



Wayward Sisters

A Germanic Narrative Structure as Building Blocks in Two *Íslendingasögur*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role and evolution of the Female Avenger in the *Íslendingasögur*, its patterns and narrative structure, by analysing and comparing two episodes from *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Harðar saga*. Þórdís (*Gísla*) and Þorbjörg (*Harðara*) draw upon an earlier Germanic archetype, best exemplified by Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, bringing about vengeance at the dinner table. However, where they differ is in the aftermath of said dinner. Building on the foundations laid by Guðrún, these two women set themselves apart from most other female characters by taking revenge into their own hands, instead of recurring to the usual, codified ways of getting revenge through inciting male relatives into doing it. Their brothers are their keystones, and their complex relationships make or break Germanic narrative structures. The turning point comes when both women betray their brothers, leading to their husbands having their brothers-in-law killed, news of the killing reaching the women at the dinner table, and the consequent decision to violently avenge their brothers. The reason for the appearance of this new structure might be found in a cultural shift, it might be purely narratological, or a mix of both. This paper seeks to answer this question.

Keywords: Old Norse, sagas of Icelanders, narrative structures, gender, archetypes



1. INTRODUCTION

The FEMALE AVENGER has long been recognised as a symbol for a Germanic narrative structure, a pattern that can be traced through time in multiple sources of Germanic origin. The figure itself was defined in 1996 by Jenny Jochens, who identified its prototype in the Norse Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, herself a tragic heroine who can be found under variations of the same name in multiple Norse and German sources. The Female Avenger, she argued, was the physical counterpart to the WHETTER: a woman who used violence to exact revenge for herself, rather than for the betterment of society (Jochens 1996:132). The aim of this article is to argue for the existence of a further pattern related to this archetype and bring forward a hypothesis for how this pattern evolution came to be. This article argues that some of the female characters cited by Jochens as examples of the ‘Female Avenger’ archetype represent an evolution of the theme, arising from different social and literary needs in medieval Iceland. This evolution will be referred to as the WAYWARD SISTER. Keeping Guðrún Gjúkadóttir as the blueprint, this article will explore the way in which Þórdís Súrsdóttir in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (*The Saga of Gísli Súrsson*) and Þorbjörg Grímkelsdóttir in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* (*The Saga of Hǫrðr and the Men of Hólmr*) broke the mould, so as to analyse the emerging narrative structure. Both could be classified as avengers based on their one act of vengeance, but the architecture of their stories is more intricate: both women have brothers, whom they betray. The brothers are or become outlaws, the sisters’ betrayal of their brothers leads to the latter’s death at the hands of their sisters’ husbands, and the sisters then try to avenge their dead brothers. However, before unspooling Þórdís’ and Þorbjörg’s stories, let us lay the foundations to the Female Avenger.

2. STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

2.1. GUÐRÚN GJÚKADÓTTIR

The earliest example of the Female Avenger is to be found in the cycle of the *Vǫlsungs*, which spans several poems and an eponymic saga.¹ Although largely cited in Eddic poetry, Guðrún’s character originates in Germanic oral tradition and represents a woman’s societally acceptable wants and avenues for revenge (Jochens 1996:155). Chronologically, we first find her story in *Atlakviða* (*The Poem of Atli*), where Guðrún avenges the death of her brothers by killing her and Atli’s sons, serving their hearts to Atli at dinner while simultaneously getting him drunk and finally killing him in their bed while he is in a drunk stupor. This story has, of course, been reshaped throughout the centuries,² but its essence has remained the same: a woman killing her husband to avenge her dead brothers. This, according to Jochens, is the core of the Female Avenger: taking revenge for a wrong experienced by either a woman or her kin, a settling of the score not for the bettering of society or a greater good, but rather personally motivated. More specifically, in Guðrún’s case the structure that can be inferred is: a married woman is wronged by her husband, who tricks her brother(s) in some way, then kills them. A dinner scene ensues, followed by the woman’s violent revenge.

