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Of rape and rage: An exploration of female anger and revenge in *Hrólfs saga kraka* at the hand of modern rape-revenge films

Juliane Witte[I]

Abstract: This article explores how female anger and revenge take their shape in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, especially with an eye towards the saga's own generic hybridity.[1] The focus of the analysis is the maiden king Ólöf, whose depiction and reception veers wildly between queen, victim, monster, and mother. As the saga breaks its own narrative form, moving from a romance bridal quest into a story about female revenge, the audience is left to confront their own understanding of where the story was meant to go and what they are meant to take away from it. As such, this article focuses on audience reception. Drawing upon the scholarship around modern rape-revenge films, with an eye on *Promising Young Woman* (2020), this article suggests that rape and female revenge stories consistently break with the story they attempt to tell. In order to give space to female anger and revenge, these stories cannot remain ideologically or generically straight-forward but must encourage moves into the fantastical and horrific. As such, this article encourages a reading of Ólöf which takes all the saga's twists and turns into account and allows for a feeling of awkwardness to remain.

Keywords: Reception, Old Norse Literature, Gender Studies, Film Studies, Violence

I PhD in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Tübingen, Germany. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8050-0606 E-mail: juliane.witte@uni-tuebingen.de

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A respeito do estupro e da fúria: um estudo exploratório da ira e da vingança femininas na Hrólfs saga kraka à luz de filmes de *rape-revenge* modernos

Resumo: Este artigo explora como a ira e a vingança femininas são moldadas na *Hrólfs saga kraka*, especialmente em vistas do hibridismo genérico da própria saga. O foco da análise é a donzela-rei Ólöf, cuja representação e recepção variam amplamente entre rainha, vítima, monstro e mãe. À medida que a saga rompe com seu próprio esquema narrativo, transformando-se de um romance de busca pela noiva em uma história sobre vingança feminina, o público é levado a questionar seu próprio entendimento acerca de até que ponto a história deveria ir e o que eles devem extrair dela. Como tal, este artigo foca na recepção do público. Tomando por base as discussões em torno de filmes do gênero *rape-revenge*, com especial atenção a *Promising Young Woman* (2020), este artigo defende que histórias de estupro e vingança feminina frequentemente rompem com a história que tentam narrar. A fim de oferecer um espaço para a ira e a vingança femininas, estas histórias não podem permanecer objetivas em relação à ideologia e ao gênero, mas devem propiciar movimentos em direção ao fantástico e o horrendo. Como tal, este artigo promove uma leitura de Ólöf que considera todas as reviravoltas da saga e permite que se mantenha uma sensação de desconforto.

Palavras-chave: Recepção, Literatura Nórdica Antiga, Estudos de Gênero, Estudos Cinematográficos, Violência

This article explores how rape, female anger, and female revenge take shape in and complicate the narrative of *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, an Old Norse-Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* (legendary saga).[2] *Hrólfs saga kraka* features various instances of sexual activity we would now consider rape, many followed by revenge rooted in female anger. These moments of sexual violence and vengeance are both necessary to the plot and yet also fracture something within the narrative. They furthermore complicate how the audience receives and responds to the involved characters, making for a potentially awkward reading experience. How a medieval audience would have responded to these scenes and the following revenge is difficult to retrace and therefore this article considers modern responses which may then illuminate potential medieval ones. The analysis will specifically focus on the episode between King Helgi and Queen Ólöf in the section sometimes called *Helga þáttr*, since this is where the fracture and complicated reception become most apparent, especially

with an eye towards the complex character of Ólöf, who rouses a variety of different feelings and responses in audiences. Is she a victim to the patriarchy or is she a monster, or is this a false dichotomy? Does she go too far in her revenge? Does her anger outweigh her victimhood?

