 1170).

When Rannveig regains consciousness, she expresses her anxiety to speak to Broddi the priest and Guðmundr Arason, and says that she will relate to everyone the things in the vision which concern them, however unpleasant they may be. The lines which conclude the account of the vision confirm that Rannveig did indeed tell others of 'leyndir lutir ... ifare þeira sealfra' (hidden matters in their way of life); to the benefit of some who subsequently repented, and to the great annoyance of others who had no wish to amend their lives even though their faults were now made public.

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[2] This detail is quite rare in visions: see P. Dinzelbacher, Vision und Visionliteratur im Mittelalter, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 23, Stuttgart, 1981, p. 43. Among other visionaries, Fursey too suffers 'a permanent and visible scar on his shoulder and jaw' from the fires of Hell, while Gottschalk has headaches and symptoms of poisoning from the noxious fumes of Hell for six months after his vision. Vision of Fursey in W. W. Heist (ed.) Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice olim Salmanticensi (Subsidia Hagiographica 28) Brussels, 1965. 38ss and Bede, HE III.9; Gottschalk in E. Assmann (ed.) Godeschalchus und Visio Godeschalci (Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins 74) Neumünster 1979..

[3] Flothilda of Avenay (d. 942) also sees local saints, St. Remigius and St Lanbert taking counsel over the fate of France in her vision. See P. Dinzelbacher, Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur: Eine Anthologie, Darmstadt, 1989, pp. 60-1.

[4] Such punishments are 'measure-for-measure' (lex talionis), where the parts of the body injured, or the type of punishment is directly and schematically related to the sin committed. See M. Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature. Philadelphia, 1985, p.78.

Shaping the narrative

As the raw data of Rannveig's experience is narrated on different occasions, the account of what actually happened to her must have been fragmented into different oral texts, now unrecoverable, but at whose content we can guess. The account transmitted to Guðmundr suppresses the names of all the sinners, both alive and dead; here it differs from other so-called 'political' visions such as Boniface Epistle 115 or the Vision of a Poor Woman.[5] The only persons named in the Leizla are those bishops and saints whose sanctity is guaranteed; doubtless the policy of 'naming no names' is a matter of tact and political expediency. Nevertheless Rannveig clearly has other versions for other auditors in which she is prepared to reveal further information about individuals and the punishments intended for them. These performances make her tremble with fear 'hon skalf iafnan er hon skyllde nockut um reða'; such trembling is reckoned by those who record visions as a sure indicator of the veracity of the vision.[6]

Subsequent Transmission

It seems likely that the local priest Broddi of Fljótsdalr was the first auditor and interpreter of the vision; his views may perhaps be voiced through the interpretations given by the demons and saints as they explain the meaning of the vision to the visionary.[7] Four years later Rannveig recounted a version to Guðmundr Arason, probably in the hearing of Lambkárr Þorgilsson. Sometime after Guðmundr's death in 1237, but before 1242 when he himself died, Lambkárr composed a Life of the Bishop, which must have included the Vision. This original Life is no longer preserved, but it is the basis for two extant manuscripts of Guðmundar saga (Resensbók

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5 In Boniface letter 115 (c. 757), the visionary identifies among others the dead Queens Cuthberga and Wiala, but says of the living sinners, the knight Daniel and Bregulf, that, as they have scorned this 'beneficent revelation', it is best not to disclose what had been seen. M. Tangl (ed.) Die Briefe des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus, MGH Epistolae Selectae I, Berlin, 1955; The Letters of Saint Boniface, tr. E. Emerton, New York, 1973, p. 189-91. . The Poor Woman of Laon (819) sees Charlemagne, one of his counsellors, a certain Picho and Queen Irmgard all in torment. The political purpose of this vision is beyond question: see below. The Poor Woman's Vision is in H. Houben (ed.) 'Visio cuiusdam pauperculae mulieris', Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins 124 (NF 85) 1976, 31-42.

6 Compare Fursey from Bede's HE III, 9: 'it was in the most bitter winter weather and there was a hard frost, Furseus was sitting in a thin garment when he related his visions; and yet he sweated as if in the middle of the heat of summer, either through excessive fear or spiritual consolation' (tr. L. Sherley-Price, Harmondsworth, 1955, p. 170). Abbess Hathumoda too recounts her vision with pallor and trembling. The burn and the trembling, says Arngrímr, prove that Rannveig's vision is true (p. 11). Vision of Hathumoda in Agius, Vita MG SS 4, 165 ff..

