

“OBEY MY WILL OR SUFFER”:¹ VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ICELANDIC FOLK LEGENDS

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ABSTRACT

This article* will look at how domestic and sexual violence against women is presented in the Icelandic folk legend collections from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Gender-based violence is a subject relatively absent in Icelandic legend collections which were mostly told, collected and published by men (the exception being the collection of Torfhildur Þorsteinssdóttir Hólm). Violence plays a role in the subordination of women, and there is good reason to consider how violence against women is portrayed in the oral legends of the past. I will among other things consider the effect these particular legends might have had on those who heard them and examine the roles of the legends in maintaining and shaping a discourse which in many cases may well have attempted to normalise this violence.

KEYWORDS: folk legends • gender studies • women • violence • Iceland

INTRODUCTION

Violence takes on various forms in reality. It also appears in various forms in diverse sources, including folk legends. This article forms part of a project researching the portrayal of women in the Icelandic legends of the past,² and the messages about women contained in them. Here the focus will be placed on those Icelandic legends telling of violence against women, especially domestic and sexual violence.³ These types of violence, discussed here, are often referred to as gender-based violence, since they reflect a systematic power structure in which women are more likely to suffer this kind of violence and men are more often the perpetrators (see for example Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir 2019: 16).⁴ While legends dealing with violence of this kind are relatively few in the Icelandic folk legend collections of the 19th and early 20th centuries compared to those in many other societies, those that exist are nonetheless worth considering.⁵ Here, I will consider what these legends tell us about attitudes towards

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gender-based violence at the time and the women who endured it. I will also consider what effect these particular legends might have had on those who heard them.

It is evident that the legends of the past provide us with valuable insights into the societies in which they were told, collected and recorded, not least because they contain a reflection of people's ideas about the world around them (Holbek 1998: 435; Valk 2014: 222). Legends can nevertheless not be seen as wholly trustworthy historical sources about the events they deal with. As Brynjulf Alver (1989: 149) puts it:

The "truth" of historical legends is not identical with the "truth" of legal documents and history books, and official documents themselves are not necessarily "objective" reports. In many instances we should consider them as the representation of one view of an event. Legend tradition constitutes another view. In epic form, historical legends reveal the reactions and reflections of the common folk, their impressions, experiences and their explanation and evaluation of events that are important to them.

In short, legends like wonder tales reveal the 'truth' of the people who tell them, reflections of their views and opinions on matters at hand (see also Röhrich 1991: 9). Repeated themes can thus be said to reflect the dominant worldviews and beliefs in the societies that passed them on (Dégh 1989: 181; Siikala 1990: 39; Palmenfelt 1993: 157; Tangherlini 1994: 22). These ideas are often reflected in the messages contained in the legends, which show, among other things, what behaviour was acceptable and what should be avoided (Gunnell 2008: 70). Legends can thus be said to contain unwritten rules of behaviour and communication, among other things, relating to that which takes place between genders and different classes.

When working with legends as sources on societies of the past, it is nonetheless always important to keep in mind where the material comes from and how it might have been affected, for example, by individual storytellers and collectors. The material used in this present research was mainly collected in the 19th and early 20th centuries, most of it (like that collected elsewhere) mainly told, collected and published by men. The main focus of my project has been on the material contained in the three earliest and largest Icelandic folktale collections⁶ as well as the only collection made by a woman: Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Hólm (1845–1919). The latter collection is also unique because it is the only one containing more legends told by named female storytellers than male (Hólm 1962; Júlíana Magnúsdóttir 2018: 134).⁷ The *Sagnagrunnur* Icelandic legend database, which contains information on 10,110 published legends, was used to find additional legends that will be considered where relevant (*Sagnagrunnur*; Gunnell 2010; Trausti Dagsson 2014: 1–2).

The aforementioned gender bias, which is apparent in most legend collections, is something that must always be kept in mind when working with legends. This is specifically interesting in the case of the comparatively few legends dealing with the gender-based violence that reflects the experiences of women. As Helga Kress (1993: 13–14) has pointed out, in the literary tradition, women's culture was commonly repressed and overlooked, something that is also apparent in the case of the Icelandic legend collections (Júlíana Magnúsdóttir 2018: 133–136). As Linda Dégh (1989: 93) notes, women's storytelling also tended to be classed as a secondary matter in the estimation of many rural communities. A similar conclusion is reached by Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalcik

(1985: ix), who stress that those genres of folktale more connected to women were often dismissed by collectors as minor genres, ‘old wives’ tales’ or ‘gossip’.

When it comes to those legends under discussion here, it is also important to keep in mind the power relations that existed between those who collected the legends and those who told them. As elsewhere, in Iceland, the collectors were educated men or clerics (Gunnell 2012: 1–4). As Michel Foucault (1991: 193) has noted people often censor themselves when talking to authorities or someone of a higher class, and as Terry Gunnell (2012: 12–13) and others have noted this also seems to have been the case in Iceland (see also Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 1998: 259 and Werth 2015: 83–84). For women, power relations were intersectional as lower class women were often subordinated on the basis of both class and gender. One can understand why some women might have been hesitant to tell male collectors stories of domestic or sexual violence.

This present research is rooted both in folkloristics and gender studies. Such interdisciplinary research is arguably new, in the field of folk legends, where comparatively little work has been done on the portrayal of women and even less on the subject of gender-based violence (perhaps understandably so since the legends are so few).⁸ The project as a whole is essentially historical, focusing, among other things, on gender history, how gender evolved historically and how gender inequality came about (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir 2002: 32–34). As the research is rooted in gender studies, which are rooted in feminism, feminist research tends to be critical of society and the dominant culture, aiming to shine a light on injustice (Esterberg 2002: 17; Þorgerður Einarsdóttir 2004: 202–204). Using historical and critical discourse analysis, the project focuses on power relations and how discourse is both shaped by and shapes society, something also seen in the legends examined here (see also Phillips and Jørgensen 2002: 61; Ingólfur Jóhannesson 2010: 252).

WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN ICELAND IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

As has been regularly noted, up until the late 19th century Icelandic society was predominantly a rural farming and fishing community. The farm was both the home and the workplace of most people and social and legal restrictions as well as the Bible had a great deal of influence on social standing and human rights. The idea that gender equality was high in Iceland of the past has been persistent. In the Icelandic sagas one can certainly regularly find women (including wives) who are strong and independent.⁹ This has led to the common idea that women in Iceland throughout the ages have had a strong position within society. As Kress (1993: 12) has pointed out, however, this is not actually true: even though many of the sagas are driven by women rebelling against their proper roles and fighting against patriarchy, it is evident that the women do not usually succeed. While Icelandic women in some eras might have had more rights than many women elsewhere in the world, and retained a certain rebelliousness, it is clear that during the period of 19th and early 20th centuries, Iceland was still at heart a patriarchal society. Most women became either housemaids or housewives, if they got married (Guðmundur Hálfðánarson 1993: 18; Anna Rúnarsdóttir 2007: 8). Marriage provided a few more rights for women but was not an option for everyone:

a system of laws in Iceland, referred to as *Vistarbandið*, remained in effect until the late 19th century, placing difficult marriage restraints on workers and people of lower class, making it near impossible for them to get married or have children (Símon Jóhannsson and Ragnhildur Vigfúsdóttir 1991: 88; Gísli Gunnarsson 2002).¹⁰

For those who could get married, many autobiographies from the late 18th century until the late 19th suggest that romance was not always the most important factor in choosing a spouse (Inga Hákonardóttir 1995: 121). Hierarchy within marriage was also clear: while the support of the family rested on the shoulders of both men and women, the man was considered the head of the family. Women did not gain independence unless they became widows; otherwise their fathers or husbands were their legal guardians (Árni Björnsson 1996: 191, 199–202). It was not until the period around the 1900s that married women attained financial competence, receiving the same rights as men to vote for parliament in 1920 (Símon Jóhannsson and Ragnhildur Vigfúsdóttir 1991: 37, 98; Auður Styrkársdóttir 1997: 62–64).