To tease out what happens in *Helga þáttr* and how audiences might respond to the figure of Ólöf, impulses will be taken from modern rape-revenge films, more specifically the responses to and scholarship around *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The genre of rape-revenge films posits rape as a crime so horrible and singular that it cannot be resolved through legal means. Instead, the victim, almost always female, takes brutal, frequently violent and lethal, revenge against her rapist(s).[3] This is the set-up of such films as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Ms. 45* (1981), and *Revenge* (2017). Sometimes it is not the victim herself who takes revenge but her father, as in *The Virgin Spring* (1960), or a female friend, as in *Promising Young Woman*. Unlike medieval sagas, or most medieval texts, rape-revenge films are incredibly, sometimes perhaps harmfully, explicit in their depictions of rape and the subsequent revenge. They leave no doubt that sexual violence has taken place. Despite this visual clarity, however, they are also fractured and awkward texts that can seem unsure in their morals and intention. Regardless of its focus on vengeance, the genre itself is rooted in Western (European and American) discomfort with the notion of revenge, especially revenge undertaken by an outraged female character.[4] Various areas of concern come together here. There is the discomfort with sexual violence against women, the fear of female anger, the distrust of female experience and its reporting, and the societal and legal concern around violent vengeance. The genre shares these concerns, even if they are expressed differently, with texts such as *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Scholarship on these films might thus serve as a way of informing how we might approach the ideas of rape, female anger, and revenge in other cultural outputs like the sagas. Tracing modern reception and thinking around these issues will therefore be used to consider medieval responses since, as Kathryn Gravdal has noted, the medieval 'ideational coupling [between romance and heterosexual violence against women] remains firmly in place' (Gravdal, 1992, p. 562) in Western culture.

While reaching for modern rape-revenge films may appear odd at first glance, medieval texts and rape-revenge films in fact have a long history. One of the earliest examples of a rape-revenge narrative in cinema is the above-mentioned *The Virgin Spring* (original title: *Jungfrukällan*) by Ingmar Bergman, which is based on a thirteenth-century Swedish ballad, 'Törres döttrar i Wänge'. This same ballad, as well as *The Virgin Spring*, then provided inspiration for one of the first truly gory rape-revenge films, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) by Wes Craven (see Laity, 2007).

The ubiquity of film furthermore provides frequent points of comparison, especially when it comes to the effect and affect of texts. In 2003 Ármann Jakobsson referred to the film *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which can be classed among rape-revenge films, when discussing Ólöf and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, specifically with an eye to audience reception (Ármann Jakobsson, 2003, p. 179). One impulse behind this article, then, is to take that thought further and to see whether we can reconsider some of the discomfort caused by Ólöf's story by taking inspiration from how modern rape-revenge films are received.

The main aim of this article is to analyse what rape, female anger, and female vengeance seem to do within a *fornaldarsaga*. The focus thus lies predominantly on the medieval material. To explore how this text might work and what effect female anger and revenge have, the article is informed by the tradition of rape-revenge films and the associated scholarship. A concomitant aim is therefore to explore how the reception of modern cultural outputs might inform our understanding of how medieval texts were received. As such, this article proposes something of a reverse-Medievalism. Rather than exploring how medieval material informs new cultural output, the question will be how an understanding, or at the very least a consideration, of new material might inform our understanding of a medieval text. In this process one must naturally be careful not to engage in anachronism or back-diagnosing and thus the word "exploration" in the title is consciously chosen. The intention is not to reach hard and fast conclusions but rather to engage in a thought-experiment and open discussion.

I will first provide an overview of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, specifically *Helga þáttr*, and explore the problematic presence of the maiden-king Ólöf. From there, I will move into a discussion of the rape-revenge film tradition, *Promising Young Woman*, and the feminist scholarship that has emerged around it. I will then return to *Hrólfs saga kraka* and suggest a reading of Ólöf which highlights the benefit of an awkward, fractured reception.

Hrólfs saga kraka and Ólöf

Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans tells the story of the legendary King Hrólfr kraki and his ancestors. The first ten or so chapters deal with his father, King Helgi, and it is on this section, the *Helga þáttr*, that this article predominantly focuses. In the remainder of the saga, Hrólfr becomes king, collects a troop of men around him, and fights a last battle against his half-sister Skuld in which he dies. The saga remains to us in nearly sixty early modern manuscripts (see Driscoll, 2009), although 'it is gen-

erally agreed that the saga assumed essentially the form in which it now survives c. 1400' (Phelpstead, 2003, p. 1). The story of Hrólfr and his father Helgi is also retained in other texts, specifically in *Ynglinga saga*, *Gesta Danorum*, and the Latin retelling of *Skjöldunga saga* (see Kalinke, 1990, pp. 96–97). (Pseudo-)Historical and legendary material about Helgi and Hrólfr therefore existed and in various ways influenced the shape that *Hrólfs saga kraka* could take, as the saga is in conversation with these earlier texts.