What sets Guðrún, and in general the archetype of the Female Avenger, apart from figures such as Þórdís and Þorbjörg is that she was not complicit in the downfall of her brothers, quite

¹ As mentioned above, Guðrún is also present in the German Nibelung cycle, comprised of the *Nibelungenlied* (*The Lay of the Nibelungs*) and the *Nibelungenklage* (*The Lament of the Nibelungs*). However, this paper will focus on her Old Norse representation through the *Eddas* and *Vǫlsunga saga* (*The Saga of the Vǫlsungs*).

² *Atlamál* (*The Lay of Atli*) and *Vǫlsunga saga* add that Guðrún mixed her sons’ blood into the wine that Atli drank, and that Hogni’s son helped her in killing Atli. Interestingly, the later versions see Guðrún have less autonomy in her violence, and she needs a man’s help to use a sword.

the opposite: she had tried to warn them and save them from Atli's plot, but in vain.³ While the relationship between sisters and brothers is not explicitly stated as part of the Female Avenger structure,⁴ a few details point towards its relevance: all the women Jochens cites as avengers have brothers whose actions, or lack thereof, are instrumental to the necessity of female revenge;⁵ and the archetype herself is a sister avenging the murder of her brothers. Further, all these avengers take their revenge on their husbands or ex-husbands, as in the case of bróka-Auðr. When it comes to Þórdís and Þorbjörg instead, it is the sisters who betray their brothers and by doing so bring about their demise. Let us take these cases one at a time, starting with Þórdís.

2.2. ÞÓRDÍS SÚRSDÓTTIR

Þórdís Súrsdóttir appears in the outlaw saga *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, where she is introduced as the sister of Gísli, Ari, and Þorkell Súrsson. *Gísla saga* is extant in three redactions, known as B, S, and M, although recent research suggests that the manuscript Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 163 p fol. represents a fourth redaction of the saga.⁶ Þórdís is a remarkable woman and attracts the attention of several men who wish to have her for themselves. These would-be suitors, however, all end up on the wrong side of Gísli's sword, who seeks to protect his sister's honour – even when she does not wish it herself. Once married to Þorgrímr, Þórdís moves to a farm not far from where Gísli lives, together with her husband. One night, Gísli's sworn brother is mysteriously slain and, suspecting Þórdís' husband of being the culprit due to old rivalries, Gísli kills him in secret. Soon after, Þórdís marries Þorkr, Þorgrímr's brother.

Later, in chapter 18, Gísli commits a fatal mistake: composing and reciting a stanza on his killing of Þorgrímr while in front of his mound. Þórdís overhears him, takes some time to think the stanza over, and connects the dots. Weeks later, Þorkr forces her to reveal that it was Gísli who had killed Þorgrímr. In most redactions she then adds that she does not know if this is true, and that women's counsel is often cold.⁷ Moreover, in AM 163 p fol. it is specified that Þórdís says this in an attempt to save Gísli, as Þorkr now wants to find and kill him. Gísli is eventually outlawed and killed by Þorkr's kinsmen led by his cousin Eyjólfur. The men then go to Þorkr and Þórdís' farm to share the news. Þorkr, elated, wants to celebrate, but Þórdís does not share his enthusiasm and, when urged by Þorkr to make a feast for their guests, replies “en mun eigi vel fagnat Gíslabana, ef grautr er gorr ok gefinn?” (Þórólfsson & Jónsson 1943:116).⁸ While serving the guests, she purposefully drops spoons, bends down and, instead of picking them up, takes Gísli's sword, which Eyjólfur had appropriated, and tries to kill the man to avenge her brother. Unfortunately for her, she merely manages to wound his thigh, though she had intended

³ One may be tempted to wonder whether Guðrún would have been such a positive sisterly figure, had she been able to remember the instrumental role her brothers had had in the death of her husband. This, however, is not a plot point in any version of her story and is therefore irrelevant in discussing her role as avenger.

⁴ Jochens analyses Guðrún's relationship with her brothers and her taking revenge for them but does not explicitly state that this should be part of a Female Avenger's *raison d'être*. She further analyses Guðrún's revenge for her husband and for her children.