The dominant ideas about the genders at the time also affected the ways people thought and acted in marriage. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a shift had taken place in the Western world in the ruling ideology relating to gender which underlined differences in nature between men and women (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir 2002: 38).¹¹ Mass-produced texts from the same time, written or translated by educated Icelandic men and intended for Icelandic women, preached that a wife should be their husband's best friend, adviser and confidant, but always submissive and obedient to him (Erla Halldórsdóttir 2011: 84–85).¹² There is thus no doubt that gender inequality was being stressed in Iceland during the period under discussion (see, for example, Sigríður Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 37–61; Erla Halldórsdóttir and Guðrún Jónatansdóttir 1998: 144; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir 2002: 38).

According to Sylvia Walby (1990: 24), patriarchy or the 'gender regime' is comprised of six main social structures, one of them being violence (see also Gyða Pétursdóttir 2009: 31).¹³ As Russell Dobash and Emerson Dobash (1979: 10–11) note, violence against women is rooted in any established gender system in which men are at the top of the hierarchy (see also Connell 1987 and Schippers 2007 on the gender hierarchy; and Ingólfur Gíslason 2008 on violence in intimate relationships). As these scholars note, for centuries, husbands have beaten their wives in order to dominate, punish and control them, something that was not been seen as being in opposition to the general principles of acceptable behaviour (Dobash and Dobash 1981: 564). As Elaine Lawless (2003: 247) states:

Questioning what goes on “behind closed doors” or the rights of the “heads of households” to control families (read “wives and children”) and reinforce religious and cultural norms remains the last bastion of male dominance and control – whether the “control” is claimed by a father, a husband, a partner, or even a brother or son.

This also seems to have been the case in Icelandic society, where, during the period in question, it was seen as being the responsibility of the men of the house to uphold discipline and moral values on their farm. In the Directive on Household Discipline (*Húsagatilskipund*) issued by the Danish king in 1745, it is noted that farmers were free to do this by any means they saw fit (Sigurður Magnússon 1997: 145).

It is nonetheless difficult to conclude exactly how common violence against women really was in 19th and early 20th century Iceland, partly because very little historical research has been undertaken on the subject. Sources are naturally limited, since as noted above, women's roles were not always of interest to those collecting folklore or historical material, and very few women wrote memoirs or diaries (Agnes Arnórsdóttir 1991: 33–34). This, of course, does not mean violence was not present, or even common. As pointed out above, it is possible that the voices of the women who shared their experiences were subdued or dismissed. As Jón Jónsson (2018: 17–18) has pointed out, it is certainly quite probable that violence towards those who belonged to suppressed groups (male and female) was always common in Iceland, just as it was elsewhere.¹⁴ Már Jónsson (1991: 6), who has carried out research into rape in 19th century Iceland, says the same, noting that gender-based violence was present in Iceland as elsewhere:

They [Icelandic men] did not hesitate to use violence to fulfil their sexual desires and did so without consideration to environment and conditions, not to mention the daughters, stepdaughters or other women they desired. They abused their physical and social dominance to rape [...]. Men's tendency to show women tyranny and disgrace is undeniable.¹⁵

Már Jónsson (*ibid.*) notes several cases of men being convicted of raping their daughters and other women on farms, as well as unknown women in the fields.

Such ideas are backed up by the fact that in Iceland laws regarding sexual harassment or gender-based violence other than rape are few. It is nonetheless obvious that rape was considered a serious crime. The definition of rape was nonetheless narrow, and proving it had taken place could be hard. In the year 1838, Icelanders had accepted almost all sanctions of the new Danish law of Kristjan V in which (article 19) a woman who had been taken against her will should immediately inform her neighbours at a church meeting and then at parliament, and if she did this she would be considered as telling the truth. Article 21 then states that offences of this kind should not result in "loss of respect or trouble" in any way (Jónatan Þórmundsson 1989: 22). In 1869, Icelanders took up their own sanctions, The General Criminal Laws for Iceland (*Almenn hegningarlög handa Íslandi*), in which chapter 16 of the law focuses on chastity. The main article focusing on rape here is 169, which states:

Whoever forces a woman of good name to have sexual relations with him by means of violence, or threats of violence, which puts the woman's life in danger shall immediately be put to forced labour for no less than four years or be executed if the crimes are particularly serious. If a woman of disrepute suffers such treatment, the punishment should be reduced, but should be no less than two years work in a prison. (*Alþingi* 1867: 93)

As can be seen here, for it to be a crime, the rape had to threaten the woman's life, the punishment for violating women of disrepute being much lighter. It should be remembered that these laws were the ones in force when the legends that are the focus of this article were collected. The laws were not changed until the year 1940, when the term rape was at last broadened and the clause about women of bad reputation was removed (*Alþingi*: Article 194). These official laws nonetheless only provide a very limited insight into the general status of women in society, and it is important to bear in mind that the

gender bias found in the folktale collections was even stronger in the creation of laws. While they talked of potential punishment, the laws were clearly male-centred and set by men who drew largely on their own point of view. It is also important to bear in mind that the existence of laws does not necessarily show how much their enforcement was in reality. The laws nonetheless underline the fact that violence against women was a recognised part of Icelandic society. But was that how it was portrayed in the Icelandic folktale collections?

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN LEGENDS

As has been noted above, it is safe to say that violence against women was a part of life in 19th and early 20th century Iceland and that it was condoned in various ways. It is therefore interesting that the folk legend collections should contain so few mentions of such violence,¹⁶ something that is reflected in other sources at the time, which also remain relatively silent about these matters.¹⁷ The legends that do contain violence against women are interestingly enough rarely told from the perspective of the women who endure it, and there is little mention of their emotions. All the same, it is noteworthy that most of the legends in question that are attributed to named storytellers are attributed to women, most of them proportionally appearing in the legend collection of Hólmi (see above). In spite of this, it is also noteworthy that the images drawn of the women who suffer is not necessarily favourable. As Angela Carter (1990: xiii) has noted, such negative portrayals of women are actually not so uncommon in legends told and collected by women, something that suggests that in patriarchal communities, women seem to have inevitably absorbed and recapitulated dominant patriarchal values. This can certainly be seen in those few Icelandic legends dealing with domestic violence.