One of those influences emerges in the ambiguity around the genre of the saga. Genre classification for Old Norse-Icelandic literature is a consistently complicated issue, since no poetics remain to us explaining how a medieval Icelandic audience might have categorised the sagas (see Bampi, 2020). *Hrólfs saga kraka* is commonly classed among the *fornaldarsögur* because of its chronotope, i.e., taking place before the settlement of Iceland in a legendary past and being set within Scandinavia, and its focus on legendary figures. However, *fornaldarsaga* is not a medieval designation but a modern term developed in the nineteenth century by C.C. Rafn (see Driscoll, 2009). Furthermore, it has been frequently noted that *Hrólfs saga kraka* does not seem to fully fit with other sagas given the same generic label. Marianne Kalinke argues, for example, that the *Helga þáttr* contains 'the motif of the misogamous maiden king of romance … transplanted into the realm of the heroic-mythological' (Kalinke, 1990, p. 95). The issue of where *Hrólfs saga kraka* belongs, among the romances or the legendary sagas, was also discussed by Ármann Jakobsson, who notes that the saga is 'an archetypal traditional *fornaldarsaga*, a *Heldensaga* with a tragic end, which nevertheless shows some similarities to both the translated Arthurian romances and indigenous Icelandic romances' (Ármann Jakobsson, 1999, p. 144). These different generic impulses show themselves in various ways throughout the saga, as traced by Ármann, but for the sake of this article it is especially intriguing to consider how it plays out with respect to the figures of King Helgi and the maiden-king Ólöf. It is in their story, namely, that a certain narrative fracture seems to emerge, a moment where the story that was being told moves into a drastically different direction due to the occurrence of rape. This fracture then opens up the narrative to female anger and female revenge and complicates how we receive both.

Helgi is first introduced alongside his older brother Hroar as their father, Hálfdan, is killed by their uncle and his brother, Fróði. The two go into hiding and, at the ripe ages of twelve and ten, avenge their father's death by killing Fróði, assisted by trustworthy men and their sister Signý. It is stated that '[þ]eir váru ólíkt skapi farnir bræðr. Hróarr var maðr hýrr ok hægr, en Helgi hermaðr mikill, ok þótti allt meira til hans koma' (the brothers were different in temperament: Hroar was a pleasant and easy

man, but Helgi was a great warrior and was thought to be of more promise, *Hrólf*. 13). The saga briefly discusses how both Helgi and Hroar settle into kingship, but it is clear that Helgi is the protagonist moving forward. The saga then introduces Ólöf as the queen of Saxland who 'var á þá leið sem herkonungar. Fór hún með skjöld ok brynju ok gyrð sverði ok hjálm á höfði. Þannig var henni háttat: væn at yfirliti en grimm í skapi ok stórmannlig' (behaved like a warrior king: she went about with a shield and byrnie and wore a sword and a helmet on her head. Such was her character that she was beautiful in appearance but grim and grand in nature, *Hrolf*. 14). Notably, Ólöf 'vildi þó engan mann eiga' (did not want to marry any man, *Hrólf*. 14), despite being a sought-after bride. Hearing of her, Helgi wants to marry Ólöf because 'þótti sér mikill frami í aukast at fá þessarar konu, hvárt sem henni væri þat viljugt vel eða miðr' (it appeared to him that there would be much to gain from marrying this woman, whether she was very willing or less so, *Hrólf*. 14). His desire to win Ólöf as his bride sets up the bridal quest which provides the structure for this *þáttr*.