7 Contrast the Visions of Wetti, and of the Monk of Eynsham where it is a distinct and external authorial voice, rather than the demons and good spirits themselves, which explicates the visions. Vision of Wetti in Heito von Basel, Visio, MG Poet. lat. 2,267 ff; Vision of Monk of Eynsham in H. E. Salter (ed.) The Cartulary of the Abbey of Eynsham II, Oxford 1908, pp. 257-371.

and AM 657 c) dating from the last two decades of the thirteenth century and differing only in minor details.

A third Life of Guðmundr, originally written in Latin by Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson, is now extant only in an Icelandic translation. Arngrímr's translator seems to have known Duggals Leizla, the Icelandic translation of the well-known Visio Tnugdali, an account of a vision said to have occurred in 1149 in Ireland.[8] Arngrímr, or his translator, elaborates the demons' speech and actions in Rannveigar Leizla with details drawn from Duggals Leizla.[9] It is thus at this later stage that the influence upon Rannveigar Leizla from another written source becomes demonstrable. Could Duggals Leizla or Visio Tnugdali have influenced the Rannveig story at any earlier stage? P. Cahill, the editor of Duggals Leizla, suggests one plausible borrowing from Duggals Leizla into the Resensbók version, but suggests that this may well have been a later interpolation.[10] What we find in Guðmundar saga then purports to be an original oral account.[11]

We cannot easily distinguish between the elements in the vision which Rannveig might 'really' have seen and heard at the time of her otherworld journey and those features which are part of the reshaping of the vision for public consumption, for as Carol Zaleski says in her study Other World Journeys:

> The vision is a collaborative effort, produced by the interaction of the visionary with neighbors, counselors, the narrator and other interested parties. One cannot point to the moment when the vision changed from a matter of personal confession into a public project; rather, it is built up in layers placed over one another like a series of transparencies.[12]

Nevertheless it is possible to hypothesize what Rannveig herself brought to the vision, and what the clerical interpreters Broddi and Guðmundr, and the writers, Lambkárr, Abbot Arngrímr and his translator, might have

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8 O. Schade (ed.) Visio Tnugdali, Halle 1869.

9 In Arngrímr's account the vision is moved from its chronological position in the saga to the beginning, among a collection of portents 'proving' Guðmundr's destiny. The vision comes as the third and clinching portent; it is immediately preceded by an account of a dream, explicitly paralleled by the dream of St Thomas à Becket's mother before his birth. Arngrímr, like Lambkárr, wants to heighten the Thomas/Guðmundr parallels. The three portents also fulfil the function of the 'three proofs of sanctity', required in documents prepared for the canonization process .

10 P. Cahill (ed.) Duggals Leizla, Reykjavík, 1983, pp. liii-lviii.

11 However see P. Dinzelbacher, 'Zur Entstehung von Draumkvaede'. Skandinavistik 10, 1980, 89-96; 'eine unmittelbare Verfassung vom Munde des Ekstatikers weg ist nirgends belegt' (p.91)

12 C. Zaleski: Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times, New York, 1987, p.86.

contributed by analysing the origins of certain of the features in the vision, drawn from Christian European vision literature, Northern native traditions of the otherworld and contemporary Icelandic politics.

The Geography of the Other World

The vision tradition in western Europe goes back at least as far as the Visio Pauli, the single most influential and most widely translated vision, originating somewhere in Egypt in the mid third century AD.[13] In the Visio the Apostle Paul is caught up and taken on a tour of hell and heaven, where he sees a large number of ingenious torments and the inexpressible joys of heaven. The vision becomes one of the most popular genres in medieval writing, partly because of its usefulness as sermon material, partly because it allows the laity to speak with authority on mysteries hidden from the priestly caste,[14] and partly because the genre often partakes in other genres: the political satire, the homily, the autobiography, the confession. Vision motifs are frequently transmitted into the vernacular: for example Visio Pauli material is found in the Old English Blickling Homilies, and utilized by the Beowulf-poet in his depiction of Grendel's mere.[15]

The vision is one of the most popular literary genres of the medieval period: in Dinzelbacher's monograph[16] Rannveigar Leizla is the eightieth such vision to be logged from the fifth century onwards. The vision becomes progressively more elaborate over this period: the geography of hell is expanded from the ancient features of fiery rivers, and freezing lakes to include knife edge bridges, devouring beasts, and even, in the Vision of Thurkill,[17] a theatre where the damned perform for the amusement of demons. The idea of Purgatory as a 'third place' emerges in this popular form long before it becomes official church doctrine.[18] Rannveigar Leizla

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13 There are extant versions in Armenian, Coptic, Greek, Old Slavic and Syriac as well as 8 different Latin versions stemming from different redactions made in the c.9 of which no. 4 is most popular; 37 mss of this version have survived. Redaction 4 contains a pit of boiling pitch, in which can be seen black girls in black clothing. This is their punishment for infanticide.