One such example is the legend "You Have Not Carried the Saddle as I Have" told by Elín Guðmundsdóttir to Hólmi (1962: 45–48).¹⁸ The legend tells of a farmer who has three daughters, the youngest of whom "had the temperament of being extremely stubborn", which was why no man dared to marry her (ibid.: 46). Another farmer has three sons, the older two of whom marry the other farmer's older daughters. To everyone's surprise, the youngest and most promising son wants to marry the stubborn daughter. They get married and as a wedding gift the girl's father gives her a beautiful saddle. On the newlyweds' way home, the bride starts falling behind, and when her husband asks what is wrong, she does not answer him. Eventually, she takes off in the opposite direction. Her husband goes after her and when he catches up with her:

He then leapt off horseback, and grabbed the reins of her horse, stopping it. He then pulled her off her horse, beating her up, and then finally smashed her saddle, saying, as he got back onto his horse holding the reins of her horse that she could go wherever she liked; he did not want to live with such a shrew. [...] He rode home to his farm. She came home later, exhausted, carrying the remains of the saddle on her back. He did not say a word to her, but silently threw at her the keys to the storeroom, kitchen and various other places of storage. He also pointed to a bed which was empty, but he slept alone. That was how the winter passed; they had no further conflicts. (Ibid.: 46–47)

On the last day of winter, they go and visit the woman's sisters and the man's brothers. There, the brothers sit down and talk, while the women work in the kitchen. The brothers then make a bet to see who has the most obedient wife, calling the women into the living room. The youngest brother wins the bet, as the youngest sister runs to him right away, telling her sisters that they have not carried the saddle as she has. The legend ends by noting that after this the couple stay very much in love and the woman is never again stubborn nor the man as cold.

This legend evidently falls under the famous tale type ATU 901 (The Taming of the Shrew) which is summarised as follows:

A man marries the youngest of three sisters, who is strong minded and shrewish. In order to demonstrate how he punishes disobedience, he shoots his dog and his horse when they do not obey his (nonsensical) orders. He brings wife to submission. In a wager with his brothers about which has the most obedient wife (sister-in-law) it becomes evident that only his wife is truly obedient. He wins the bet. (Uther et al. 2004: 524)

The tale type is well known from William Shakespeare's comedy, but as Jan Harold Brunvand (1966: 346) has pointed out, it can be found in various oral and literary versions all over the world (see also Brown 1995: 288–289). This Icelandic version clearly fits the type well.

The legend clearly reflects the idea that women should be obedient and submissive to their husbands and that this submission could be brought about by violence and/or ridicule. Similar ideas are seen in other Icelandic legends, for example, in the legend of "Þórdís The Stubborn" told by Þuríður Magnúsdóttir, in which Þórdís is beaten by her father because of how stubborn she is (see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 105–107). This can also be seen in the legend "The Story of Magnús" told by Guðbjörg Guðmundsdóttir, in which a woman called Ingibjörg refuses to take a letter from a man called Magnús (a friend of her fiancé) and accuses him of lying. He then asks her if "she means to maintain this stubbornness towards him?" and continues by noting that it is evident that she has never been taught how to obey. He then throws her off her horse into the snow saying "You will behave, you disobedient woman." Later Ingibjörg apologises to Magnús for her behaviour. (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: XI 286) According to those legends, being stubborn and independent seems to have been one of the worst sins for a woman, reflecting how limited their operating space within society could be. The same idea appears in two legends of the sorceress Stokkseyrar Dísa,¹⁹ one of which was told by an unknown storyteller to Jón Árnason (1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 579). This legend tells of how Dísa, who was "known for her temperamental behaviour and malevolence" with those who disagreed with her, was made more obedient by her husband. In the legend her husband throws her on her knees and cuts the dress off her back, making the blade touch her back in three places so that she bleeds. The legend notes that terrible ogresses were treated in such a fashion and that most altered their behaviour after this humiliating treatment. In a later legend collection (1940–1957: V 51–52), the collector Guðni Jónsson (1940–1957: V 51–52) (1901–1974) states that this was a known punishment only inflicted on women, suggesting it was not uncommon. In another legend told by Sigríður Alexíusdóttir, Dísa tries to steal a horse from a man who does not want to sell it to her. He attacks her and pulls her off the horse; they then

wrestle for a while, until Dísá becomes exhausted. He then unties her shoes and punishes her with them. Dísá then tells him: “That was a very manly thing to do”, apparently complimenting the man for disciplining her. (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 568) The act of removing women’s clothes to belittle and punish them also appears to be a repeated theme. In the legend “The Man’s Rib” told by Ingibjörg Pálsdóttir and Sveinn Halldórsson, a priest punishes a woman after she steals a human rib from a grave (for the purpose of sorcery) and lies when confronted. The priest then removes her clothes and scourges her, afterwards warning her boyfriend about her behaviour. The legend then notes that they got married and that she never caused trouble again. (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 230–231). The underlining of the stubborn or ill-mannered behaviour of the women in all of these stories naturally suggests that the responsibility for the violence lies with the women themselves. Their rebelliousness is being punished.

The idea that women are to blame for the violence they endure is today referred to as victim blaming, in which violence against women is normalised (Maestre 2013: 311; Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir 2019: 24). As Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir (2014: 1–2) have pointed out, sexual violence does not originate in biological factors (such as in men being unable to control their sexual urges) but rather underlying attitudes towards women in Western culture. Lawless argues that such ideas are rooted in the fact that folkloric material commonly reflects the near universal portrayal of women as being evil or sinful by nature, to the extent that any violence rendered against women in folktales is often construed, consciously or not, as being justifiable (Lawless 2003: 239).²⁰ As Lawless (*ibid.*: 242–245) notes, women commonly absorb this idea (among other things via the stories they hear at home or in church) and can come to believe that they are ‘bad’ and deserving of punishment (see also Bartky 1998 on how women absorb the gender hierarchy and take part in maintaining it).

The legends noted above fit the accepted idea that men must discipline their wives, and it is noteworthy that the men in the accounts are never said to be punished for the violence they inflict on the women. They are arguably seen as merely fulfilling their roles as masters of the house. As suggested above, little or no sympathy is shown to the women in these accounts.²¹ If anyone, it is the aggressor who receives the sympathy which thereby minimises and excuses their responsibility, another known feature in victim blaming (Maestre 2013: 311; see also Manne 2018: 196–201 on the concept of *Himpany*). In the legend about the woman who carried the saddle, one also notes how at the beginning of the story, the husband is said to be “the most promising” of the brothers (Hólm 1962: 45). In the end, the fact that the pair are said to have fallen in love after the clash, appears to suggest that the violence was effective (*ibid.*: 48).²² In the case of Dísá and her husband, meanwhile, the husband is said to be “known for his calmness” (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 578).²³ These men are not shown as monsters, and therefore apparently do not use violence unless necessary (Manne 2018: 197–198). In all cases, violence is shown to be an effective method in disciplining women, even being seen as a means of beating out the evil in them (Guðni Jónsson 1940–1957: V 51–52; Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 568; III 105–107, 578; Hólm 1962: 45–48).

Other Icelandic legends suggest that women deserve to be punished by their husbands or fathers for speaking up to, fighting, denying or belittling men, once again

reflecting the idea that women were supposed to respect and obey men. This is apparent, for example, in the legend “Given a Good Bite” told by Elín Guðmundsdóttir (Hólm 1962: 55). Here a woman celebrates the death of her husband and as a result is slapped by her father,²⁴ once again showing women as subordinated by men (see also similar legends in Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 567; III 604–605; Hólm 1962: 34). Any challenge to a husband’s authority or any reversal of the marital hierarchy of this kind commonly seems to warrant censure or punishment (Dobash and Dobash 1981: 568). This applies in particular when the perpetrator of the violence is closely related to the women, in the shape of their fathers or husbands, and is possibly seen as having some form of ‘ownership’ of them, suggesting that there is a need for such male figures to maintain respect and power over the women.