Ólöf is in many ways a typical *meykongr*, or maiden-king, a figure singular to Old Norse-Icelandic storytelling (see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2012). The maiden-king has a number of defining features: she is a 'young, noble, unmarried woman, usually depicted as haughty, cruel, and, early in the tradition, armed. She rules her own kingdom, rejects all her suitors and mistreats them physically, verbally, or both' (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 107). This figure is shared between the *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, although she takes a slightly different form in each tradition. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is considered to be one of the earliest *fornaldarsögur* to feature a maiden-king, the figure of Þórbjörg, who takes on a masculine name and identity until she is conquered in battle by Hrólfr, whom she then marries after resuming a female identity. Among the *riddarasögur*, *Clári saga* appears prototypical. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir argues, this saga 'lavishes much more attention than earlier ones on the degradations that the *meykongr* and the suitor inflict on one another and especially the woman's humiliation and suffering, both physical and psychological, as punishment for her pride and cruel rejection of the suitor' (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2012, p. 235). Violence, then, is an essential element of these narratives, a violence which goes both ways but should always end with the female character submitting to the male character in marriage. Female anger is equally important however, as the maiden-king's actions are fuelled by her outrage at being proposed to; female anger is therefore a driving factor in these kinds of narratives. This is especially notable, for example, in the *riddarasaga Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, where the maiden-king Sedentiana's rage defines her characterisation (see Sif, 2017, pp. 145–174; Witte, 2026, pp. 119–127). *Hrólfs saga kraka* employs the figure of the

maiden-king in a narrative that appears to be that of a bridal quest, but as will be shown below, the episode does not end as one would expect from similar texts.

Helgi arrives in Saxland with a troop and demands a feast from Queen Ólöf. When she is informed of his arrival, the saga takes the time to say that 'kom þetta á hana óvart, ok var engi kostr liði at safna' (this came as a surprise to her and it was not possible to gather her troops, *Hrólf*. 15). With this brief reference to Ólöf's troops it becomes clear that this is a situation she would have preferably fought off, but she is unable to do so. Consequently, she organises a feast and accepts that Helgi seats himself next to her. The saga states that 'drekka nú bæði samt um kveldit, ok skortir þar ekki neitt, ok fann engi ógleði á Ólöfu drottningu' (they drank together throughout the evening and nothing was lacking nor was any unhappiness to be found in queen Ólöf, *Hrólf*. 15). Helgi then says that he wishes this feast to be their wedding feast, stating further that '"skulum vit bæði byggja eina rekkju í nótt"' ("we two shall sleep in one bed tonight", *Hrólf*. 15). The proposal of marriage is often the moment where the anger of the maiden-king emerges, since she considers it an insult against her identity and position as king. In the case of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, however, the proposal is immediately followed by the implicit naming, as well as expectation, of sex. Furthermore, the maiden-king is usually surrounded by her own people and in a position of strength, while *Hrólfs saga kraka* has made clear that this is not the case for Ólöf. This may be why she does not immediately erupt in anger at the proposal but rather attempts to politely refuse. Ólöf argues this has all moved too fast and that surely Helgi is a courteous man who would not want to wed her 'með svívirðingu' (with dishonour, *Hrólf*. 15). Helgi replies that it would nonetheless be 'makligt fyrir dramblæti sitt ok stórlæti, – "at vit búum nú bæði saman slíka stund sem mér líkar"' (fitting because of her haughtiness and pride "that we two be together for such a time as suits me", *Hrólf*. 15). What emerges from this scene is a threat to Ólöf which does not merely affect her position in society but is also sexual and physical in nature. What we see here are the 'intersecting strands of power, pressure, and coercion', which (Bonsal and Piercy, 2025, p. 20), which Jane Bonsall and Hannah Piercy centred in their reconsideration of consent and coercion in medieval literature. Helgi makes it clear that regardless of whether she is willing, he will go through with both the marriage and the sexual intercourse. This is also not presented as an action fuelled by passion or love, but rather is explicitly linked to Ólöf's pride, meaning that the threat of unwanted sex is here employed as a corrective against an overly independent female character.

Ólöf does not seem to be in a position to outright refuse, which means that her only avenue of response is to play along. As such, the drinking continues and the

