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Laxdæla Dreaming:
A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life

Árman Jakobsson

The four dreams

It is probably not a matter of debate that one of the most memorable scenes in the entire saga corpus is when the young Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir relates her four dreams to the renowned sage Gestr Oddleifsson from Hagi on Barðaströnd, in chapter 33 (out of 87) of *Laxdæla saga*. The dream narrative goes as follows:

Úti þóttumk ek vera stödd við læk nökkurn, ok hafða ek krókfald á höfði ok þótti mér illa sama, ok var ek fúsari at breyta faldinum, en margir tölðu um, at ek skylda þat eigi gera. En ek hlýdda ekki á þat, ok greip ek af höfði mér faldinn, ok kastaða ek út á lækinn,—ok var þessi draumur eigi lengri [...] Þat var upphaf at öðrum draum, at ek þóttumk vera stödd hjá vatni einu; svá þótti mér, sem kominn væri silfrhring á hönd mér, ok þóttumk ek eiga ok einkarvel sama; þótti mér þat vera allmikil gersemi, ok ætlaða ek lengi at eiga. Ok er mér váru minnstar vánir, þá renndi hringrinn af hendi mér ok á vatnit, ok sá ek hann aldri síðan. Þótti mér sá skaði miklu meiri en ek mætta at glíkendum ráða, þótt ek hefða einum grip týnt. Síðan vaknaða ek. [...] Sá er inn þriði draumur minn, at ek þóttum hafa gullhring á hendi, ok þóttum ek eiga hringinn, ok þótti mér bætrr skaðinn; om mér þat í hug, at ek mynda þessa hrings lengr njóta en ins fyrra; en eigi þótti mér sjá gripr því betr sama, sem gull er dýrra en silfr. Síðan þóttumk ek falla ok vilja styðja mik með hendinni, en gullhringrinn mætti steini nökkurum ok stökk í tvá hluti, ok þótti mér dreyra ór hlutunum. Þat þótti mér líkara harmi en skaða, er ek þóttumk

þá bera eptir; kom mér þá í hug, at brestr hafði verit á hringnum, ok þá er ek hugða at brotunum eptir, þá þóttumk ek sjá fleiri brestina á, ok þótti mér þó, sem heill myndi, ef ek hefða betr til gætt, ok var eigi þessi draumr lengri. [...] Sá er inn fjórði draumr minn, at ek þóttumk hafa hjálm á höfði af gulli ok mjök gimsteinum settan. Ek þóttumk eiga þá gersemi; en þat þótti mér helzt at, at hann var nökkurs til þungr, því at ek fekk varla valdit, ok bar ek hallt höfuðit, ok gaf ek þó hjálminum enga sök á því ok ætlaða ekki at lóga honum, en þó steypðisk hann af höfði mér ok út á Hvammsfjrd, ok eptir þat vaknaða ek. Eru þér nú sagðir draumarnir allir.¹

[I seemed to be standing outdoors, by a stream, wearing a tall head-dress that I felt did not suit me at all well. I wanted to change the head-dress but many people advised against it. I refused to listen to them, tore the head-dress from my head and threw it into the stream. The dream ended there. [...] In the beginning of the second dream I seemed to be standing by a lake. I seemed to have a silver ring on my arm which belonged to me and suited me especially well. I treasured it greatly and intended to keep it long and well. But the ring slid from my arm when I least expected it and fell into the lake and I never saw it again. I was filled with a sense of loss much greater than I should have felt at losing a mere object. After that I awoke. [...] In the third dream I seemed to have a gold ring on my arm; it was my own and seemed to make up for my loss. I expected to have the pleasure of owning this one longer than the previous one. All the same it wasn't as if it suited me so much better, not if compared with how much more costly gold is than silver. Then I fell and reached out my hand to break my fall, but the gold ring struck a stone and broke in two, and I thought I saw blood seep from the pieces. My feelings afterwards were more like grief than regret. I realised that there had been a flaw in the ring, and upon examining the pieces I could see other flaws. All the same I had the impression that if I'd looked after it better the ring might still have been in one piece. The dream ended here. [...] In my fourth dream I seemed to have a gold helmet on my head, set with many gems. This treasure was mine. But it did seem to me that it was too heavy for me to bear. I could hardly manage it and held my head bowed. I didn't blame the helmet for this, however, nor did I intend to get rid of it. But it fell suddenly from my head and into the

waters of Hvammsfjord, after which I woke up. Now I have told you all the dreams.']²

We are not informed of even the slightest hesitation on Gestr's part, before he suggests the following interpretation:

Glöggt fæ ek sét, hvat draumar þessir eru, en mjök mun þér samstaft þykkja, því at ek mun næsta einn veg alla ráða. Bændr mantu eiga fjóra, ok væntir mik, þá er þú ert inum fyrsta gipt, at þat sé þér ekki girndarráð. Þar er þú þóttisk hafa mikinn fald á höfði, ok þótti þér illa sama, þar muntu lítit unna honum, ok þar er þú tókt af höfði þér faldinn ok kastaðir á vatnit, þar muntu ganga frá honum. Því kalla menn á sæ kastat, er maðr lætr eigu sína ok tekr ekki í mót. [...] Sá var draumr þinn annarr, at þú þóttisk hafa silfrhring á hendi; þar muntu vera gipt öðrum manni ágætum. Þeim muntu unna mikit ok njóta skamma stund; kemr mér ekki þat at óvörum, þóttú missir hann með drukkun, ok eigi geri ek þann draum lengra. Sá var inn þriði draumr þinn, at þú þóttisk hafa gullhring á hendi; þar muntu eiga inn þriðja bónda. Ekki mun sá því meira verðr, sem þér þótti sá málmrinn torugætri ok dýrri, en nær er þat mínu hugboði, at í þat mund muni orðit siðaskipti, ok muni sá þinn bóndi hafa tekit við þeim sið, er vér hyggjum, at miklu sé háleitari. En þar er þér þótti hringrinn í sundr stökkva, nökkut af þinni vangeymslu, ok sáttt blóð koma ór hlutunum, þá mun sá þinn bóndi veginn; muntu þá þykkjask glöggst sjá þá þverbresti, er á þeim ráðahag hafa verit. [...] Sá er inn fjórði draumr þinn, at þú þóttisk hafa hjálm á höfði af gulli ok settan gimsteinum, ok varð þér þungbærr; þar munt þú eiga inn fjórða bónda. Sá mun vera mestr höfðingi ok mun bera heldr ægishjálm yfir þér. Ok þar er þér þótti hann steypask út á Hvammsfjörð, þá man hann þann sama fjörð fyrir hitta á inum efsta degi síns lífs. Geri ek nú þenna draum ekki lengra.' (pp. 89–91)

[I can clearly see what the dreams mean, but you may find the fare lacking in variety, as I would interpret them all in a very similar way. You will have four husbands; I expect that the first man to whom you are married will not have been a match to your liking. As you thought you bore a great head-dress, which you felt suited you poorly, you will care little for this man. And since you removed the head-dress and threw it into the water, this means that you will leave him. People say things have

been cast to the tide when they refer to getting rid of possessions and getting nothing in return. [...] In your second dream you thought you had a silver ring on your arm. This means you will be married to a second, fine man for whom you will care greatly and enjoy only a short time. It would not surprise me if he were drowned. There is no need to dwell any longer on this dream. In your third dream you thought you had a gold ring on your arm. This represents your third husband. He will not surpass his predecessor to the same extent that you felt metal to be rarer and more precious. But if my guess is right, there will be a change in religion around that time and this husband of yours will have adopted the new religion, which seems to be much nobler. When the ring appeared to break in two, in part because of your own carelessness, and blood to seep from its parts, this signifies that this husband will be killed. It is then that you will see most clearly the faults of that marriage. [...] It was in your fourth dream that you bore a gold helmet set with gems on your head, which was a heavy weight for you. This signifies that you will marry a fourth time and this husband will far surpass you. The helmet seemed to fall into the waters of Hvammsfjord, which indicates that this fourth husband will have an encounter with the same fjord on the final day of his life. I can make no more of this dream.] (p. 45)

It seems so neat and, perhaps, somewhat obvious—too obvious, even—almost as if it were a mistake on the author's part.³ Four dreams, four precious objects and four husbands. It would seem almost incredible that Guðrún had not thought of this interpretation herself; indeed I will suggest in this article that this may be precisely what the saga's intended audience was expected to infer.

As palpably true as the interpretation is, even before the truth of Gestr's fourfold prophecy is confirmed by what follows, this dream narrative is not merely a symbolic illustration of the future. It raises many other questions, and in this paper I will discuss some of the ambiguities of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and her four dreams. My analysis seeks to suggest that the narrative is deliberately ambiguous, that the saga author (by which term I mean the authorial figure that every textual interpretation needs to refer to) intended it to be so, and that a thirteenth-century audience could reasonably be expected to have been aware of such complexities.⁴ One of the premises for the following study is thus that modern readers are not necessarily more sophisticated than pre-industrial ones, although the modern interpreter does have access to learned analytic vocabulary

not available to the saga's mediaeval audience. We may thus begin by allowing that to the implied audience, a dream is not just a dream, and its interpretation not necessarily straightforward.⁵

I will be concentrating on three issues raised by the dreams and their role in the saga: 1) the curious role of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir herself, often seen as a typical strong-willed and, in this instance, glamorous saga woman but nevertheless a figure who may also be regarded as strikingly anomalous; 2) the representation of the four husbands in the dream, and the interpretation of the imagery used; 3) the existentialist problems which the dreams pose, especially as Guðrún goes on to 'live' them.⁶

It is not just that these dreams come true, it is also necessary to explore how and why they become true, and whether this was inevitable or not. It is my hope that this study, though limited in scope, will cast some light on the complex imagery and metaphorical language of *Laxdæla saga*, as well as its sophisticated understanding of the human psyche.