14 In Draumkvæde, the visionary awakes from two weeks of spiritual journeying and rides to church. As he is thought to be dead, his appearance astonishes everyone, and the priest in particular is dumbstruck. See K. Liestøl, Draumkvæde - A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages, Studia norvegica no. 3, Oslo, 1946. Dinzelbacher, 'Zur Entstehung' p. 170 dismisses the arguments of Olav Bø, 'Draumkvædet. Kentnisse und Vermutungen' in Norveg 17, 1975 155-72 that some idea of class opposition is at work here.

15 See C.L. Wrenn's lucid discussion of the relations between these texts in his edition of Beowulf, London, 1973, p.150.

16 As in note 2, table pp. 13-28

17 See E. Gardner (ed.) Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante, New York, 1989, 226-231.

18 See below, and J. Le Goff, The Birth of Purgatory, tr. A. Goldhammer, (Chicago, 1984). (Original publication: La Naissance du Purgatoire, Paris, 1981)

conforms to the usual pattern of the otherworld vision: the soul is snatched by demons, shown torments and threatened, then rescued by saints and shown the joys of heaven. Distinctive is the fact that only one hellish torment is depicted, the ancient and ubiquitous pit of pitch and fire, and the heavenly landscape shows one frequent variation: the different buildings authorized by the biblical text: 'In my father's house are many mansions' (John 14:2) which reflect the varying merits of Icelandic bishops.[19] The Virgin Mary and St Peter, who themselves experienced otherworld journeys in very early church tradition, are often seen in visions - occasionally Peter offers himself as a guide to the soul.[20]

Pagan Norse tradition also envisages journeys to the land of the dead, and a pagan - though unsystematic - geography of hell exists with river barriers, enclosing fences and gates and a bridge (Gjallar bru) leading to the Other World.[21] In the Snorra Edda Hel rules over a hall where the dead feast on mead in one realm of the dead, Niflheim (Gylfaginning ch. 34). Snorri allegorizes the trappings of the hall but includes the - apparently traditional - high gates and walls. The notion of punishment is largely absent from the pagan eschatology, although Völuspá 39 depicts oath-breakers, seducers and murderers wading in a river of knives and axes.

Two features of Rannveigar Leizla suggest themselves as distinctively native rather than Christian: the first is the point at which Rannveig experiences her vision: the place between the the bathing room and the main building. Here Rannveig is in a liminal area, neither inside the safety of the building nor outside the farmyard altogether. There is much evidence for Germanic superstition about the threshold as a place where spirits may manifest themselves: one example is the incident in Eiriks saga rauða where a woman about to die in an epidemic sees her own figure among the spirits of those already dead standing between the privy and the doorway of the main building.[22] The 'hraun' over which Rannveig is dragged is certainly drawn from the Icelandic landscape: the briars, which

19 Although palaces and mansions are typical of visions of heaven, the influence of Grímnismál, which catalogues and describes the palaces of the gods may also be present.

20 See Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell on the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Ethiopic and Greek Apocalypses of Mary. Peter and Mary are the first figures seen by Flothilda (940). Peter and John the Baptist are the two guides in the Vision of Anskar (865). Arngrimr's Life notes that Peter and Mary are the patron saints of Rannveig's own parish church (p.10). Vision of Anskar, Rimbert, Vita in MG SS 2, 690 ff.

21 H.R. Patch, The Other World, New York: repr. 1970, pp. 60-79 synthesises the information about the Other World in Northern writing from different periods.