saga takes care to again note Ólöf's disposition and, crucially, how it is perceived: 'er drottning allkát, ok finnr engi annat á henni en hún hyggi allgott til ráðahagsins' (the queen is very cheerful and no one saw anything of her but that she thought well of the marriage, *Hrólf*. 15).[5] Ólöf carefully shields what may be her true feelings about the situation, both from the intradiegetic audience (meaning the text-internal audience, i.e., Helgi and those at the feast) and from the extradiegetic audience (meaning the text-external audience that is hearing or reading the saga). She then waits for him in bed, where he falls asleep due to the drinking, sticks him with a sleeping thorn, and waits until they are entirely alone. Then she 'rakaði þá af honum hárit allt ok neri í tjöru. Síðan tók hún eitt húðfat ok lét þar í koma nokkur klæði. Eftir þat tekr hún konunginn ok reifar hann innan í þessu húðfati. Síðan fær hún til menn ok lætr flytja hann til sinna skipa' (shaved off all his hair and smeared him with tar. Next, she took a leather sack and put some clothes into it. After this, she takes the king and shoves him into that sack. Then she calls to her people and has him carried to his ships, *Hrólf*. 16). Due to the sleeping thorn, Helgi does not awaken during all of this until his own men open the sack and the thorn falls out. He 'er nú í illu skapi til drottningar' (is now in a bad mood with the queen, *Hrólf*. 16) and his men also believe that he was 'svívirðiliga leikinn' (disgracefully tricked, *Hrólf*. 16), but Ólöf has taken the intervening time to gather her troops, meaning there is no way for Helgi to respond. Helgi returns home 'með þessa sneypu ok svívirðing ok unir nú stórilla ok hugsar oft, hversu hann megi fá á drottningu hefnt' (with this dishonour and disgrace. He was deeply unhappy about this and often wondered how he might be avenged against the queen, *Hrólf*. 16). So far, *Helga þáttr* aligns well with the bridal quest structure familiar from other maiden-king narratives.

It is not merely Helgi who has thoughts about Ólöf's actions. To highlight the wider reception of her actions, the saga also employs the voice of public opinion: 'Þykkir öllum in mestu ódæmi, er hún skyldi hafa spottat slíkan konung' (Everyone thought it a great misdeed that she had mocked such a king, *Hrólf*. 17). The narrative voice of the sagas frequently employs the voice of public opinion, marked out as such by phrases like 'þykkir öllum' (everyone thought), to explain how actions are received within the world of the story, but it also serves to guide the extradiegetic audience in its evaluations of the characters (see Merkelbach, 2019, pp. 149–174). As Phelpstead proposes, this 'disapproval voiced against Ólof in *Hrólfs saga* makes it quite clear that she is felt to be transgressing the boundaries of acceptable gendered behavior [and] it is difficult not to read Ólof's portrait as essentially misogynist' (Phelpstead, 2003, p. 4). Ólöf's actions, then, are not merely a rejection of a suitor, they are positioned as a misdeed against societal norms. This emerges clearly in

the shaving of the hair, which is an offence against Helgi's kingship and masculinity due to 'the symbolic associations of hair, masculinity, and royal power' (Phelpstead, 2013, p. 5). Phelpstead has also suggested that 'Ólof humiliates Helgi, the would-be rapist, in a manner appropriate to his intentions and symbolic of her subversion of gender roles: by penetrating one of *his* bodily orifices' (Phelpstead, 2003, p. 6, emphasis his) with the sleeping thorn. While there are undoubtedly misogynistic overtones in Ólöf's depiction, it is worth questioning, however, whether it is *her* portrayal that is shown to be so or whether we can posit that the *reaction* to her, her context, is shown to be misogynistic.

Ólöf responds to Helgi's actions with humiliation and dismissal which directly attacks Helgi's masculinity and his position in society. This is, it must be noted, exactly what is to be expected of a maiden-king figure, as the violence enacted upon a suitor by a maiden-king is a key feature of the stories within which she appears. A responding violence is then also required from the suitor, however, and Helgi can indeed not let the shame he suffered stand. He secretly returns to Ólöf's lands with a treasure and dresses as a beggar. As Ólöf's greed is well-known, he convinces a slave to tell her about the treasure and to secretly bring her to the woods. The slave does so, at which point Helgi 'grípr hana höndum ok segir þá vera skapligan fund þeira at hefna sinnar svívirðingar' (grips her hands and says that their meeting was the fitting moment to avenge his disgrace, *Hrólf*. 18). In response, Ólöf 'sagðist hafa illa breytt við hann, – "ok vil ek þat nú allt bæta við þik, ok gerðu til mín brúðkaup sæmiligt"' (said she had dealt badly with him, "and I now want to improve matters with you and you will arrange my bridal feast honourably, *Hrólf*. 18). Helgi refuses, however, saying instead: '"eigi skal þér þess kostr. Skaltu fara til skipa með mér ok vera þar þá stund, sem mér líkar, því at ek nenni eigi fyrir metnaðar sakir at hefna þér engu, svá illa sem ek var leikinn ok háðuliga"' ("that is not possible for you. You shall come aboard the ships with me and be there a while, as long as pleases me, because for my pride's sake I cannot bear to have no vengeance on you, with how badly and shamefully I was played", *Hrólf*. 18–19). The saga states briefly that Helgi sleeps with her multiple nights, presumably against her will, before sending her home. Of Ólöf it is said that 'unir hún stórilla við hag sinn' (she is deeply unhappy with her circumstances, *Hrólf*. 19), which directly mirrors how Helgi felt after his humiliation at her hands.