The cunning woman

When considering the representation of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir it seems a good idea to start with her interlocutor, Gestr Oddleifsson the wise. The very fact that these two people were involved in the conversation quoted above tells us something about both of them, although perhaps more about Guðrún. Gestr is, in fact, a well-known figure from *Landnámabók* and in *Íslendingasögur* such as *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Hávarðar saga*, in which he periodically saunters onto the stage to prophesy or to provide shrewd commentary on the action.⁷ In *Laxdæla saga* he is thus in a familiar role, introduced as 'höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti, vel vingaðr við alla ina stærri menn, ok margir sóttu ráð at honum' (p. 87) [an important chieftain and an especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future. Most of the foremost men of the country were on good terms with him and many sought his advice', p. 43]. Guðrún, on the other hand, is merely a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl, and thus it is somewhat unexpected that when she meets this renowned sage, the two begin to chat as if there were no generation (or other) gap between them: 'taka þau tal saman, ok váru þau bæði vitr ok orðig' (p. 88) [they struck up a conversation; their discussion was both shrewd and lengthy, p. 44].

The wise man and the teenage girl might at first sight seem a strange couple and even more remarkable is the fact that the saga highlights their common eloquence and wisdom. Even at fourteen, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is very comfortable in making witty small-talk with one of the wisest men in Iceland. It is this that makes Guðrún special. Even in today's culture of apparent equality, a fourteen-year-old girl talking to a professor on an equal footing would be considered a somewhat strange phenomenon. And that is precisely what Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is: a strange phenomenon. In the saga overall she is not just a woman with many husbands. And although she might with some justification be regarded as glamorous—she and the handsome Kjartan Ólafsson are later described as well suited for one another (p. 112)—beauty is never her principal asset or accomplishment.

Even in modern responses to *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún is often regarded primarily as an exceptionally good-looking, refined and glamorous woman—to take just one example, Jane Smiley calls her 'the most beautiful woman ever born in Iceland', but makes no mention of her intellect.⁸ The saga itself, on the other hand, draws attention to her mental powers rather than her looks.⁹ Guðrún is indeed said to be good looking but her appearance is never described in detail (although her costume is so depicted, after the death of Bolli, p. 168). Detailed physical descriptions are, in fact, reserved for the men of the saga, in particular Kjartan Ólafsson, whose good looks receive extensive and exaggerated attention (pp. 76–77).¹⁰

Guðrún, on the other hand is said to be 'kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi, bæði at ásjánu ok vitsmunum. [...] Allra kvenna var hon kœnst ok bezt orði farin; hon var örlynd kona' (p. 86) [the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland, and no less clever than she was good-looking [...] She was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well', p. 43].¹¹ It may be noted that there is no particular statement made about her looks. While the description of Kjartan draws special attention to his face, eyes, hair and body, Guðrún is not described specifically at all. She may have had long hair or red hair; she may have been tall or short; we are not told whether her eyes were particularly striking. Guðrún, then, is certainly a handsome woman, but, more importantly, she is extremely wise, clever, eloquent and 'örlynd' (generous, or quick-tempered). While I am not sure that the saga is implying that Kjartan was not similarly wise, clever or eloquent, nothing is explicitly stated about these accomplishments in his portrayal.

With this description of Guðrún in mind, it becomes less surprising that she is not only dreaming of her fate at fourteen years of age, but is also carrying on intelligent conversations with wise chieftains in their prime. Later the saga, the main obstacles to attacking Bolli are his valour and the wise counsels of Guðrún and her father Ósvífr (p. 163). And it is indeed Guðrún's wisdom that makes her so attractive to the men of Iceland, such as the extremely handsome Kjartan Ólafsson: 'þótti Kjartani gott að tala við Guðrúnu, því at hon var bæði vitr ok málsnjöll' (p. 112) [Kjartan enjoyed Gudrun's company, as she was both clever and good with words; p. 57]. She may be a good-looking woman but it is her eloquence rather than her beauty which captivates him.

This is the first curious and neglected aspect of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's dreams and their interpretation. The saga is a narrative about a precocious girl who is able to engage in intelligent conversation of the kind that would normally be restricted to men of some stature, in the fundamentally unequal society of mediaeval Iceland, albeit with an occasional superwoman included in the group of dominant men.¹²

Bearing in mind who Guðrún is, we may now return to the question of what she is doing when she calls for a prophecy by narrating her dreams to Gestr. Is she entirely innocent or is she playing some intellectual game? At first sight, of course, there is nothing peculiar about the narrative. A teenage girl has had puzzling dreams that she does not understand. She tells them to the wisest man in the region when she meets him by chance, and he explains their meaning to her. On the face of it there seems to be nothing suspicious about this, except, of course, that Guðrún is not an ordinary teenager. Soon after this, she has not only obtained a divorce from her husband but is giving her new lover advice on how to get rid of his wife (p. 95). And this plot, like all her plots, is cunning and subtle.

There is nothing simple about Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, the interpretation of the four dreams is actually quite straightforward. As a dreamer Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir almost resembles King Sverrir, whose long journey to the throne included prophetic dreams that eventually became less and less subtle in implying that his future lay with the throne of Norway.¹³ When she approaches Gestr she tells him that these dreams have been worrying her 'en engi maðr hefir þá svá ráðit, at mér líki, ok bið ek þó eigi þess, at þeir sé í vil ráðnir' (p. 88) [No one has yet been able to interpret them to my satisfaction, although I don't insist that they be favourably interpreted; p. 44]. She does indeed not insist at all. It is almost as if she is goading him to find the dead husbands in the dream. Or are we to believe that this extremely clever

woman had not thought of husbands at this point? I think that such a view would be as naive as thinking that just over a decade before the Christianization of Iceland, Gestr is referring to a new and much nobler religion without any particular faith in mind.