22 Eiriks saga ch. 4. For the threshold, the boundary between inside and out, where supernatural influences make themselves felt: see A. van Gennep, Les Rites de passage, Paris, 1909, 22, and H. Bächtold-Stäubli, Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, Berlin, 1927-42, vol. x. 151 ff.

might also be regarded as a naturalistic detail, seem rather to belong to a Northern Christian tradition of the other world, appearing also in the Norwegian Draumkvæde, and as the Whinny Muir in the English ballad The Lyke Wake Dirge.[23]

Rannveig's vision, as initially experienced, is thus very likely to have been structured by her knowledge of native traditions and her understanding of hell and heaven learned from sermons and vernacular vision poetry. The only poem of this nature which survives, Solarljóð, is likely to date from the late thirteenth century, but it may have had antecedents now lost.[24]

Contemporary Icelandic Politics

The interpretation of the vision - the explanations apparently given by the demons and the saints of the sights Rannveig sees - strikingly reflect contemporary preoccupations of the Icelandic church, as Jenny Jochens has shown.[25] The most contentious principles which the Icelandic church was seeking to impose in this period were the abolition of concubinage among both priesthood and laity and the independence of the church from secular control. The celibacy of the clergy, as legislated for by the Gregorian reforms, was deemed desirable, but was not at this point given especially high priority by the Icelandic church.[26]

Guðmundr Arason's subsequent career as Bishop of Hólar was to founder on his attempts to establish the immunity of clerics from secular prosecution; attempts which aroused the enmity of Kolbeinn Tumason, the chieftain who had formerly been Guðmundr's patron and who had been most instrumental in his appointment to the see. Thus the comparison of Guðmundr to Thomas à Becket at the end of the vision is thus likely to be an

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[23] Thorns and briars occur in other non-Northern visions though not usually as part of the landscape: there are thorny trees in the Vision of Alberic (c. 1117) where women are tortured M. Inguanez (ed.) 'Cod. Casin. 257, pp.712-34' Miscellanea Cassinese 11, 1932 pp. 81-103.; Elisabeth of Schönau sees brambles overgrowing the lower part of one of the roads to heaven, Dinzelbacher, Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur, pp.96-104. Godeschalk (1189) who comes from Holstein in northern Germany is forced to walk over brambles which tear his feet. The remedy, as in Draumkvæde and the English Lyke Wake Dirge, is to give shoes to the poor. (Text in F. Sidgwick (ed.) Popular Ballads of the Olden Time, second series, London, 1904, pp. 88-91.)

[24] A new edition of Sólarljóð, now in progress will justify this later dating.

[25] J. Jochens, 'The Church and sexuality in medieval Iceland', Journal of Medieval History 6 (1980) 377-392.

[26] Guðmundr Arason, the other celibate bishop of Iceland in this period seems to have been little concerned with the celibacy question, though the growing consciousness that the Icelandic church lagged behind the rest of Europe in this respect may have been instrumental in his selection as episcopal candidate. Bishop Páll, asking his brother Sæmundr for advice about Guðmundr's appointment is told that Guðmundr's charity, rectitude and chastity especially recommend him: 'gezku sinnar ok alðuende ok hreinlifis' (S. Karlsson (ed.) Guðmundr saga biskups, p. 137)

elaboration of Lambkárr, pointing up the parallels between the two bishops, which, at the actual time of the vision, were yet to emerge.

The men seen burning in the pit, 'alla ner höfðingja ólerða, þá er illa fõro með þvi valde, er þeir höfðo', (almost all the secular chieftains who had misused their authority), are presumably those chieftains who resisted the Church in the question of clerical appointments and concubinage. This may well be a coded reference to the notorious chieftain Jón Loptsson, whose battles with Bishop Þorlákr, firstly over the bishop's assumption of the prerogative of appointing priests to the churches on Jón's land and, secondly, over Jón's long affair with Ragnheiðr, Þorlákr's sister, are chronicled in Þórlaks saga.[27] Jón had died in 1197, so his appearance in hell in 1198 would be particularly timely; since Páll, the current Bishop of Skálholt, was the illegitimate son of Jón and Ragnheiðr Rannveig had good reason not to mention him by name. While the rebellious chieftains might win temporary victories against the Church on earth by force of arms, as Kolbeinn Tumason was later to do against Guðmundr, their punishment in the next life is assured.