Hrólfs saga kraka partakes in the understatement usual to Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, but what it presents here is a female character fending off marriage and (marital) rape and being raped across multiple nights as revenge for this rejection. Grace O'Duffy has recently done important work on uncovering how sexual violence is depicted and discussed in the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, noting 'a ple-

thora of euphemistic or ambiguous terms, as well as several recurring words, by which sexual violence is either referred or inferred' (O'Duffy, 2025, pp. 25–26). In this instance, although it is not stated in explicit terms, the rape can be inferred. It is crucial to restate, as was mentioned above, that the violent back and forth between a maiden-king and her suitor is a key element of maiden-king and bridal quest narratives. What we see here is similar to what Kathryn Gravdal noted in medieval French romance, namely that the 'elision of the actual representation of rape leads the audience to ignore the physicality of assault and its literal consequences for the female victim' (Gravdal, 1992, p. 569), with the audience instead focusing on notions of romance and chivalry. The same occurs in *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, for example, where Sedentiana violently rejects a suitor and is then raped and humiliated by his disguised brother, Sigurðr, across three nights. *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* remains coherent within its generic and narrative form by having Sedentiana and Sigurðr marry at the end. While this ending might not appear like a happy end to a modern audience, it is the proper ending to this kind of narrative and is intended to resolve the cycle of violence and transgression which preceded it. This is possible because the rape is followed by a happy marriage, which aids in eliding it, but when this is absent, as in *Helga þáttr*, it forces a reconsideration of the assault. Helgi breaks the pattern when he rejects Ólöf's suggestion of marriage after he has captured her. Ólöf's submission is dictated by the genre, but the expected acceptance on the part of Helgi is missing. This further serves to transform the moment of rape in the narrative, since it is not "corrected" into something more acceptable by a subsequent marriage.

It is here, then, that a fracture occurs and that the text becomes somewhat difficult to interpret. Marianne Kalinke has discussed this breaking of the pattern and it is worth quoting her at length:

> As soon as the hero no longer abides by the rules of romance but enters the heroic realm, the heroine follows suit. Until the decisive departure from the maiden-king pattern – generated by the necessity to provide plausible motivation for the subsequent incest – the author of the *Helga þáttr* has spun a credible maiden-king romance. Once the hero rejects the woman who is prepared to submit to him, however, the reader acquainted with maiden-king tales realizes that the world of romance had been a mere façade (Kalinke, 1990, pp. 100–101).

Helgi fractures the saga and therefore Ólöf does not become a loyal and dutiful wife to a noble king. The saga thus becomes something hybrid, best summarised by Johanna Denzin in the title of a chapter: *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comic, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral … romance' (see Denzin, 2008). This fracturing furthermore,

as Kalinke notes, affects how the audience receives the narrative. The atmosphere of romance is disrupted and reveals its dark underbelly; the audience's trust, both in the story and in their own reaction to it, is broken. It was discussed above how the pre-existing material around Helgi and Hrólfr established certain boundaries and preconditions for the saga. This departure from its own romance structure is also demanded by these earlier tales. As O'Duffy notes, it is because of 'the need to conform to the [previous] matter, [that] Helgi steps outside of the romance genre' (O'Duffy, 2025, p. 199). He must become the father of Hrólfr, but it is not Ólöf who is Hrólfr's mother. The two cannot end up in wedded bliss because the story demands something else in order to align with what is known to be "true", despite what the narrative initially suggested. Helgi thus sends Ólöf back home, humiliated but alive, thereby opening the narrative door to a different story of female anger and female revenge.