Guðrún's reaction, when Gestr offers his interpretation, is interesting: she 'setti dreyrrauða, meðan draumarnir váru ráðnir; en engi hafði hon orð um' [had grown blood-red while listening to her dreams being interpreted, but kept silent; p. 45]. She keeps her composure, though, and remarks only that she will have plenty to think about, if all this should come to pass (p. 91). But she is visibly upset and this is also somewhat strange. Is she so surprised that this is not just a dream about vanished treasures? Or had she been laying a trap for Gestr? Did she perhaps not expect him to unravel the riddle so quickly? Or did she think that he would find it too simple and offer something more complex? We will return to this point presently, but for now we may simply note the obvious fact that Gestr's interpretation of the dreams perturbs Guðrún, in the wake of his earlier responses that had been restricted to sardonic one-liner responses, such as 'Era sjá draumr minni' [No less remarkable is this dream] and 'Eigi fara í þurrð draumarnir' [The source of your dreams is far from drying up] (p. 88-89; p. 44).

Another legitimate question is: did Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir really dream all this? Or has she been inventing the dreams, and, if so, to what purpose? Most modern experts would doubtless hesitate to wager that an actual tenth-century Guðrún really had these four recurring dreams. But would a thirteenth-century audience have been any more uncritical? Might it not have been the intention of the saga creator to hint at the possibility that Guðrún had never dreamt anything of the kind? And that possibility, in turn, raises interesting questions about the prophetic nature of her dreams, to which I will also return presently. But, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ *Laxdæla saga* tends not to illuminate riddles but deliberately leaves them for the audience to wrestle with.

After having unravelled Guðrún's dreams, Gestr Oddleifsson has fulfilled his most important function in the story, though he will make two further appearances of some significance.¹⁵ These, however, do not occur until after he has met Kjartan Ólafsson and his fosterbrother Bolli on the way from Guðrún and told his son that Bolli will eventually kill Kjartan (p. 92; p. 46). Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, however, remains at the forefront of the saga. She marries four men, loves a fifth and ends up as an old woman at Helgafell. At the conclusion of the saga the theme of her husbands reappears. Guðrún's son, Bolli Bollason, comes to visit and asks his old mother to identify the man whom she had loved the most.

Guðrún, subtle as ever, does not really answer but says positive things about three of her husbands, while dismissing the fourth. But Bolli persists and secures the reply: 'Þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest' (p. 228) [Though I treated him worst, I loved him best; p. 119].

The most striking thing about this famous answer is that it is not really an answer. Several scholars have tried to solve the puzzle and identify the person whom Guðrún loved most, and several intelligent and fascinating solutions have been proposed;¹⁶ and, of course, generations of *Laxdæla saga* readers have also been free to speculate. But, when *Laxdæla saga* is regarded as a text, dismissing for a moment the possibility that Guðrún might have existed and that the answer might hark back to real truths and a long tradition, the answer is, of course, simple: *Guðrún does not say whom she loved most.*¹⁷ The answer is left to the audience.

Of course, the enigmatic nature of the answer does not mean that it is devoid of meaning. On the contrary, Guðrún and the saga reveal a good deal. To begin with, the emphasis in the sentence is not on the best-loved man, but on Guðrún herself: *I was worst to him that I loved the most.* She is, in fact, not answering the question posed by Bolli but a different question, about her own feelings and guilt. Which brings us to the heart of the matter: the name of the most-loved lover is perhaps not all-important; it is the emotional life of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir herself that is first and foremost in her mind. Her enigmatic answer does not reveal the identity of the man in her life, but it does reveal that Guðrún is the subject in her own story.

It is Guðrún's inner life that is essential, and this in turn may explain why so little is said about Guðrún's appearance, while Kjartan and so many other handsome men of the saga are described in detail. It is her wisdom that matters most. This is hardly surprising if we regard her as the subject of this narrative; the self to whom this story happened. In the life of every individual, even in the age of mirrors and photographs, physical appearance can never be quite as important as thoughts and feelings. And Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is the self of that part of *Laxdæla saga* which deals with her love life.

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's enigmatic answer is not just subtle but also very subjective. No facts are given, only an insight into what an old lady is feeling. In my view this also makes it feasible to regard Guðrún's dreams as a statement of her inner life rather than as a prophecy about the fate of four men—she wants these dreams to be known and she already knows what they mean. Perhaps they were also meant to be a riddle that Gestr should have had to work harder to solve.

The arguments in support of such a proposition would be, firstly, that the dreams should not have been so difficult to interpret for Guðrún herself; secondly, that Guðrún is visibly upset when she has heard the interpretation; and, thirdly, that Guðrún's inner life is demonstrably a theme in the saga, and that the narrative of her mysterious answer to her son is obviously linked to the prophetic dreams at the beginning of her story.