The issue of clerical concubinage is addressed in the pains which Rannveig suffers during her vision. The sins for which her feet, hands and back are burnt may seem surprisingly petty: her feet are burnt for wearing embroidered stockings and black shoes, with a view to attracting men; her hands because she has sewn both for herself and for others on feast days; her back suffers because she has worn linen and fine clothing, also for the benefit of men. Rannveig's sins may be minor sins of vanity,[28] but their consequence is to attract men to lechery and in particular, we learn from the introduction to Rannveig's story, to kindle lechery in the hearts of priests. Rannveig, although in most respects a pious woman 'imorgu lage tru maðr mikill' had been the mistress of one priest and was now the concubine of another 'þott henne seiz litt um þetta' - she seemed to have few scruples about that. Rannveig's sin aligns her with the chieftains in the pit, for just as they have misused their office in opposing the church and keeping concubines, so she has been instrumental in the transgression of her lovers against their priestly calling, 'þu hefir lagz undir ij presta ok saurgat sva þeira þionosto',

27 Biskupa sögur I, Copenhagen, 1858-78. 282-6, 289-93.

28 See the vision of the Empress Theophano in Othlo of St. Emmeram's book of visions discussed below (PL 146, col. 373). Theophano's love of finery is decoupled from sexual temptation however.

(you have lain with two priests and thus defiled their office) the demons say.[29]

Although Rannveig is said to be unscrupulous as to the morality of extra-marital relationships with priests, she must have been aware of the official Church attitude towards such liasons. The precise sin with which she is charged then is likely originate from her own consciousness of wrong-doing, but no doubt Guðmundr's reaction to her story would have persuaded her of the wickedness of concubinage.[30] At all events, it is clear that, despite her conduct, Rannveig has internalized church teaching both in this matter, and more broadly, in the matter of women's culpability for the arousal of sexual desire in men.[31]

One of the most notable features of Rannveigar Leizla is its intense nationalism. The saints who speak are Scandinavian: Óláfr, patron saint of Norway, Magnus of Orkney and Hallvarðr, patron of Oslo. Hallvarðr is an obscure figure - this story is in fact the only evidence for his cult in Iceland;[32] Magnus is noted for his celibate marriage, maintained through a strict regimen of cold showers[33] while Óláfr's cult was fairly widespread in Iceland.[34] Why is there no role here for Þórlákr, who was to be declared a saint at the Alþing in 1198? Arngrímr's version, composed as part of the campaign to secure Guðmundr's canonization, emphasises the protective role which each one plays as patron saint: 'ok svá sem vér fullting veitum Noregi ok Orkneyjum, svá mun hjálpa Island med sínum boenum', (just as we give protection to Norway and the Orkneys, so Iceland will be helped by his [sc. Guðmundr's] prayers) the saints proclaim (p. 11). It is possible that both Lambkárr and Arngrímr were trying to promote Guðmundr's claim to become Iceland's patron saint over the ultimately successful candidacy of Þorlákr.

The intention of the vision's description of heaven is not in showing the reward that Rannveig herself can hope to attain if she repents of her sin, but in confirming the authority of the bishops of the Icelandic church,

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29 The conflation of these two behaviours is clear in Bishop Þorlákr's accusation of Jón Loptsson, (BS I, 283-40); see J. Jochens, 'The Church and Sexuality' as in n. 25 above, p. 386.

30 Jochens (p. 391) suggests that priests, having despaired of reforming male sexuality, concentrated their message on women, with such spectacular results as the case of Þuríðr later in Guðmundr saga: Karlsson ed. p. 111.

31 For a masterly exposition of early Christian attitudes to the body, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, New York, 1988, 77-84, 153.

32 s.v. KLNM VI col. 63-66.

33 Finnbogi Guðmundarson (ed.) Orkneyinga saga, IF 35, Reykjavík, 1965 p. 104.

34 s.v. KLNM 'helgene' vol. VI, cols. 334-6.

enthroned in palaces filled with heavenly music while those who defied them on earth sizzle in boiling pitch. This section would seem to have been shaped by the same political pressures which I outlined earlier, and we may therefore surmise the influence of the clerical transmitters here.

Rannveigar Leizla then is inseparable from the context in which it is transmitted. The familiar European vision format has been used first to illustrate the themes of clerical independence, and the parallels with Thomas à Becket which the rest of Guðmundar saga seeks to develop; second it expresses a broader idea of Northern nationalist pride in the saints which Scandinavia had produced, and promotes Guðmundr's claim to sanctity. A reading of Sturlunga saga, Biskupa sögur, and other contemporary sagas makes evident the particular political conditions which shape the depictions of sinners.