⁵ Throughout the book, Jochens specifically talks about Signy, Guðrún, Þórdís, Þorbjörg, and bróka-Auðr as avengers. The first four avenge their brothers, whereas bróka-Auðr avenges her own honour in the face of her brothers' inaction. Given that all of their stories hinge around a sibling relationship, it seems to me that this is a relevant plot point for the pattern. Further, the avengers named hail from different saga sub-genres: Signy and Guðrún are known from *fornaldarsögur*, whereas Þórdís, Þorbjörg, and bróka-Auðr are found in the *Íslendingasögur*. This shows that the archetype is a known cultural construct, as it transcends corpora.

⁶ I am grateful to Saskia J. Cowan for sharing her research with me before publication.

⁷ Cowan's palaeographic analysis shows that it is Þórdís who speaks the proverb even in B, which previous scholarship had ascribed to Þorkell. This would make Þórdís the speaker of the proverb in three out of the four redactions.

⁸ “[A]nd I think Gísli's bane will be met well enough if porridge is made and offered”. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

to cause more damage. What happens next is a blur of insults, requests for reparation, and Þórdís declaring herself divorced. The constituents of this episode are similar to those of Guðrún's, but with a few additions: here we have a woman who is wronged by her brother, betrays him, then her husband is the cause of her brother's death, a dinner scene ensues, after which the woman tries to violently avenge her brother at the expense of her husband.

This dinner episode is significant in many ways. To begin with, we have Þórdís' dour behaviour and silence, which are often indicators of a woman looking for revenge. Then, there is the rather interesting choice of meal: Þórdís is going against the laws of hospitality in serving *grautr*, porridge or oatmeal, to her guests. The tradition of women using meals to take revenge is a pan-European one, firmly rooted in stories like the Greek Procne's or, once again, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's. While these women used meals, usually dinners as in our case, to take their tragic revenge on their husbands by serving them the meat of their children, Þórdís takes her revenge on her husband's kinsman, and her choice of food is far less cruel, though connected to bloody events. All redactions of the saga specify that Þórdís chooses to serve *grautr* and makes it an integral part of her plot for revenge.⁹ This simple choice is both a narrative convention and a subversion of it. We, as informed readers, are expecting violence to come out of it, but certainly not from Þórdís' side. As Martínez-Pizarro (1986:224) points out, in sagas, "what happens is determined directly by the food that is served. [...] The men's reaction to the food is never so to speak gastronomic; they respond not to the food as food, but to a meaning they find in the victuals or attribute to them". The same can be said about Þórdís' choice of meal: not a simple gastronomic choice, nor one dictated by her status as a grieving sister struggling to overcome her emotions to focus on a proper meal for her guests, though it could be passed off as such. The choice of food is purposeful and indicative of actions to come. Þórdís is playing a game of conventions that she subverts and manipulates for her own ends. This is but one step to her calculated revenge. Playing into the stereotypes afforded to her, she then drops a tray of spoons for the sole reason of getting closer to the weapons that travelling men always had on them. She then chooses her own brother's sword as her avenging tool, revealing a plan that had been set in motion long before dinner was served. Unlike Guðrún and Þorbjörg, as we will see, Þórdís could not have taken her revenge to bed since Eyjólfur was not her husband. Instead, she stabs him at the dinner table and then divorces Þorkr, leaving him penniless and without support, as the *goði* of the region eventually rules against him.

2.3. ÞORBJÖRG GRÍMKELSDÓTTIR

Þorbjörg is also part of an outlaw saga, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, where her loyalty appears divided between her brother and her husband. The saga is extant in full in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 556 a 4to; and as a fragment in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 564 a 4to (Faulkes 2001:xvii).

⁹ It bears mentioning that this episode also takes place in *Eyrbyggja saga* (*The Saga of the People of Eyri*), with a notable difference: Þórdís suggests *grautr*, and Þorkr comments that he does not meddle with meals. This does not detract from the slight that such low-status food brings but is rather an indication of Þorkr's non-committal character. Just as he had outsourced his revenge, he is now dropping responsibility for the treatment of his honoured guests. This can be read as an authorial tool to lower his reputation while at the same time improve Þórdís', likely in relation to the ascent of Snorri goði as one of the most prominent characters of the saga, and his treatment of and relation to Þorkr and Þórdís. However, of the relevant episodes for this structure, only this dinner scene is mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga* since the narrative has a different core and makes no mention of the events leading up to this episode. Considering that the relationship between Þórdís and Gísli is central to the narrative pattern, *Eyrbyggja saga* is not deemed fit for this study as it does not provide a holistic view of the two siblings' relationship.