Considering the earlier-noted fact that these legends were mainly told by women, one wonders again why they would tell stories that imply they condone such violence. As noted above, women were evidently affected by the dominant ideology of the time. In the case of Iceland, it might be argued that those legends told at communal ‘evening wakes’, which included both oral narratives as well as readings from sagas, the Bible and sermons (see Gísli Gunnlaugsson 1991: 61–65), might have deliberately included warnings from women to other women about how to avoid violence, teaching them that if they are disobedient, stubborn or threaten the social hierarchy they are at more risk of being victims of violence, thereby serving to maintain male hegemony (see also Gyða Pétursdóttir 2009 on emphasised femininity and how this facilitates women’s subordination).

There are, however, some legends in which the sympathy clearly lies with the women who are violated, which underlines how, unlike in many countries, there was some opposition to the aforementioned approaches in Iceland. This is often apparent in the title of the legends, such as “The Bad Fiancé” told by Sigríður frá Vogum (Hólm 1962: 28–29); “The Harshness of Sheriff Magnús” told by Ingibjörg Eggersdóttir (Hólm 1962: 80–81); “Abuser of Women” told by an unknown storyteller (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: IV 168–169); and “The Legend of Mountain Manga and Helgi the Bad” told by Guðný Sigfúsdóttir (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: IX 392–400). Three of these legends tell of women who are saved from the bad treatment of their husbands or fathers. It is also especially interesting to note that in each of these three legends, the women in question are pregnant, putting them in a liminal position (van Gennep 1960: 10–11; Turner 1969: 95; Árni Björnsson 1996: 83–85), making them (and/or the unborn child) more vulnerable and apparently more deserving of sympathy.²⁵

Once again, however, it is noteworthy that in these legends, the men are never punished for their violence.²⁶ In “The Bad Fiancé”, frustration about this lack of punishment is nonetheless evident. The legend in question tells of a man who intends to drown his fiancée, who is saved by a nearby farmer. When he arrives, the bad fiancé runs away. At the end, the female storyteller notes that she is uncertain whether the woman got back together with her fiancé but stresses that he was not hanged for his actions. (Hólm 1962: 28–29) This implication, that the woman may have got back together with her fiancé despite his horrible treatment, is also interesting, although as Már Jónsson (1987: 77) has noted, at this time it was not easy for women to break off engagements or get divorced. Other legends which show disapproval of such violence even though there is no punishment include “The Sisters from Möðrufell” told by an unknown storyteller,

which notes simply that “it can be said about Jón and Rósa, that he treated her poorly and would sometimes beat her” (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: I 46–47; see, for example, also Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: IV 231; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: II 124–126).

In those few legends where men are actually punished for violence, it is worth noting that the perpetrators in question have no relationship with the women they abuse (and therefore legally have no right over them). This can be seen, for example, in the legend “The Hay Rake Trick” told by Anna Kristín Sigfúsdóttir to Sigfús Sigfússon,²⁷ about a man called Jón who is in love with a woman who turns him down. He gets angry so she avoids him. This escalates, and eventually, when she is outside gathering hay, he corners her and attacks her:

He thrust the shaft of the rake up one of the arms of her dress, and out of the other. She was then worse than merely bound because her arms were held out. He then had his way with her. After that, he collected the scythe and killed the girl. Next, he cut open a tussock, and dug a deep grave, threw the body into this, and then replaced the tussock, tidying everything up in such a way that it was impossible to see any recent activity, because the earth there was so deep. (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: I 104–105)

The legend notes how after this Jón moved to another farm. The summer passes and one day when the women’s parents go out for a picnic, her mother notes two flowers on the hill where her daughter lies buried. They open the hill and find her body. Jón admits to the crime, is convicted and eventually executed. Evidently there were some forms of justice. Punishment (in the form of execution) is also found in the legend “Sveinn Skotti”, told by an unknown storyteller (see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 120–121), which tells of a man named Sveinn Björnsson, the son of the most famous serial killer in Iceland,²⁸ who is convicted of raping the daughter of a wealthy farmer.²⁹ Another legend about Sveinn, “Sveinn Skotti and his Descendants” told by various storytellers (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: III 225–226) tells of how he violated a housemaid. In this case, the violence seems to be the result of biological factors and is thereby explained as abnormal.

As suggested above, most of the legends noted here say little about the drastic psychological results such violence can have on the women involved. This is something that becomes more evident in those legends where the abusers are of the supernatural kind.

‘OTHER’ MEN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In Icelandic legends that include gender-based violence where the abuser is a supernatural man (or that is, a person from outside the ‘normal’ world), one notes that the relationships between the men and the women are often somewhat vaguer than in the legends examined above. Here the messages are more problematic. As Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir (1988: 22–23) has noted, relationships between supernatural men and non-supernatural women usually end tragically in Icelandic legends, most often not due to violence but rather because of the clash between two worlds (see also Ólína

Þorvarðardóttir 1995: 14–15; McKinnell 2005 on such relationships in earlier Norse myths and legends; and Liliequist 2006 on sexual encounters with spirits and demons in Sweden). In some of these legends, however, such ‘outsiders’ seem to marry women with the direct intention of harming them.

Several legends of this kind are horror stories that tell of women who are forced to marry outlaws (liminal beings at the margins of human society) who later turn out to want to torture and kill them.³⁰ The legend “Nineteen Outlaws” is especially famous in this regard. Told by an unnamed old woman (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 233–234) it tells of a farmer’s daughter who stays at home guarding the farm on Christmas Eve while everyone else goes to church (commonly a risky thing to do, see Gunnell 2002).³¹ After a while she hears voices outside and senses that someone is trying to get inside the house. She locks every door, but one entrance remains open, a chute in the kitchen through which a man (an outlaw) comes crawling. When he sticks his head out of the chute the girl chops it off with an axe. More men follow and she eventually manages to behead 18 outlaws, but the 19th escapes. When the people of the farm return, the girl tells them what has happened. Sometime later, a foreign ship arrives and its commander is a wealthy and powerful man who wants to marry the farmer’s daughter. She refuses him but after some persuasion from her father, she finally accepts. They get married but on their wedding night the man announces to her that he is the outlaw that escaped and now means to avenge his friends. He brings out various implements and red-hot iron which he plans to use to torture her. She manages to escape by jumping out of the window, and then runs to her father and tells him what happened. The farmer catches the outlaw, who confesses and is later executed. The girl then remarries and lives happily ever after.³²

In all the versions of this legend, the women all manage to escape the horrible violence their new husbands intend to inflict on them.³³ It can therefore be argued that, when it comes down to it, the main violence towards brave and independent women is inflicted by the women’s fathers or legal guardians who force them into marriage. A clear example of such an enforced marriage (less common in Iceland than in many other societies) to an outsider can be seen in the legend “The Bishop’s Daughter in Skálholt” told by an unknown storyteller to Jón Árnason in which a bishop promises an outlaw his daughter’s hand in marriage despite her objections. The legend states:

The bishop spoke to his daughter about marrying this man, but she flatly refused. He said that she was being short-sighted to refuse all men: “I won’t be living with you forever,” he says, “and when I die you will be left without any assistance.” She was unimpressed and said that she didn’t want a husband, and least of all this one. The bishop said he was not going to put up with this any longer, and that he was now going to take charge of all of her affairs, meaning that she would marry this man. The bishop told the man that the marriage would take place soon and that this problem would not prevent it taking place. (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 231)