The first and second riddles of the husbands establish Guðrún as the main subject of the saga, much as Egill Skalla-Grímsson (who, incidentally, is Kjartan's grand-father) is the dominant figure in *Egils saga*. Also, like Egill, she wants to go abroad with the person she adores, in her case Kjartan (p. 115), but is not allowed to leave. In that case, her desires are completely at odds with accepted social norms, since the two are not yet married. And Guðrún's desires are emotionally driven, as she herself says: 'ekki ann ek Íslandi' (p. 115) [it's not Iceland that I love; p. 58]. It is indeed not Iceland that she loves—and since Guðrún is Guðrún, we have to finish the sentence for her: she loves a man called Kjartan.

The main plot of *Laxdæla saga*, the story of Kjartan, Bolli and Guðrún, is fomented by a woman's desires. Interestingly, Guðrún blushes again when she hears about Kjartan's friendship with the royal (and truly noble) Ingibjörg: 'gekk á brott ok var allrauð. En aðrir grunuðu, hvárt henni þætti þessi tíðendi svá góð, sem hon lét vel yfir' (p. 127) [She walked away blushing. Other people suspected that she hardly thought the news as good as she implied; p. 65]. And she changes colour again later, when Kjartan insists that she now must relinquish the seat of honour, traditionally hers, to his new wife Hrefna: 'Guðrún heyrði þetta ok leit til Kjartans ok brá lit, en svarar engu' (p. 139) [Guðrún heard his words, looked at Kjartan and changed colour but said nothing; p. 71].

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir may be a handsome woman, but first and foremost she is wise and emotional; so wise that the wisest men in Iceland clearly think of her as operating on their own level, so emotional that she cannot speak of her emotions except in riddles. She is a complex figure who does not show or articulate her feelings.¹⁸ Thus her story is framed by two riddles that she has either dreamed or invented. *Laxdæla saga* does not tell us the solution to her last riddle, and neither is it clear whether Guðrún actually dreamed anything or what she intended to do with her dreams. But the two riddles still provide a key to the complex psyche of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir.

Decorative men

The four unexplained dreams and the riddle of Guðrún's greatest love combine to make her affairs with men an important, and perhaps the most important, theme of the saga. In her dreams, she reveals quite a bit about her attitude towards these men. Her husbands belong to her ('his treasure was mine').¹⁹ They are her jewels and precious objects. She does not like the first one but loses the other three through a series of accidents. But none of them figures in the dream as an individual, they are just not equally decorative. Even the flaw in the gold ring (which represents Bolli) is the fault of Guðrún herself, as she states: 'þótti mér þó, sem heill myndi, ef ek hefða betr til gætt, ok var eigi þessi draumr lengri' (p. 89) [All the same I had the impression that if I'd looked after it better the ring might still have been in one piece; p. 44]. The responsibility is not Bolli's but her own.

In Guðrún's dream, her husbands are firmly objectified. She is not just subject but also agent. They are just decorative objects. It is not strange that *Laxdæla saga* has often been regarded as an unusually feminine²⁰ and female-centred saga,²¹ reflecting a more feminine point of view, and perhaps even composed by a woman.²² One of the main reasons for this is that Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is so clearly the main subject of her part of the saga—it is even feasible to suppose that the saga is constructed around her life.²³

However, though the women in *Laxdæla saga* are strong and active and though it may even be possible to detect an ironic stance towards some of the male heroes,²⁴ the activities of the *Laxdæla saga* women are in no way atypical for the saga genre. The *Laxdæla* women, for example, often goad men towards revenge, as other saga women tend to do,²⁵ but they do not take up arms themselves, except Guðrún's rival Bróka-Auður, who has to dress like a man in order to do it. There are far fewer women than men in the saga. They are less visible 'onstage', as it were. And, last but not least, the women are not described as carefully, even lovingly, as the men are.

Laxdæla saga is also unusual in that, although it is possible to find instances of the familiar male gaze which is used to dominate women,²⁶ the text itself is not preoccupied with focusing on the women but rather on the men.²⁷ They are described in far greater detail, especially Kjartan Ólafsson (pp. 76–77) and Bolli Bollason (pp. 224–25). There is an unusual episode in which Helgi Harðbeinsson's shepherd provides his master with an unusually detailed description of the men coming to attack Helgi (pp. 187–89). And there is the strange and almost erotic scene in which Guðrún barges in on Kjartan Ólafsson,

now married to Hrefna, when he is about to dress in the morning (p. 139). So, for the most part, the women and men of *Laxdæla saga* are gazing at beautiful men, while Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is remarkable mostly for her inner life.

In light of all this, the metaphors about men and jewels need not surprise us. These are not confined to the dreams but pervade the saga. One of the first things revealed about Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is that she has more finery than other women: 'Guðrún var kurteis kona, svá at í þann tíma þóttu allt barnavípur, þat er aðrar konur höfðu í skarti hjá henni' (p.86) [She took great care with her appearance, so much that the adornments of other women were considered to be mere child's play in comparison; p. 43]. When she dreams about her future, she sees treasures and adornments. Soon after the dreams have been interpreted, she marries for the first time and the marriage seems to revolve around finery as well. According to the marriage contract, not only is Guðrún to be in control of the household purse and receive half of the estate, but should there be a divorce her hapless husband is also required to buy her all the beautiful things (*gripi*) that she wants. However, Guðrún's hunger for finery knows no limit (she is *erfið í gripakaupum*) [avid in demanding purchases of precious objects; p. 47], which naturally puts a severe strain on the marriage. In the end the husband strikes her and she promptly divorces him (pp. 93–94).