In chapter 11, Þorbjörg had answered her brother Hǫrðr's certainty of dying before her with a verse that conveyed all the affection she had for him, as well as betraying events to come.¹⁰ The verse reads as follows:

Verðir þú,
svá ek vita gerla,
vápnum veginn
eðr í val fallinn,
þeim skulu manni
mín at sönnu
bitrlig ráð
at bana verða.

(Vilmundarson & Vilhjálmsen 1991:32)

If I found out
that you were fallen,
brought low by blades
or slain in battle –
that man who did it
would be my foeman,
and should best beware
my bitter vengeance.

(Straubhaar 2011:33)

A little after, Þorbjörg marries Indriði, and Hǫrðr becomes an outlaw intent on destroying Indriði's farm. Þorbjörg has a prophetic dream of wolves with fire in their mouths and a sad polar bear. She correctly interprets it as an omen of her brother's intentions and betrays them by warning everyone and commencing preparations to withstand the attack. Once there, Hǫrðr asks Þorbjörg to leave with him, but she stays firmly on her husband's side, even refusing to divorce him in exchange for protection. The outlaws are chased away, an assembly is summoned at Leiðvǫllr, and Þorbjörg causes surprise and scandal by showing up and vowing bloody revenge on anyone who would kill her brother.

The significance of this episode is underlined by yet another narrative subversion: silence often foreshadows revenge, though in different ways according to gender. A man's silence as well as somatic indicators can foreshadow his violent revenge, whereas a woman's silence is most often a weapon in itself, though violent acts can follow (Wolf 2018). Here, it is the *entirely male* assembly that is plunged into silence at the arrival of Þorbjörg.¹¹ Dismissing her words, the assembled men form a band and after a while Hǫrðr is killed. When news reaches Indriðastaðir – Indriði's farm – it is once again at a dinner with guests and Þorbjörg is uncharacteristically silent until her brother's death is mentioned. Then she sings his praises and disparages the killer by saying that only sorcery or a trick would have been able to best Hǫrðr. Once alone in bed with her husband, she tries to stab him, perhaps as a proxy for the actual killer who was not present at the dinner. She only manages a hand wound, but he promises her that he will kill Þorsteinn Gullknapp, the man responsible for Hǫrðr's death, and so Þorbjörg's bitter vengeance comes to pass. Just as Guðrún was forever praised as a role model for sisters and Þórdís was favourably judged for keeping her household in the divorce, Þorbjörg's actions bring her praise as, in the end, society at large believes her to have acted magnanimously. The constituents of this narrative follow the pattern delineated in 2.2., and we shall soon see what significance this holds.

Just like Þórdís, Þorbjörg subverts narrative constructs: the stratagems she resorts to in order to keep Indriði's farm from burning are the ones used by the titular hero in *Króka-Refs saga* (*The Saga of Refr the Sly*), a man considered so witty and smart that only the Norwegian king was his match. However, in *Harðar saga* it is not a clever man who outwits the band of bloodthirsty men, but rather Þorbjörg who takes charge and whose orders are obeyed. Next, she uses silence to her advantage not by remaining silent herself, but by plunging an assembly into silence so that her threat may be heard far and wide. Further, while she does not use the dinner scene as the stage for her action, she lays the groundwork for her revenge during the

¹⁰ The significance of this strong sibling bond has been remarked upon most recently by Merkelbach (2024:44).

¹¹ It should be noted that silence in sagas is a highly codified narrative tool utilised by both male and female characters. While it is used as a signifier for further strategic intentions regardless of gender, Wolf (2018) notes how it can be used as a weapon by women, as is the case in this episode. Here the male crowd's silence is a stunned one, not a tactical one.

meal and utters scathing remarks that damage her guests' honour. Lastly, not having been able to properly stab her husband, she subverts the whetting scene: she has already inflicted a wound on Indriði, ideally showing him what will await him should he not heed her words and compels him to do what she cannot and kill her brother's killer. Echoes of Guðrún and Þórdís can be found in this scene, as well. Guðrún had waited until Atli was drunk and in bed to stab him, and Þórdís had also been unsuccessful at a full stabbing.