Legends of this kind also often note that the women in question have refused every man that has asked for their hand in marriage, thereby, explaining why, when a well-educated, wealthy and powerful man arrives, their fathers feel compelled to take action and force them to marry.³⁴ It can thus be argued that the women are punished for being

too stubborn, as in the earlier noted 'stubborn girl' legends. These legends can therefore to a degree be said also to fit the earlier-noted ideas of victim blaming (Maestre 2013: 311). Nevertheless, considering how these marriages usually turn out, in the case of these particular legends it could perhaps be said that these narratives imply that forcing women into marriage is problematic, at least with mysterious foreign men. As in other 'stubborn girl' legends, in most of these legends, it is clear that all the women are of an upper class, i.e. daughters of clerics, bishops or farmers.³⁵

Despite the reprehensible actions of the fathers, it is clear that the outlaws are also presented as villains in most of these legends. The descriptions of the violence they intend to inflict on their new wives are striking, the weapons these men intend to use to harm the women most often involving iron of some kind (Einar Guðmundsson 1932–1947: II 85–96; Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 233–234; IV 393–394). In the legend about the bishop's daughter, the outlaw clearly announces that he is going to torture her until she dies: "I am going now to run you through with eleven red-hot iron rods," he says, 'and the twelfth will go through your heart because you intended to kill me" (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 232). Using weapons against unarmed women is naturally something that breaches most moral laws.

As noted above, in Icelandic legends outlaws are described as being somehow outside human society and in that sense they can be seen as belonging to the supernatural, living in the wilderness in a similar space to trolls, which they have many similar features to (Einar Sveinsson 1940: 207; Hastrup 1985: 143; Lindow 1998: 109; see also Hall 1997 on 'othering'). Various methods are used in legends to emphasise how evil and far from humanity many of them are; they have bad manners and are often said to be cannibals or murderers (Dagrún Jónsdóttir 2016: 40).³⁶ In the legends noted above, little sympathy is shown to these abusers. Indeed, in some of the legends they are moved even further away from humanity through mentions that they are also sorcerers, or return with foreign ships (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 212–215, 230–234; see also Gunnell 2006 on approaches to foreign bodies in Iceland).³⁷ In such legends, unlike those dealing with other non-related abusers, the men are all clearly punished for their actions, usually by being sentenced to death and executed, underlining some degree of justice. At the end of the legends, the women are then regularly said to get married to someone else who proves to be a good husband.

In other legends, as in those dealing with the real world, denying men either marriage or sex is shown to be the driving force of the violence. This is especially evident in a number of ghost legends in which men who are turned down when proposing to women seek revenge by bringing a ghost back to life to haunt or kill the women who refused them,³⁸ if they do not come back as ghosts themselves (see Gunnell 2012 on waking the dead as a form of revenge).³⁹ Indeed, a number of legends tell of men who come back from the dead to rape women who turned them down when they were alive.⁴⁰ One famous legend of this kind is "The Son of a Ghost Becomes a Cleric",⁴¹ told by Guðríður Eyjólfsdóttir (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 354–355). The legend tells of a worker at a farm who was in love with one of the housemaids and wanted to have her, but she refused him twice. He then swore that he would "get his way with her when dead since he couldn't get her when alive" (ibid: III 354). Soon after, the worker became ill and passed away. A few nights later, the owner of the farm where the housemaid worked found the grave of the worker open and empty. Knowing that

(according to tradition) if he put something into the grave, its owner would not be able to return, the farmer deposited a piece of clothing in the grave. Shortly after, the ghost of the worker returns. The farmer then informs him that he will let the dead man back into his grave if he tells him what he has been doing. The ghost unwillingly tells him that he has been with the housemaid:

He had wanted to have his way with her while he was alive, but she had never wanted to do this, and so he had threatened to come back as a revenant and then have his way with her. The farmer asked if he had succeeded in doing this. The ghost said he had. The farmer asked if there would be any effects of him having had his way with her. (Ibid.)

The ghost replies that the girl will become pregnant and will give birth to a boy who will eventually grow up to become a cleric, and that during his first mass the church will sink into the ground with all the people inside. The farmer then allows the ghost to return into the grave. Everything goes as the ghost has foretold: the housemaid becomes pregnant and is unhappy, telling the farmer that she does not know who the father of her child is. He tells her that he will help her. The child grows up to become a priest and at the first mass he conducts, the farmer leaps up and kills him, thereby saving the church and the people inside.

In such legends that tell of supernatural rape, it seems once again evident that violence against the women is not the main drive of the legend, and, in fact, the women themselves only play a small role in them. Usually no mention is made of their feelings after they have been raped and impregnated by the ghost, the only exception being the legend noted above.⁴² The farmer's question here about whether the ghost's visit will have any effects is nonetheless interesting, because it implies that the harm is not the violation itself but rather the fact that the woman becomes pregnant and her child dangerous to the community (see also Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 274–277; III 356–357, 555–558; Þorsteinn Jónsson 1978–1979: IV 245–247).⁴³ In the variation "The Ghost of Feykishólar" told by an unknown storyteller (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 276–277), the fact that the woman dies giving birth to the child similarly seems to be of little concern to the storyteller. The same occurs in "The Ghost's Son", told by an unknown storyteller (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 355–356), in which the ghost is met by a worker after raping the daughter of a priest. The worker asks the ghost what will come of his visit to the girl and as in other versions the ghost replies that she will become pregnant. The worker then asks about the fate of the girl and the child, to which the ghost replies:

"The girl won't come to any harm; she will later become your wife." "I'm not too happy about that," says the man, "taking on the leavings of a ghost." "That's the way it will be," says the ghost, "and it won't cause you any harm." (Ibid.: III 356)

Once again what matters is not the feelings of the woman, but rather the fact that she is pregnant and the effect this will have on the man that she will later marry. The violence and its effect on the women are once again dismissed.

Four other legends of a similar kind describe how the women are left in a comalike state by the ghosts of men they have turned down and have to be rescued (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 255–256; III 555–558; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]:

II 85–88).⁴⁴ The legend “Give Me My Rag Mangi” passed on by the cleric Sigurður Gunnarsson (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 557–558), tells of a girl who does not get pregnant but is apparently left almost dead by the ghost, who has “hidden her life under her little toe”. To save her, the cleric who met the ghost had to “put her to bed and then join her there and stroke her with warm hands.”⁴⁵ The cleric did this, saved the girl and they then got married. The ghost did not return.

As in the legends about non-supernatural men who violate women, these ghosts naturally avoid punishment. After confessing to what they have done, the ghosts are simply allowed to return to their graves and are not even told off for their actions. They have got what they wanted and never return. Arguably, when it comes down to it, these ghost legends are not really about violence. They can be seen more as heroic tales of men who kill ghosts, and save the church and its endangered parishioners.

One legend of this kind, however, is somewhat different. “A Naked Woman Fights a Ghost” told by Friðbjörg Sigurbjörnsdóttir (see Hólm 1962: 3–4) tells of a vagabond woman who arrives at a farm where she meets a young girl who is crying. The woman asks her what has happened and the girl answers that she is afraid because a man she has refused has threatened to get her when he dies, and he has now taken his life. The woman tells the young girl that she will sleep on the floor in front of her that night for her protection. When the ghost arrives that night, the older woman is waiting for him, naked with a knife in her hand. She manages to overpower him and saves the girl. Interestingly enough, this legend, the only one of its kind to come from a collection made by a woman, provides a much better picture of the girl and her feelings. It also differs in that another woman manages to prevent the violence and save the girl (*ibid.*: 4), underlining an interesting idea of women protecting each other.