Given that the men in her life are represented as jewels in Guðrún's dreams, it is tempting to infer that Guðrún's addiction to beautiful things is really an addiction to men. As it turns out, the real motive for the divorce is not that Guðrún needs more jewels but rather that she has met a man whom she desires.

Yet if the dreams tell the life story of Guðrún, it might be argued that this biography is marked by a strange absence. There is a gem missing—Kjartan Ólafsson himself, whose depiction in the saga is so striking and extensive that if other men are jewels he must be regarded as the saga's most precious stone. And indeed Kjartan, too, ends up being objectified as a precious item, when he is given a *motr*, a white head-dress, by the princess Ingibjörg. In presenting Kjartan with this head-dress, she instructs him to present it to his future wife and specifically mentions Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, of whom she has obviously heard and whom she may respect (p. 131).²⁸ However, when Kjartan returns, Guðrún is married to Bolli and he ends up presenting the head-dress, along with himself, to Hrefna (p. 133). He clearly sees the gift as being intended for his wife, whoever she might be, rather than for Guðrún specifically.²⁹ That is, of course, a matter of debate as Ingibjörg had mentioned Guðrún's name.

If the head-dress is a symbol for Kjartan, its history becomes fraught with meaning. Ingibjörg presents it to Guðrún, through Kjartan, which means that she is relinquishing this great treasure of a man to her greatest rival. He, on discovering that Guðrún is married, presents Hrefna with both the head-dress and himself. Guðrún, however, desires both the head-dress and the man and in the end robs Hrefna of both. When Kjartan is her guest at Laugar, she apparently surprises him while dressing and soon after she asks Hrefna if she can take a long look at the symbol for Kjartan as well, even though he has expressively forbidden it. Hrefna, of course, being both proud of the head-dress and obliging by nature, cannot but grant her this wish (p. 140).

Guðrún's reaction is, as her reactions usually are, subdued: 'Hon rakði motrinn ok leit á um hríð ok ræddi hvárki um löst né lof' (p. 140) [Gudrun unwound the head-dress and looked at it awhile, without either praising or criticising it; p. 72]. This is not unlike her previous reaction, when she had heard about Kjartan's friendship with the king's sister. And when Kjartan threatens Bolli, after the head-dress had disappeared, she comments: 'Nú þó at svá sé, sem þú segir, at þeir menn sé hér nökkurir, er ráð hafi til þess sett, at motrinn skyldi hverfa, þá virði ek svá, at þeir hafi at sínu gengit' (p. 144) [And even if it were true someone here was involved in the disappearance of the head-dress, in my opinion they've done nothing but take what rightfully belonged to them; p. 73]. She comes as close to admitting her guilt in the disappearance of this precious garment as she possibly can, obviously having no wish to conceal her actions from Kjartan, while at the same time declaring her rights to the head-dress (and, also, to Kjartan).

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir has all the best adornments. She has a craving for finery. She dreams of her men as finery. In her ensuing feud with Kjartan she is obviously referring to her dream by first destroying the head-dress, her symbol for Kjartan, and then by having him killed. She lost her husbands in a dream but the man whom she never married is destroyed by her in real life. And by doing this, Guðrún also bursts out of the autobiography that she had dreamt in her youth.

A pre-dreamed existence

The dreams of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, whether real or imagined, are clearly symbolic and they revolve around her desires for jewellery and men.³⁰ It is also worth noting that Guðrún is always near a brook or a sea or a fjord in her

dreams—in modern psychoanalytical theory, water may represent transformation, the flow of life, or be connected with sexual desires, and the dreams may indeed well be described as Guðrún's sexual autobiography. Also noticeable is the obsession with death. Like a minuscule *Ynglinga saga*, this mini-narrative tells the story of the husbands of Guðrún through their various deaths and dismissals. Life cannot be narrated the way death can. All their other qualities are secondary in the dream, the manner of the husbands' deaths is the fundamental part of their lives, thus enabling Guðrún to conceal from the audience of *Laxdæla saga* whom it was that she loved most. The dreams do not tell us such things but are more like obituary notices: divorced – drowned – killed in battle – drowned.

I have argued previously, however, that we do not really know whether the dreams actually happened. Perhaps Guðrún's anxieties and desires are not really all that unconscious and her so-called dreams are in fact her own invention—a way to dramatize the future and wrap herself in an enigma. The first attempt, if Guðrún's red face is to be taken as a sign, was punctured by Gestr; her second, however, was so successful that after seven centuries of debate, we cannot identify the man she loved the most.