2.4. NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

Having explained the major plotlines regarding the stories of Guðrún, Þórdís, and Þorbjörg, I will now move on to an analysis and comparison of the narrative structures present in these episodes and propose a hypothesis for the change in structure and its evolution.

In Guðrún's case, the structure is fairly simple:

- (1) a. husband plots wife's brothers' death
- b. wife tries to save brothers
- c. husband has brothers killed
- d. wife makes dinner for husband and avenges brothers

However, when it comes to Þórdís and Þorbjörg things get more complicated. The present structure is still in use, but with modifications. Both sisters choose to betray their brothers in favour of their husbands due to circumstances out of their control: the knowledge of Gísli's confession of murder and the outright attack of Hqrðr both force the hands of the sisters. Þórdís is made to betray Gísli by revealing him as Þorgrímr's killer, Þorbjörg by revealing Hqrðr's plan and declining his offer to join him. Then, their husbands decide to have Gísli and Hqrðr killed, their death is announced at dinner, and in the same evening the women try to avenge their brothers. Because of their back and forth between loyalty to their original family and to their husbands, the centrality of their relationships with their brothers, and the expectations that the brothers have of these sisters, I propose the name 'Wayward Sisters' for this pattern. The modified structure appears as such:

- (2) a. *wife betrays brother*
- b. *brother is an outlaw*
- c. husband plots wife's brother's death
- d. wife tries to save brother
- e. husband has brother killed
- f. wife makes dinner for husband and avenges brother¹²

As we can observe, the scheme maintains the foundations of the Female Avenger but is further developed. We notice that the interplay between brothers and sisters is the keystone of this narrative structure, as the entirety of the new conflict is based around a sibling bond. These Wayward Sisters could not have been such if they had been loyal to their brothers all along, as Guðrún had. This new pattern seems to present itself as a legitimate structure, but whether it emerged as an evolution of the Female Avenger, or to underline the passage between one social structure to another, and possibly even between shifting morals, is of yet unclear. What we can observe is that, just as Guðrún had been used as a shining example of old

¹² Variations have been italicised to make them immediately apparent.

family ties, so can Þórdís and Þorbjörg be seen as the mirror of a society divided between the new Christian morals shared by the authors and scribes of these sagas, and the ones they attributed to the pagan society that they wrote about.

Kress (2002:91) noted that “Old Norse literature is a unique source in that it shows a connection between the oppression of women and Norse patriarchy during the phase of its establishment”. This points at gender norms and societal structure as influential in the shaping of Old Norse narratives. They reflect the new Christian patriarchal structure while describing the older pre-Christian society. This is not to say that Norse society was not patriarchal in nature before conversion, but the changes that occurred in the interplay between sexes made it so that free women, who may have had more or simply different privileges before the advent of Christianity, saw their role shift to one of further submission to the head of the family, be it father or husband. This very shift can be seen in the stories preserved in the sagas, and especially in the two cases here discussed.¹³ Before launching into a rationalisation of this phenomenon though, it is necessary to look specifically at family structures, having established that the driving force behind the evolution of the Female Avenger into the Wayward Sister hinges on the relationship between a sister and her brother.

3. KINSHIP

It has often been argued that the *Íslendingasögur* emerged as a form of historiography and were a reflection of the anxieties and worldview of the society they were written in.¹⁴ As such, it should come as no surprise that, although partly fictional, these texts contain real life issues and are a mirror of the society that produced them. Mundal (1994) points out that, as part of the realistic saga genres, events in the *Íslendingasögur* may have been changed or embellished, but key aspects such as social structures and legal systems were true to life or largely unchanged, thus making it possible to derive historical meaning from these sagas and use history as a method to analyse them.¹⁵ To better understand the forces at play in the shaping of these patterns, and the importance of family ties both in the sagas and in real life, one must first look at the differences between Germanic and Icelandic kinship groups. To do so, I will use Meulengracht Sørensen’s (1993b) models, divided in ANCESTOR-CENTRED (or fixed) and EGO-CENTRED (or changing).

3.1. ANCESTOR-CENTRED

Meulengracht Sørensen’s ancestor-centred kinship model (see Fig. 1) corresponds to pre-Christian, Germanic family structures: a group all descended from a same forefather and clearly distinguished from others.