The fact that in these legends the women are all abused in their homes and in their sleep is both interesting and particularly terrifying, possibly reflecting the fact that women did not feel safe anywhere or at any time and could never let down their guard even when in bed. Interestingly enough, the night setting also applies to those legends in which women are forced into marriage with outlaws who try to kill them. All in all, these legends once again appear to reflect the idea of a rape culture which to a large extent accepts sexual violence against women and even considers it a norm (Alcoff 2018: 3; Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir 2019: 15–16). As Susan Brownmiller (1975: 15) and Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir (2019: 17) have noted, the fact that even though not all men use violence, but some do, is enough for women to feel threatened, especially when they dare to say no (as happens in the legends noted above). This fear of potential violence and rape naturally diminishes their freedom and thereby plays a part in maintaining their subordination.

It is nonetheless interesting that more Icelandic legends tell of supernatural men (or outsiders) raping women than non-supernatural men living in the community. Of course, legends in legend collections usually revolve around supernatural phenomena, but it is also possible that this emphasis reflects a common myth encountered in a rape culture: that normal men are not capable of rape, only inhuman monsters (Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir 2014: 2; see also Manne 2018: 179). In the legends noted in this section, the fact that no sympathy is expressed for the abuser (unlike the non-supernatural legends) arguably strengthens the idea that the abuser is a monster. Nonetheless, as Ulf Palmenfelt (1993: 149, 155) has pointed out, it is also

worth remembering that supernatural beings in legends are commonly used to act out everyday human conflicts, making it easier to discuss them and deal with them mentally (see also Shaw 2004: 131), something that certainly seems fitting for the sensitive subject of gender-based violence. Talking about supernatural men as perpetrators was a way of talking about real worries in the everyday world without having to name a real aggressor (see also Tangherlini 1998; Asplund Ingemark 2013; Vilborg Bjarkadóttir 2018 on the role of storytelling for those dealing with trauma). While the legends noted above might not have offered women much comfort, it is nonetheless possible that they underlined that women were not alone, and that other women had experienced similar things and feelings, giving them the opportunity to discuss difficult matters. It is also noteworthy that many of the legends examined above were told by women, although somewhat fewer are found in the collection of Hólm.⁴⁶

Yet another approach to violence against women is arguably found in those legends telling about women and “hidden men”/“elves”,⁴⁷ such as “Karitas in Búðardalur” (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 58) and “Katla’s Dream” (ibid.: I 59–63).⁴⁸ The first was told by an unknown storyteller to Jón Árnason and tells of a woman who is attacked by a hidden man who wants to kidnap her, but she manages to defend herself with a knife. The mother of the hidden man then returns to avenge him somewhat like the ghosts in the legends above. The famous legend “Katla’s Dream” told by Sveinn Ögmundsson tells of a married woman who is taken by hidden people in her sleep while her husband is away. She is raped by one of the men and becomes pregnant. The woman tells her husband what has happened, and he then supports her and raises the child as his own. (For other versions see Ólafur Davíðsson 1898–1903: IV 4–29; Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: VI 28–29; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: X 504–528) This legend has been interpreted by Gísli Sigurðsson (1995) as being a guide for men about how to react when their wives become pregnant by other men, the supernatural man once again being a substitute for a real man. Gísli Sigurðsson (ibid.: 210–214) also suggests that the legend mediates forgiveness and understanding towards women living in a strict environment in which little or no mercy was shown when women had been raped, even by the law, something that shows a rare degree of understanding compared with many other countries. Arguably, one can say that the same theme can be seen in those ghost legends noted above in which the farmers and guardians of the women tell them not to worry when they are unable to name the father of their children. As Gísli Sigurðsson (ibid.: 214) also notes, “Katla’s Dream” thus seems to imply that common folk questioned the ideology of the spiritual or worldly authorities. While this may be going a little too far it could well be argued that such an idea can also be seen in the legends examined here with regard to attitudes relating to the punishment of women who have children outside of marriage. The same could be argued about those stories of women forced into marriage. A closer look at these legends nonetheless makes it clear that the messages they have for women are more complex. They certainly underline that the ruling ideology in 19th century Iceland was often unfavourable to women, leaving us with the impression that it was hard, if not impossible, for women to refuse men, and that if they did so, they would live to regret it.

CONCLUSION

As noted at the start, gender-based violence is comparatively rare in the Icelandic sources of the past, which usually focus on the world of men rather than women, meaning that it is only recently that accounts telling of experiences of violence against women have begun to make it into the daylight.⁴⁹ As this article has stressed, stories can be an important tool for identifying, illuminating and discussing problems in society, something that became especially clear in the 2017 #metoo movement, which played an important role in shedding light on old established attitudes, many of which can be found in the legends examined above.⁵⁰

It is naturally important to bear in mind that folk legends can never be regarded as providing a solid overview of collectively accepted moral codes, although they often present useful insights. As noted above, it is safe to say that the limited insight into attitudes towards violence against women reflected in the Icelandic legend collections certainly suggests that attitudes in Iceland varied greatly. They range from almost blaming the women for her predicament to occasionally showing them some degree of sympathy for the violence they endure. The legends nonetheless seem to imply that many believed men were allowed to use violence against stubborn and disrespectful women, including their wives and daughters, indeed any women who questioned their rulership, thereby reflecting ideas of victim blaming and the existence of a rape culture, although, of course, there are exceptions. Violence against pregnant women is always frowned upon, as one can see in legends like “The Harshness of Sheriff Magnús”, “The Bad Fiance” and “The Legend of Mountain Manga and Helgi the Bad”.

Also noteworthy is how those legends that deal with gender-based violence are more often than not told by women. They potentially reflect their own experiences, although one notes how, especially in the case of those legends in which the abusers are supernatural, the narratives often seem to be somewhat androcentric making little mention of the women’s feelings (Hastrup 1998: 138). It is nonetheless also clear that talking about gender-based violence in which ‘other’ men are the abusers might have allowed women to discuss those matters more freely. Equally apparent is how little mention is made in these accounts of the psychological and physical consequences that the violence in these legends will have had. Rape seems to be simply something that ‘happened’.

While a great number of legends deal with housemaids in the Icelandic collections, it is interesting to note that in those legends that deal with domestic violence, housemaids are less often the victims than one might expect. More often than not, those involved in these accounts are the daughters of farmers or even of priests or bishops and can therefore be classed as higher-ranking people in society. Most probably, this does not reflect the whole picture at the time since women of lower classes have always been at more risk of violence even if they were less likely to have marriage imposed on them (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005: 44; see also Crenshaw 1994; Alcoff 2018: 229–331 on intersectionality regarding gender, class and race). It is nonetheless possible that violence against women with higher status had a greater story value, as the contradictions in them would have been more striking. Violence against women of low status was perhaps too common for it to be a topic in the legends (Úlo Valk, private communication). As Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (2010: 5–6) has noted in her research about sexual vio-

lence and class in old Icelandic literature, the class of women that endures the violence sometimes affects the way in which the violence is portrayed in stories. This is something that might be reflected in the laws from 1869 which state that the punishment for abusing women was less if the women previously had a bad reputation (*Alþingi* 1867: 93). Whatever the case, as this article has shown one only rarely encounters punishment for violence against women in Icelandic legends, especially when the perpetrator is a family member.