Shaping the Narrative

Rannveigar Leizla then is, as we have seen, constructed in a number of layers. In the first instance, on the most realistic level, the experience was probably produced by the shock of leaving the warm, sauna-like bath-house and emerging into an Icelandic winter. In her period of unconsciousness motifs familiar to her from sermons, traditional knowledge of the Other World and contemporary vision poetry combine with subconscious guilt about her sexual behaviour and her awareness of the current political strife between church and chieftains. On awakening, she seeks figures of authority to whom the vision is to be relayed, and promulgates 'personalised versions' for the living people seen in the vision. Thus the account recited to Guðmundr Arason, four years later, bears traces of clerical influence in its treatment of the chieftains and nationalistic depiction of heaven. Finally Lambkárr adds the parallels with Thomas à Beckett, a textual key to his presentation of Gudmundr's later life, and the translator of Abbot Arngrímr's Life calls upon the learned written tradition when he expands the Leizla with elements taken from Duggals Leizla. We are fortunate in Rannveigar Leizla to find a narrative which allows, if only to a limited extent, the untangling of some of the various strands which are woven into a vision text.

Women's Visions

Although Rannveigar Leizla is the eightieth vision in Dinzelbacher's catalogue, only eight or nine visions of the Other World are recorded as

occurring to women before the second half of the twelfth century, when the visions of Christina of Markyate, Christina Mirabilis, Elisabeth of Schönau and Hildegard signal the beginning of the 'Frauenmystik' of the later middle ages. These early women's visions do however share some characteristics. The earliest is that of a nun in the Convent of Ste. Croix in Poitiers, recorded by Gregory of Tours c.583. She sees a vision of heaven, described in the usual terms, and is given a splendid robe by an abbess, a gift from her heavenly bridegroom. The nun decides to become a recluse and was still walled up at the time at which Gregory wrote.[35]

The experience of the visionary of Boniface's Epistle 115 (if she is indeed female) is recorded only fragmentarily: (s)he sees souls in pits who were to be set free on the day of judgment or before.[36] Heaven is divided into three areas, reached by a rainbow bridge; in the penitential pits are seen queens: Cuthburga and Wiala, tormented with spots and flames for their carnal sins, a count and king Ethelbald of Mercia. The living were also seen and named, but the correspondent thinks it best not to detail the punishments. Similarly, the Poor Woman of Laon (819) sees Charlemagne, a certain Picho and Queen Irmingard, first wife of the reigning king, among the damned. Charlemagne can be saved by seven masses, while molten gold is being poured into Picho's mouth. Irmingard is weighed down with rocks. The Poor Woman also sees the wall surrounding the Earthly Paradise on which are inscribed the names of Bernhard, king of Italy, and King Louis the Pious (his uncle), whose name is almost rubbed away. Her guide remarks that before Louis's blinding of Bernhard, and Bernhard's consequent death, no name had been more lustrous than his. The Poor Woman was exhorted to go to Louis and tell him of her vision.[37]

Abbess Hathumoda of Gandersheim (874) has visions of the convent which she founded. She sees most of the foundation's nuns disporting in heaven and the damned burning in a pit. Hathumoda invokes St Martin, whom she has always thought particularly effective, and she hears that her

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35 Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, Book 6, ch. 29.

36 An very early witness to the idea of Purgatory : see further Le Goff, pp. 181-6. The identity of the visionary is unclear from the text, which is preserved in a fragmentary version only in the Vienna ms. From my reading of the vision, I cannot see why Dinzelbacher, in Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur, and before him, C. Fritzsche in 'Die lateinischen Visionen des Mittelalters bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zu Culturegeschichte', Romanische Forschung 3 (1887): 247-279; 337-369 believe the visionary to be a woman.