Marriage requires that a daughter (or son) be given away to another group and become a member of it, while existence in her (or his) ancestral group comes to an end. [...] A woman will, for example, be a guarantee of peace between her father’s and her husband’s families. [...] if nevertheless strife arises between such families, it will lead to a conflict of loyalties for the one who is caught between the belligerents. (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993b:20ff.)

This is reflected perfectly in the story of Guðrún, who was indeed married to Atli to ensure sustained peace but ended up killing him to exact revenge for her brothers.

¹³ For more on this topic, see for example Byock (2001:214f.); Jochens (1996:146); Meulengracht Sørensen (1986:244–257; 1993b:20f.); Mundal (2014).

¹⁴ See, for example, O’Connor (2017); Mundal (1994).

¹⁵ See also Bagge (1992); Miller (1990); Meulengracht Sørensen (1993a).

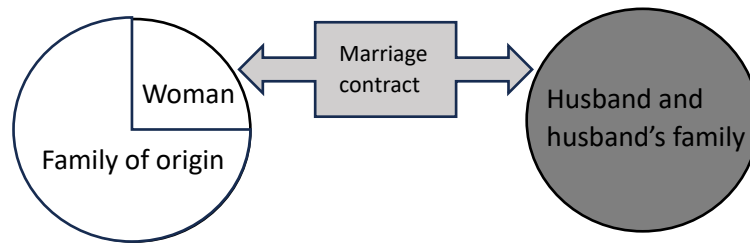


Figure 1. *Ancestor-centred kinship model.*

Jochens (1996:150–155) also talks about this older family structure, noting how it can be extrapolated from Guðrún’s brothers’ reactions to her decrying her first husband’s death, and how she would have had more cause to grieve if it had been one of her brothers who had been slain, rather than Sigurðr. The original family, the one a woman was born into, was supposed to be the sole repository of all her loyalties. This model does not take into consideration the chance of affections developing between a wife and her husband, or a mother and her children. The first is explained by the married couple not sharing the same forefather, and only being together because of a contract of sorts, manifesting as an alliance in the face of adversity, peace, or a continuation of the husband’s line. The weaknesses of this model are all exemplified and exacerbated in Guðrún’s story, which turns into a cautionary tale against such customs: her adherence to the ancestor-centred family model brings about the death of many, including her own children, whereas the straying from it – exemplified by her mourning Sigurðr – is largely without consequences. It should be noted that, at the time of writing, this pre-Christian kinship model was no longer in use, and the Icelandic authors of sagas and poetry had to make sense of it through their Christian worldview.

3.2. EGO-CENTRED

According to Meulengracht Sørensen, Icelandic kinship was ego-centred, and as such can be best characterised as a family, one in which only siblings have identical family groups – at least until they marry. After marriage, each individual has their own family, which are not the same as those of their parents or siblings and will not be the same as those of their children. All these family groups overlap with each other, so that in turn this model creates a network of interconnecting families (see Fig. 2), one of the biggest strengths and weaknesses of the Icelandic system.

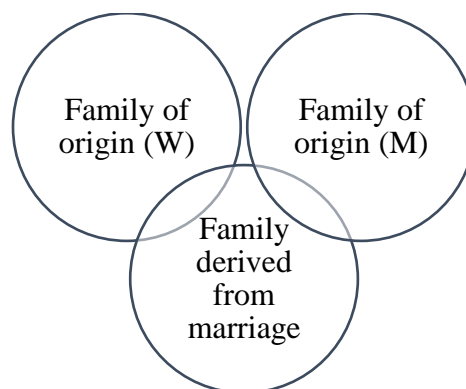


Figure 2. *Ego-centred kinship model.*

This network is portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*, and the ensuing divided loyalties play a big part in many sagas. In the ego-centred structure, a woman is no longer just a daughter, or just a sister, or just a wife, or just a mother. Rather, she is daughter, sister, wife, and mother at the same time, having to juggle responsibilities and loyalties to more than one family group (see Fig. 3). Simultaneously, she is subjugated to the head of the family who, according to the new Christian norms, is her husband.