Using the Icelandic legend collections in line with approaches drawn from gender studies, it is evident that they shine a valuable new light on social attitudes to gender-based violence in earlier times, underlining the value of reconsidering this archival material from a new viewpoint. As noted earlier, gender-based violence commonly plays a role in the subordination of women. In this article I have aimed to examine how this kind of violence is portrayed in Icelandic legends, noting the potential role these narratives may have had in maintaining and shaping a discourse that in many cases can be said to have normalised violence against women.

NOTES

1 *Láttu því að vilja mínum, annars fer illa* in Icelandic (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: XI 217).

2 In the article, I have limited myself to analysing those narratives that have been designated legends by former collectors and publishers because they take place in the world of the storytellers and their audience and are often connected to specific places or people. They include many historical narratives, although most revolve around supernatural or strange events (see further Einar Sveinsson 1940: 7–12; Símon Ágústsson 1942: 428; Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir 1988: 14–15). Nonetheless, as is well known, all genres overlap to some degree (see further Röhrich 1991: 7, 10–12).

3 Here I will not be focusing on mental abuse or legal violence against women, for example, or those accounts of women executed for murder or witchcraft. I will also not be focusing either on violence against supernatural women, such as trolls, ghosts or hidden women, even though the motif of men overcoming and even killing supernatural women is common in Icelandic legends (see, for example, Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 347–348, 490, 591; III 220–221, 230–231, 241–244, 604; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: I 365–366; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: III 247–251).

4 See, for example, the report from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights *Violence Against Women: An EU-Wide Survey* for information on gender-based violence in the 28 countries of the European Union (Nevala 2014). The first research carried out on violence against women in Iceland did not take place until 1979 (Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Sigrún Júlíusdóttir and Þorgerður Benediktsdóttir 1980: 172–186). Research carried out in 2008 showed that 42% of Icelandic women had been the victims of gender-based violence. Of them 30% had been the victims of physical violence and 24% victims of rape (Elísabet Karlsdóttir and Ásdís Arnaldsdóttir 2010: 4).

5 Gender-based violence is also apparent in other genres in Iceland, including Old Norse literature, the chivalric *riðdarasögur* from the 14th century and ballads. See for example Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2010; Kress 2009; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2010 and Þorgerður Aðalsteinsdóttir 2016.

6 These collections are: *Icelandic Folk- and Wonder Tales (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*; extended 6 volume edition published in 1954–1961; original edition in 1862–1864) collected by Jón Árnason (1819–1888) with Magnús Grímsson (1825–1860); *Icelandic Folktales (Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*; extended

4 volume edition published in 1978–1980; original edition published in 1895) collected by Ólafur Davíðsson (1862–1903); and *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (*Íslenskar þjóðsögur og sagnir*; revised 11 volume edition published 1982–1993; original edition in 1922–1959) collected by Sigfús Sigfússon (1855–1935). Due to the size of Sigfús's collection, he had difficulties finding a publisher for it.

7 Hólm's collection was not published until after she had passed away, and was then edited by Finnur Sigmundsson (1894–1982), who admits to having edited some of the legends (Finnur Sigmundsson 1962: vi).

8 A growing interest in research on women and gender began to emerge in the 1970s–1980s, something that was also the case in Folkloristics. This has recently led several folklorists to revisit the archives from a gender perspective (see, for example, Júlíana Magnúsdóttir 2018: 133). For research done on women and violence in wonder tales and Old Norse literature, see, for example, Tatar 1992; Bennett 2005; Kress 2009; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2010; Jorgensen 2014 and for research on violence against women in legends, see, for example, Jauhiainen 1989; Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 2000; Lawless 2003; Lyngdoh 2012 and Maestre 2013.

9 See, for example, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir in *The Saga of the People of Laxárdalur* (Einar Sveinsson 1934), Yngvildur in *The Saga of the People of Svarfaðardalur* (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956) and Hallgerður langbrók in *Njal's Saga* (Einar Sveinsson 1954).

10 This situation was not specific to Iceland but known all around Europe. Specific to Iceland was the fact that around 25% of the population remained in the situation of workers throughout the 19th century (Gísli Gunnarsson 2002). While for male farmworkers, the situation was only temporary, and sometimes a preparation for a life's work as a farmer, for many women this was permanent (Guðmundur Hálfðánarson 1993: 18).

11 As various scholars have identified, the idea that men and women have different natures has echoed throughout the ages in the Western world. According to these ideas, women were believed to be more innocent and emotional (and therefore more irrational) while men were seen as stronger and more intelligent, thereby making it logical that men should remain in charge (Beauvoir 1999: 25–46; Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir 2001: 21; Erla Halldórsdóttir 2011: 74–75, 81).

12 See, for example, *Arnbjörg* 1973 by Björn Halldórsson (first published in 1843), a guide intended to tell upper class Icelandic women how to behave.

13 According to Walby (1990: 24), the other five social structures of the “gender regime” are paid work, housework, the state, sexuality and culture.

14 Jón Jónsson's research focuses on Icelandic vagabonds in the early 20th century. Here he notes stories of women belonging to this minority group, who were often said to be afraid of men, one of them always carrying a pair a scissors to defend herself. He also mentions the story of a prank played on a woman called Sæborg which resulted in her being raped without the case ever being taken to parliament (Jón Jónsson 2018: 178).

15 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Icelandic are by Terry Gunnell.

16 In this section of the article, my focus is on 33 legends I came across when reading various legend collections, and with the help of the *Sagnagrunnur* database. In all these legends it is clearly noted that women were the victims of violence from men. I did not take into account those legends in which violence was merely implied or legends where one might only assume violence or rape. Out of these 33 legends, 6 are found in the legend collection of Hólm (1962), 21 are attributed to named female storytellers, of which two are also attributed to men. Another two are attributed only to men and the other 10 storytellers are unknown. For legends that involve violence and are attributed to female storytellers, see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 568, 580–581; III 105–107, 175–176; Hólm 1962: 28–29, 34, 44–48, 55, 80–81; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: III 114–116; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: I 104–105; V 373–376; IX 392–400; XI 216–218, 278–290. For legends only attributed to male storytellers, see Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: V 131–145; XI 278–290. For legends attributed to unknown storytellers, see Einar Guðmundsson 1932–1947: III 110–112; Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 120–121; III 578,

604–605; IV 168–169, 231; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: I 46–47; III 225; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: VII 57–60.

17 Nonetheless, further research needs to be carried out into the various court records.

18 This legend is also found in the collection of Sigfús Sigfússon (1982–1993 [1922–1959]: X 161–162) told by Anna Kristín Sigfúsdóttir and Herborg Guðmundsdóttir and an unpublished collection by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1899–1984) (Árni Magnússon Institute: Einar Ól. Sveinsson) told by his mother Vilborg Einarisdóttir. As Kress (2002: 91) has pointed out similar motifs are also found in accounts in Old Norse literature suggesting that strong women must be tamed.

19 See also Dagrún Jónsdóttir, forthcoming, on gender roles and the figure of Stokkseyrar Dísa which suggests that she is punished for stepping outside her female role into more dominant male roles.

20 As Lawless (2003: 239) notes, this motif can be traced back to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden in which the blame for disobedience and the expulsion from the garden is placed on Eve. As Lawless states, this idea has affected contemporary culture, the view of Eve as the sinner who causes problems for men supporting a view that all women are abject.

21 Elín Guðmundsdóttir implies some sympathy for the woman when she notes at the end of her story that the woman's husband was never so cold again, nevertheless justifying his actions by blaming the woman's stubborn behaviour (Hólm 1962: 46–48).