Dreams and riddles are the polite woman's way of expressing herself. Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is very subtle, someone who hides her feelings. Love between her and Kjartan is never mentioned, except for the one time when she says 'ekki ann ek Íslandi'. For the most part, Guðrún's inner life is not shown in *Laxdæla saga*. She, like everyone else, reveals herself through her reactions, and, as she is a polite and sophisticated woman, these tell us little. It is only in the dreams that we come to know Guðrún, and perhaps in the last part of her long life.

When she is on her way to church, she has a vision about her husband's death and is much shaken (p. 223). Knowing that this is the fourth and last husband enables her to focus on saving her immortal soul.³¹ She drives away an old sibyl from the church floor at Helgafell by her bitter tears of repentance (pp. 223–24), and she ends the saga as the first eremitical nun in Iceland, with her life belonging to the past. We are given one last glimpse into her mind, through which we learn nothing about whom she loved the most, but a good deal about her preoccupation with her past crimes and misdemeanours.

It is not difficult to believe that she is worried about her salvation. In this story of power and love, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir has been a ruthless manipulator of other people's lives from an early age. She abuses her first husband Þorvaldr and Bróka-Auðr, the wife of her second husband, in order to move from one marriage

to the next.³² She then has Kjartan killed, with the same stroke wrecking the life of the innocent Hrefna. Bolli is later killed in revenge, having been goaded by her to take part in the attack on Kjartan. Guðrún's life has revolved around control, and her reaction to Þorkell Eyjólfsson's death demonstrates how the dreams help her in this endeavour.

In her dreams Guðrún seems carelessly to be losing beautiful objects, mainly headwear and rings. But those dreams are in fact her way not of losing anything but rather of gaining control over her own fate. The dreams are Guðrún's autobiography, where a chaotic future is subsumed within a grand ordered and structured narrative. Her unruly life metamorphoses into a fixed text, the story that Guðrún is going to live. Thus the dreams turn out to be prophetic after all, whether they were actually dreamed or not. After they have been explained, Guðrún is able to act out her fate, and she indeed has a hand in her first divorce and in the violent death of her third husband. She also keeps on marrying until she has had four husbands, as in the dream, but will not marry again once the dreams have come true.

When Guðrún has heard Gestr's interpretation, she replies: 'mikit er til at hyggja, ef þetta allt skal eptir ganga' (p. 89) [I shall have plenty to think about if all of this comes to pass; p. 45]. These enigmatic words may mean that although Guðrún is not altogether happy with this narrative, she accepts it as her life and is going to live according to the dreams. Perhaps this is the reason why she can interpret her fourth husband's dream correctly and obviously foresee his death (p. 215), but also why she still replies in an oblique fashion when he narrates it to her. Guðrún either does not want to change what has already been dreamed, or she does not want to frustrate Þorkell with an autobiographical dream such as the one with which she has been living since her youth.

Are the dreams Guðrún's fate or does she have a free will? We might say that in her own eyes and those of the saga, Guðrún is responsible. She could have changed her fate but chose not to do so. Guðrún lives the dreams as if they were her fate, rather than seeking to fight against them—except when she meets Kjartan Ólafsson.

Did she perhaps see in him the ring from the third dream, the third husband whose religion was far better than heathen customs, but whose marriage with her was full of flaws and blemishes?³³ While this is conceivable, the other possibility is that Kjartan was something entirely different, the one man who was absent from her dream. It was neither a part of the dream autobiography to love him nor to kill him. In her relations with Kjartan, Guðrún changes her story. Is that why

she undertakes spinning work on the day of Kjartan's death (p. 154). Suddenly, she has recast herself as one of the fates, a free agent in her own story. Perhaps that makes the life and death of Kjartan more important to her than any of the husbands—and indeed it might be he who is occupying her mind in her old age—the one story that she has made for herself and that was not a part of the dream.

The death of Kjartan is obviously an important reason for the guilt which materializes in her bitter tears of repentance on the church floor and in the melancholy solitude of her final years. Nevertheless, she seems to retain a kind of pride, along with an inclination boldly to decide her own fate, be it good or bad; it is that which makes her turn a question about whom she loved the most into an answer about whom she treated worst.

NOTES

¹ *Laxdæla saga*, *Íslenzk fornrit V*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1934), pp. 88–89.

² *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, transl. by Keneva Kunz, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 5 vols, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), V 1–120 (p. 44).

³ Cf. A.C. Bouman, *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1962), p. 132.

⁴ Cf. Bouman, *Patterns*, p. 111. The exact age of *Laxdæla saga* is of no great importance to this study; it may have been composed in the 1240s (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Formáli', *Íslenzk fornrit V*, p. xxxiv), in the 1250s (Bjarni Guðnason, *Túlkun Heiðarvíga sögu*. *Studia Islandica 50* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1993), pp. 252–53) or in the 1270s (Rolf Heller, 'Das alter der Laxdæla saga', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 97 (1968), 134–55). There is, however, a general agreement that the saga dates from the thirteenth century.

⁵ The most important studies of dreams in the sagas are those by George Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), and Robert James Glendinning, *Träume und Vorbedeutung in der Islendinga Saga Sturla Thordarsons: Eine Form- und Stiluntersuchung* (Bern and Frankfurt a. M.: 1974); the latter, unfortunately, is mainly concerned with *Sturlunga saga* and thus does not discuss Guðrún and her dreams.