37 Bernhard was the nephew of Louis the Pious; when he heard that he was to be cut out of the succession he mounted a rebellion which failed. Though he was condemned to death the penalty was mitigated to blinding (one source suggests at the instigation of Irmingard) and died three days later. In 822 Louis made a public apology for the killing and submitted himself to the Church for penance.

prayers have been answered and their salvation is guaranteed. St Martin later appears in the convent, confirming Hathumoda's faith in him.[38]

Flothilda (940) is connected with the convent of Avenay near Reims. Her spirit is rapt and taken to a place of wonderful beauty where she sees Christ, Peter and Mary. In another vision, two weeks later, she is taken to the same place where she is told to pray to St Lawrence and St Hilaire of Poitiers in her forthcoming trials. Plagued by demons at night, she is taken to a place where clerics are debating. Local saints Remigius and Lantbertus are rebuking Artold, former archbishop of Reims and chancellor of King Louis IV for his failure to resist the king (deprived of his see, Artold now owned the convent to which Flothilda was attached). France is said to have incurred God's displeasure, the bishop is driven out and consumed by flames from which priests later rescue him, and the people of France are chided for their faithlessness towards their king. Lantbert tells Flothilda to make known what she has seen, and she dies shortly after her visions cease.[39] The eleventh-century Othlo of Emmeran recounts the vision of a nun who sees the Empress Theophano, the powerful Byzantine mother of the child-Emperor Otto III, dressed in miserable rags, lamenting that she never did penance for her immoderate love of fine clothes and ornaments, since, in her own land, this was not considered a sin; moreover her luxurious ways had led honest German women astray 'alias mulieres similia appetentes peccare feci'. Uncharacteristically for monkish reporters of visions, Othlo cannot remember where he heard this story from, nor whether the nun's prayers were successful in releasing the empress from her torments.[40]

Another of Othlo's visionaries is a maid-servant 'ancilla' to Engilbertus, one of two important officials (tribuni) in the town of Würzburg. She dies, but revives on the way to the funeral, and has the other official, Adalricus, sent for. To him she reveals that she has been sent back to tell him that his father is in torment because, while he was alive, he had unjustly alienated land from a poor man, one Dominic. The maidservant presumably here gives voice to a sense of popular outrage at the abuses of the powerful.[41] The mother of Guibert de Nogent (early c. 12) has a very explicit vision of her husband, Guibert's father in Purgatory, who reveals to her the existence of

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38 MG SS 4, 165 ff.

39 Most conveniently available in Dinzelbacher, Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur, 58-65

40 PL 146, col. 373.

41 PL 146, cols.359-60.

illegitimate half-brother, who died unbaptized. The mother, in consequence, adopts an orphan child.[42] Aupais (b. 1156) is covered with disgusting boils and her brothers planned to let her starve to death. She has a series of visions: one of which shows huge crowds of devils inside the monasteries of the world, whilst only a couple of devils could be seen in the towns. The moral is that the souls of the townsfolk are already safely given over to Satan, while the devils concentrate their fire on the monastic souls which are slipping from their grasp. Another vision shows a dead abbot whose care of his flock is symbolised by his lactation.[43]

If the visions concerned with the developing notion of Purgatory, and the one intended to induce a nun to become a recluse are discounted, there remains a series of visions with some traits in common with Rannveig's and with one marked difference. None of the other visionaries is herself a sinner: their experience is passive, they are in no great personal danger and they are simply required to record what they see and pass on the message to others. Rannveig's own sinfulness links her with a particular, and very common, male pattern, typified by the Visio Tnugdali.

What many of the other women's visions share with Rannveig's is their political nature. The Poor Woman of Laon is required to reproach Louis the Pious with his torture of a political opponent while Flothilda not only becomes enmeshed in the affairs of her local diocese of Reims, but is also the vehicle for political comment about the French people's disobedience to King Louis IV. Hathumoda's visions bestow divine approval on her work of founding the convent at Gandersheim, and reveal that most (though not all) of the nuns there can be seen in heaven. The later visions of Othlo's nun and of Aupais betray particular clerical interests: the nun gives voice to the constant clerical admonitions concerning female clothing, just as Rannveig is punished for her love of finery, while Aupais's vision represents monastic existence as a constant battle against demons, rather than the opportunity for unbridled gluttony, sloth and lechery which the later medieval estates satires were to depict.[44] Yet Othlo's nun also has a political agenda: Theophano was extremely unpopular both as a foreigner and as a politically active queen, acting as regent of Germany for Otto III. Odilo of Cluny, the biographer of Theophano's mother-in-law, the redoubtable Adelheid,

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42 Account in Self and Society in Medieval France: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent, Edited with an Introduction by John F. Benton, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 15 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), repr. 1984. Pp. 93-97. Analysed in Le Goff, Birth of Purgatory, 181-86

43 Dinzelbacher, Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur, 128-35

44 Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, Cambridge, 1973.

consistently refers to her as 'that Greek woman'[45] and the nun's vision indicates how Theophano's foreign customs had led her into damnation. Both these last-mentioned visions, like Rannveig's, encode perennial, as well as immediately topical, church concerns.