22 See also legends in which women who are threatened with violence or death if they refuse marriage (to outlaws or hidden men) later fall in love with their abusers. See, for example, Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: II 315–327; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: I 46–48; III 257–259.

23 In the legend “Everyone Creates Their Own Luck” it is noted that when a man called Einar was 20 years old, he “was involved in an incident of having a child with an unconfirmed girl (14 years old) and another with a 16 year old” (see Einar Guðmundsson 1932–1947: V 110–112). The same extremes are seen in the legend “Story of Mountain Ketill and Settlement Ketill” told by Guðmundur Pétursson in which a man called Ketill is outlawed for murdering an older woman who had been believed to be a sorcerers. The legend nonetheless states that “her death was no tragedy, those were simply the rules at the time” (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: IX 261). Ketill later rescues a young woman who he falls in love with, and is then forgiven for the old “accident which could hardly be considered a crime” (ibid.: IX 268).

24 The legend does not state why the woman is celebrating but two other legends attributed to Elín Guðmundsdóttir revolve around women who are abused by their husbands (Hólm 1962: 34, 45–48).

25 According to Icelandic tradition (as in many other countries), after giving birth women were considered to be impure until they next went to church. This was also a protective method for them since during this time the women were not allowed to work and the men were not supposed to have sex with them. (Árni Björnsson 1996: 83–85)

26 In the legend “The Story of Fjalla Manga and Helgi the Bad”, Helgi is not punished for the violence against his wife, but when he later returns to kill their child, he is convicted and executed (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: IX 399–400).

27 It is worth mentioning that Anna Kristín Sigfúsdóttir, the storyteller, is the sister of Sigfús Sigfússon who collected the legend (*Sagnagrunnur*).

28 Axlar-Björn (Björn Pétursson) was born around 1545 and executed for 18 murders in the year 1596. His son Sveinn “skotti” Björnsson was born in 1596 and executed for attempting rape in 1648 (Gísli Sigurðsson 2001; *Íslendingabók*).

29 For other legends of this kind, see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 580–581; Hólm 1962: 44; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: I 104–105; V 51–52.

30 See, for example, Einar Guðmundsson 1932–1947: II 85–96; Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 230–234; IV 393–395; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: III 257–259.

31 In some other versions, the woman is stolen by outlaws and manages to escape (see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 212–215, 230–232; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: III 257–259).

32 These legends bear resemblance to wonder tales in their structure, as is often the case with Icelandic legends of outlaws (Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir 1988: 15).

33 An exception is one legend told by Guðríður Eyjólfsdóttir of a housemaid who is stabbed to death by the outlaw when he returns (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: IV 394–395).

34 It is also interesting that in some of these legends the outlaw pretends to be sick and tells the woman's father that he will get better if he is allowed to marry her (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 230–232).

35 It is perhaps understandable that these women are upper class since, as noted above, at the time it was nearly impossible for housemaids to marry.

36 Naturally there are some exceptions to this. See, for example, the legends of the outlaw Fjalla Eyvindur (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 237–245).

37 Several other legends tell of foreign men who arrive with ships and rape women. See, for example, the legend "Briktí's Saga", which exists in two versions, one told by an unknown storyteller (see Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: V 379) and the other by Valdimar Ámundsson (see Jón Þorkelsson 1956: 187–190). In those legends, English men come to Iceland to rob goods and rape women. The legend "Magnús the Strong" (see Hannes Þorsteinsson et al. 1935–1936: II 171–184) passed on by Stefán Ólafsson also tells of men from Spain who were tricked in business by Icelanders. The year after they returned and in revenge 18 men raped a woman and wounded her so badly she eventually died. In these legends the abusers are all later killed by Icelandic men. Here, of course, the men are not supernatural. They nevertheless belong to the 'other'. Also worth noting here is the legend "About Ísfold" told by various storytellers (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: VII 57–60) about the girl Ísfold, daughter of a man called Runólfur, who was said to be very strong; when men tried to harass her, she would defend herself and throw them out. The legend tells of how twice when foreign men tried to have their way with her, she defeated them and threw them out or into the ocean, thereby humiliating them.

38 See, for example, Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 272–276, 391–392, 507; III 399–400; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980 [1895]: I 370–375; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: II 241–243.

39 In those less common legends in which women are turned down by men, it is noteworthy that they usually take their own lives to haunt the men. See, for example, Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: II 295–298; III 363–364.

40 See, for example, Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 274–277; III 354–357, 555–558; Hólm 1962: 3–4; Þorsteinn Jónsson 1978–1979: IV 245–247; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: II 85–88.

41 This legend is known in many variants in Europe and categorised as tale type AT 764 "The Devil's Son as Priest" (Aarne and Thompson 1961; see also Ní Fhearghuse 1994–1995: 93 on the distribution, form and function of this tale type). Jacqueline Ní Fhearghuse (1994–1995) notes that the tale is on the border between being a legend and a wonder tale, stating that the Icelandic tales are those which show the most characteristics of folk legend. She adds that in the Icelandic versions, the moral lesson of the legend is "not only religious but also entails adherence to practical secular virtues or avoidance of certain types of behavior." (Ibid.: 93)

42 As Max Lüthi (1982: 21) has pointed out, in legends, the feelings of the characters are often noted, something that is usually not the case with regard to wonder tales. As noted above, many Icelandic legends could be considered on the border between legend and wonder tale. While it varies greatly whether feelings are noted in Icelandic legends, it is noteworthy that this is not the case here.

43 It is interesting to compare these legends to those examined earlier in which women who are pregnant are rescued from violence, the violence once again perhaps proving to be problematic because of the child.

44 Three of these legends revolve around Magnús Pétursson, who according to Jón Árnason (1954–1961 [1862–1864]: III 555–558) later became a priest in Hörgsland (see also Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: II 85–88).

45 Sigurður Gunnarsson, the storyteller noted here, was an active legend collector for Jón Árnason. It is known that his daughter also took part in collecting legends and in all cases was registered as the collector (Werth 2015: 93–96).

46 Around 36% these legends telling of violence committed by outlaws and ghosts are attributed to women. Around 53% are from unknown storytellers and only 11% attributed to named male storytellers. (*Sagnagrunnur*)

47 The hidden people are nature spirits living in the rocks around us. In legends, they often appear as more glamorous than us, and can be either good or bad (Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 1995: 10–12; Gunnell 2007: 116–118).

48 Violence against women therefore seems to appear in almost all genres of legend, but is generally absent in legends of trolls except in the case of troll women who are abused and killed by men (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 490; III 220–221, 230–231, 241–244, 604; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: III 247–251). This is particularly interesting because in that category several legends tell of troll women who steal human men to have as their husbands (Jón Árnason 1954–1961 [1862–1864]: I 178–183, 185–186; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993 [1922–1959]: III 264–265).

49 Of course, there are some exceptions to this. Noteworthy are, for example, the books *Salka Valka* (published in 1931–1932) and *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1976 [1934–1935]), both works of fiction written by Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) which tell of sexual violence.

50 In 2006, the activist Tarana Burke founded the Me Too movement, using the phrase “Me Too” to raise awareness of sexual abuse and assault on women in society. The phrase developed into a broader movement following the 2017 use of #metoo as a hash-tag following the allegations of sexual abuse against Harvey Weinstein. On the effect of the #metoo movement, see, for example, Jaffe 2018; Mendes et al. 2018; Zarkov and Davis 2018; Finnborg Steinþórsdóttir and Gyða Pétursdóttir 2019.

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