⁶ Many scholars have discussed the dreams and their function in the narrative structure: see especially Heinrich Beck, 'Laxdæla saga—A Structural Approach', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 19 (1977), 383–402. I have also wrestled with these issues: see Ármann Jakobsson, '(Miðalda)kona verður til: Forleikur að grein eftir Dagnýju', *Kynlegir kvistir tindir til heiðurs Dagnýju Kristjánsdóttur fimmtugri 19. maí 1999*, ed. by Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir (Reykjavík: Uglar og ormur, 1999), 75–80.

⁷ On his role in the community, see Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Galdur og forspá í ríkisvaldslausu samfélagi', in *Galdur og samfélag á miðöldum*, ed. by Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2008), pp. 73–83.

⁸ Jane Smiley, 'Distant Voices', *The Guardian*, 8 April 2006.

⁹ See also Loren Auerbach, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla saga*', *Saga-Book*, 25 (1998), 30–52 (pp. 36–38).

¹⁰ See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Konungasagan Laxdæla', *Skirnir* 172 (1998), 357–83 (pp. 357–64).

¹¹ I am not sure that *er upp óxu á Íslandi* should be translated as 'ever to have grown up in Iceland'; I would also argue that *kvenna vænst* could be translated simply as 'a very beautiful women': a translation is always an interpretation, of course, and in this case I believe that the translator overstates Guðrún's beauty—in line, of course, with a long tradition.

¹² See, for example, Gunnar Karlsson, 'Kenningin um fornt kvenfrelsi á Íslandi', *Saga*, 24 (1986), 45–77; Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 363–87; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹³ See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Sinn eiginn smíður: Ævintýrið um Sverri konung', *Skírnir*, 179 (2005), 109–39.

¹⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of the Icelanders', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 119 (2004), 37–53.

¹⁵ See Bjarni Guðnason, *Túlkun Heiðarvíga sögu*, pp. 136–38.

¹⁶ See, for example, Aðalsteinn Davíðsson, 'Um Laxdælu', *Mímir* 3 (1964), 14–16; Hermann Pálsson, *Leyndarmál Laxdælu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1986), pp. 9–24; Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Skáldskapur og fræði', *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 60/4 (1999), 52–61 (pp. 60–61), and several others.

¹⁷ See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Some Types of Ambiguities', p. 44.

¹⁸ Cf. Jonna Louis-Jensen, 'A Good Days Work: Laxdæla saga, ch. 49', *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday 28 April 1993* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1992), 267–81 (p. 276): 'Throughout the saga Guðrún exercises remarkable self-control; the only reaction she shows to a particularly harsh treatment by a man who has just killed her husband is a smile (it is up to the reader to imagine what kind of smile)'.

¹⁹ Cf. this remark of Ursula Dronke ('Narrative Insight in *Laxdæla saga*', *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. by Mary T. Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979), 120–37 (p. 129)), when analyzing the conversation of Guðrún and Kjartan (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 115), before he goes abroad: 'How much already she thinks she owns him!'.

²⁰ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Formáli', *Íslensk fornrit* V, pp. ix–x.

²¹ Robert Cook, 'Women and Men in Laxdæla saga', *Skáldskaparmál*, 2 (1992), 34–59.

²² Helga Kress, "'Mjök mun þér samstaft þykkja"—Um sagnahefð og kvenlega reynslu í Laxdæla sögu', *Konur skrifa: til heiðurs Önnu Sigurðardóttur* (Reykjavík: Sögufélagið, 1980), 97–109; Auerbach, 'Female Experience'.

²³ *Laxdæla saga með formála, skýringum og skrám*, ed. by Aðalsteinn Eyþórsson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), p. x.

²⁴ See, for example, Cook, 'Women and Men'; cf. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Konungasagan Laxdæla'.

²⁵ See Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1958).

²⁶ Helga Kress, "'Gægur er þér í augum": Konur í sjónmáli Íslendingasagna', *Yfir Íslandsála: Afmælisrit til heiðurs Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. desember 1991* (Reykjavík: Sögufraeðslusjóður, 1991), 77–94.

²⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Konungasagan Laxdæla'.

²⁸ Cf. Dronke, 'Narrative Insight', p. 131.

²⁹ As does Bouman, *Patterns*, p. 144.

³⁰ Cf. Bouman, *Patterns*, pp. 146–47.

³¹ Cf. Gabriele Bensberg, *Die Laxdæla saga im Spiegel christlich-mittelalterlicher Tradition* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 261–311; Bjarni Guðnason, 'Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir och Laxdæla saga', *Scripta Islandica*, 50 (1999), 9–30 (pp. 20–28).

³² On this episode, see William Sayers, 'Sexual Identity, Cultural Integrity, Verbal and Other Magic in Episodes from Laxdæla saga and Kormáks saga', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 107 (1992), 131–55.

³³ Bouman (*Patterns*, pp. 126–32) suggests that when Guðrún sends Bolli off to kill Kjartan, she may have been hoping for a different outcome to their conflict (as Bolli himself suggests, *Laxdæla saga*, p. 155), and that she might suspect (or wish) that Kjartan is the fourth husband in her dreams.