Gender and genre

The tendency for women's visions to have a contemporary political content is striking, especially since the seers are not, with the exception of Hathumoda, powerful abbesses and confidantes of kings, such as Hild of Whitby or Hildegard of Bingen, who were involved in royal and imperial decision-making. Rather the women are poor, humble and, as far as we can tell, not especially politicised. It would be easy to dismiss them as mere mouthpieces for the views of the priests who recorded and no doubt interpreted their visions, but I would argue that the phenomenon has more complex traditional and socially-determined origins. The 'political' woman's vision is shaped in part by the biblical tradition of privileged wisdom coming from the disempowered: most pithily summarized in the saying 'out of the mouths of babes and sucklings' (Matthew 21: 16), but also recognized by Christ when he accords an instinctive wisdom to the actions of the woman of Bethany in anointing his feet with spikenard (Matthew 26: 6-13; paralleled in Luke 7: 37-50). Given the Northern origin of most of the female visions, there may also be a connection to the Germanic tradition of 'wise women' which Tacitus notes in Germania ch. 8: 'they believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies'.[46]

Most important however is the role women have to play as conduits of information in early societies, reflecting popular feelings and anxieties upwards to the ruling hierarchy and, conversely, funnelling those teachings which the Church wishes to prioritise down into popular life. From the early Christian church through the conversionary processes of Merovingian France and Anglo-Saxon England[47] to the audience of the preaching of Francis of Assisi (typified by St. Clare),[48] women have frequently been more receptive than men to the Church's message and also,

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45 P. Stafford, Queens, Dowagers and Concubines: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages, London, 1983, p. 3.

46 Tacitus, The Agricola and the Germania, ed. H. Mattingly and S. A. Handford, Harmondsworth,1948; rev. 1970, p. 108.

47 See S. Hollis, Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church, Woodbridge, 1992, pp. 208-42.

48 R.J. Armstrong and I. Brady, Francis and Clare: The Complete Works, London, 1982.

in such areas as the institutionalization of the doctrine of Purgatory, prominent in giving voice to popular beliefs drawn from 'low culture'.[49]

In the modern world, contemporary visionaries are often women, or young children. In a recent newspaper article on visions of the Virgin Mary,[50] Kevin McClure, author of *Evidence for the Visions Of The Virgin Mary,* was reported as saying:

> [Visions of Our Lady are] fearfully common and often very wrapped up in politics. But the visionaries are usually impressionable children or women with Catholic backgrounds who have no idea of the politics and are certainly not fraudulent. They may not recognise that they are responding to a popular feeling in the country.[51]

That women can become privileged speakers within a contemporary political discourse through strategic use of the vision genre thus seems to be suggested by the evidence considered above. However the precise link between gender and subgenre needs to be more closely scrutinised; as McClure's comments suggest, the producers of visions with a political or topical subtext , though frequently female, are not necessarily so. Rather it is disempowerment, marginalization, through poverty, social class, secular status, youth, or gender, which impels these visionaries. Their very lack of a voice within their cultures is, paradoxically, what urges them to speak: the vision genre represents an authorizing strategy which, both individually and as part of a social collective, enables the disempowered to gain and to articulate a perspective on the social constructs which delimit their own experiences.[52]

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49 The visions of Margery Kempe have, as one of their aims, a revaluation of the possibility of sanctity for the non-virgin and the reassessment of the position of marriage in the prevailing hierarchy. See D. Aers, Community, Gender and Individual Identity, London, 1988, pp. 73-116.

50 *The Guardian*, Nov. 20 1992, 2:4-5.

51 For example, the Virgin who currently appears regularly to Christina Gallagher in County Mayo, Ireland, has expressed her sorrow over abortion.

52 Visions with 'political content' seen by ordinary citizens, or the poor and dispossessed include: the Visions of Theoderich and Dagobert (Gesta Theoderici 2,3 MG SS rer. Merov. 2, 214) Gesta Dagoberti 44, MG SS rer. Merov. 2, 421 s.)) , the Vision of Bernold (probably heavily doctored by Hincmar of Reims) (PL 125 cols. 1115-1119), the vision of the poor girl of Würzburg and the Vision of a Beggar in Othlo von Emmeram's Liber Visioni (PL 146 365).