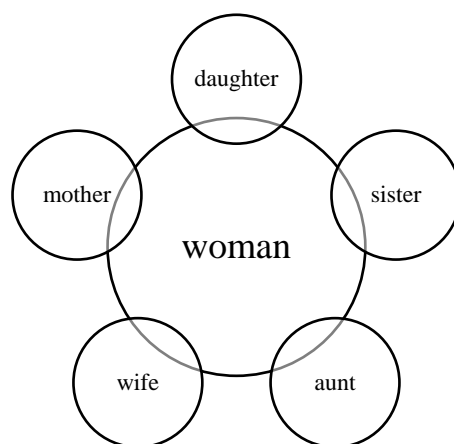


Figure 3. *Schematisation of a woman's roles in the ego-centred kinship model.*

Jochens notes that “[t]he transformation from a sister avenging her brother to a wife retaliating for her husband has been variously explained by the differences between Old Norse and Germanic traditions, pagan and Christian perceptions of women, and oral and written cultures” (1996:151). Thus, both acts of vengeance are acceptable in literature, but each of them finds its place in only one of the two different systems. It is their simultaneous presence in the same one that suggests that the Icelandic authors of these stories had some awareness of the changing – and changed – times, as well as of the trope they were drawing from. Their outlaw brothers expect Þórdís and Þorbjörg to act according to the old, ancestor-centred model, whereas the two women initially follow the current, ego-centred model.

In addition, this suggests a deeper understanding of the changing role of women, and the pull they felt to be part of not just a new family, but two families simultaneously. The pressures on women to be daughters, sisters, aunts, wives, and mothers are reflected in the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*. I would go as far as to say that Þorbjörg is the pinnacle of this conflict, as she must contend with all these different expectations. She is a devoted daughter and sister until she marries and refuses her outlaw brother’s offer to live on the run with him. She saves her husband’s farm and reaffirms her loyalty to him but also makes good on her promise to look after her brother and she tries to prevent his death. Failing that, she becomes the driving force behind him being avenged and ensures that his wife and children are taken care of and allowed to thrive.

4. WAYWARD SISTERS

As established, the architecture of family ties changes with the times, and is in turn influenced by the new Christian faith. It is thus that we find new expectations, such as a wife’s loyalty to her husband above all else, since, according to the view of Christianity, women were more clearly subordinated to their husbands, a factor that led to the Old Norse view of women coming under pressure (Mundal 2014:333).

This would go to some length to account for the emendation to the Female Avenger archetype and explain why in the first instance Þórdís and Þorbjörg chose their husbands over their brothers. Another piece of the puzzle is to be found in the point of view these relationships are observed from. The part of this structure that remains unchanged is largely ascribable to a male point of view: brothers expected their sisters to take revenge on behalf of their family of origin. This can be seen not only in Guðrún's story proper, but also in *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, where Gísli explicitly compares Þórdís and Guðrún in his poem over his broken expectations. This is made even more obvious once we take into consideration the dating of the poetry in *Gísli*, which is much older than its prose and seemingly represents an older view of society (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993b:256). Hǫrðr, too, is acting under the impression that Þorbjörg will follow him. Both men fail to consider their sisters' wants and needs. While Guðrún is loyal to her brothers until the end, even at the expense of her own children, Þórdís and Þorbjörg place more importance on what they want and need than what their brothers do. They make a choice for themselves and place themselves first. What they want is the safekeeping of their new family, or to avenge a wrong they have been made. A significant aspect of this retrospective way of thinking is to be found in the brothers' status as outlaws. Hǫrðr is already an outlaw when Þorbjörg betrays him, whereas Gísli is outlawed following Þórdís' betrayal, but on the grounds of a murder he had already committed and taken no accountability for. Both brothers had broken the laws of society and appear to expect their sisters to do the same, as if abandoning modern law were synonymous with regressing to an older societal and kinship model. Their expectations are not met, as their sisters live by modern rules and fully participate in the ego-centred kinship model, which enables them to choose husband over brother. This creates tension between the siblings, and within the married couple. The brothers believe that they should be the sole repositories of their sisters' loyalty, while the sisters are being pulled in both directions.

I believe that this changing pattern reflects social anxieties on both sides of the gender divide: the women's need to be heard and taken into consideration corresponds to the men's need for control and their underlying fear that power could be taken from them, even if only temporarily. After all, these women take their violent revenge with weapons, and "[w]eapons are not to be used by women, they are to be used against them" (Kress 2002:90). Vengeful women in the shape of Wayward Sisters first assert their needs, then use a typically feminine sphere – the dinner – to overthrow the masculine with its own symbol of choice: the sword. Women following the archetype of the Female Avenger end up repressing a part of themselves to do what is societally expected of them. Unlike the Female Avenger, whose shoulders the Wayward Sisters nonetheless stand on, these women resist society and push their needs and wants to the forefront. It is significant that this structure takes new life and emerges in a corpus so varied and vast as that of the *Íslendingasögur*, and especially that it should happen in the corpus of outlaw sagas, as outlaws tend to associate more with women, being marginal figures in society.¹⁶

It was once again Kress (2002:91) who said that "the strong women this literature depicts are not free. But they are strong, and their strength consists in resisting oppression – they refuse to be oppressed. They do not succeed, but their protest is everywhere in the text".¹⁷ They fail not only in their botched attempts at violent revenge, but also in the fact that these attempts were necessary in the first place. In other words, the choice they made to put themselves and their husbands first comes back to haunt them once their brothers are dead. No matter the number of preventative measures they take, what they thought they wanted – the safety of their family – becomes a source of sorrow once their brothers die. But just when it looks like the

¹⁶ On this, see for example O'Donoghue (2005); Merkelbach (2022).

¹⁷ I would add that the oppression Kress talks about can and does also manifest as familial and societal pressure.

walls are crumbling around them, they rise once again to fix the unfixable. Unlike Guðrún, whose story is entirely tragic, both Þórdís and Þorbjörg have a happy ending and win the respect of their communities, though both of their brothers die. Þórdís owns her own farm, and her son, Snorri goði, goes on to become one of the most influential men of his time, as well as the unofficial protagonist of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Similarly, Þorbjörg not only prevents the destruction of her farm, and her descendants are mentioned as converts to Christianity, but she also “secures lasting fame for her brother through heroic revenge” (Merkelbach 2024:60), as well as the continuation of his line, by tricking her husband into helping Hqrðr’s wife and children. Merkelbach has recently pointed out that this happens because Þorbjörg employs strategies that are societally acceptable, i.e. using her intelligence to “fulfil obligations to both sides of her family, and thus ultimately to herself” (2024:60).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have explored the ways in which models of kinship, along with societal and religious change influence the evolution of narrative structures, reflecting anxieties over kinship bonds and social networks in the *Íslendingasögur*. The narrative archetype of the Female Avenger is identified with Guðrún as one and the same, and while no other literary woman comes close to her, echoes of her example can be found in the *Íslendingasögur*. In the case of the outlaw sagas, the women seem to be victims of the kinship models and the expectations these set. Throughout their stories, Þórdís and Þorbjörg express closeness with their brothers before being married, then they favour their husbands – or really themselves – only to go back to their original loyalties. Their relationships with their brothers are the keystone in the Wayward Sister structure: if they had not betrayed their brothers by putting themselves first, none of the ensuing catastrophic events would have taken place.¹⁸ At the same time, in the ego-centred model, their brothers are an extension of themselves. Therefore, punishing Gísli and Hqrðr is also a punishment for Þórdís and Þorbjörg. Take the brother out of the equation, and the structure ceases to exist. Perhaps this is why the pattern shows itself in the specific subset of outlaw sagas, where the outlaws’ relationships to women are of a closer and more positive nature. The Wayward Sister then is a woman who, with her divided loyalties, is likely to be a manifestation of changing times and ethics manifesting through the Christian authors’ concrete narrative choice to have these sisters explicitly measured against an older concept of loyalty vis-à-vis the newer Christian view of a woman as a dutiful wife devoted to her new family. However, more research in the outlaw sagas and other subsets of *Íslendingasögur* is necessary to ascertain whether this evolution of the Female Avenger is indeed a narrative structure, as I believe it to be.

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¹⁸ Which is not to say that the outcome of these stories would have been positive, as they nonetheless deal with serious breaches of the law.

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