Ólöf does take revenge, which leads to the incest mentioned by Kalinke. She returns home pregnant and gives birth to a girl she calls Yrsa, after her dog. The fact that Ólöf becomes pregnant itself complicates issues of consent, as ideas of the "consent of the flesh" and two-seed theory suggested that pregnancy indicated enjoyment and therefore negated rape (see Cooper, 2024, pp. 109–124). Ólöf's unhappiness is clear, however, as she neglects the girl and has her raised by shepherds. Helgi returns to the scene of the crime years later, once again dressed as a beggar, to see what has happened to Ólöf. He instead sees Yrsa and falls in love with her at first sight. He states that they will marry and although Yrsa 'bað hann þat eigi gera, en hann tekr hana sem áðr ok hefr sik til skipa ok siglir síðan heim í sitt ríki' (asked him not to do this, he takes her back to the ships and sails home to his kingdom, *Hrólf*. 20). At the same time 'Ólöf drottning varð fláráð við þetta ok eigi heilbrjóstuð, þá er hún vissi. Lét hún sem hún vissi ei, hvat um var, ok gerði þat í hug sér, at þetta mundi Helga konungi vera til harms ok svívirðingar' (Queen Ólöf became deceitful at this and not well-intentioned, when she found it out. She acts as if she did not know what was going on and thought to herself that this would lead to King Helgi's grief and disgrace, *Hrólf*. 20). Ólöf's initial revenge against Helgi takes two different forms. On the one hand there is the disregard with which she treats their daughter, which might arguably also stem from trauma. On the other, there is her refusal to intervene when Helgi's own behaviour once again sees him take possession of a woman.

There is a further step in her revenge, however. When Ólöf hears that Helgi and Yrsa are in fact quite happy together, she travels to them and sends word to Yrsa. When the two meet, Yrsa invites Ólöf home with her, but Ólöf states that 'þat eigi vilja, kveðst engang sóma eiga at launa Helga konungi' (she does not want that,

explaining there is no honour to repay King Helgi, *Hrólf*. 25). Yrsa demands to know her true parentage, accusing Ólöf (correctly) of having treated her '"[ó]virðuliga"' ("shamefully", *Hrólf*. 25). Ólöf promises to reveal what she knows but first asks whether Yrsa is happy in her marriage. When Yrsa responds positively, Ólöf states '"Ekki er svá gott við at una sem þér þykki … því at hann er faðir þinn, en þú ert dóttir mín"' ("Your love is not as good as you seem to think … because he is your father and you are my daughter", *Hrólf*. 25). Their following conversation complicates a simple view of Ólöf's revenge somewhat:

> Yrsa mælti: "Mína ætla ek móðurina versta vera ok grímmasta, því at þetta er þau ódæmi, er eigi munu fyrnast um aldr." "Helga hefir þú goldit at í þessu," segir Ólöf, "ok reiði minnar, en nú vil ek bjóða þér til mín með sæmd ok virðingu ok gera til þín í alla staði eftir því, sem ek kann bezt." Yrsa segir: "Eigi veit ek, hvernig þat gefst, en eigi mun ek hér vera, þegar ek veit þessi ódæmi, sem á liggja." (*Hrólf*. 25–26)
>
> Yrsa spoke: "It appears to me that I have the worst and cruellest mother because this is such a misdeed that it will never be forgotten." "You have Helgi to thank in this," says Ólöf, "and my anger, but now I want you to come with me in honour and respect. I will behave as best I can towards you in all things." Yrsa says: "I do not know what that will bring, but I cannot stay here now that I know about this misdeed which oppresses us."

Helgi attempts to convince her to stay, but Yrsa goes to Saxland with Ólöf.

It is intriguing that this final part of Ólöf's revenge takes place in a conversation with Yrsa, rather than with Helgi. She reveals the incestuous nature of the marriage to their daughter, rather than to the man who raped her. It might appear as if Ólöf is continuing to punish Yrsa for being a living reminder of her ordeal, and that is a possible reading of the situation. However, this is somewhat undercut by Ólöf's desire to take Yrsa home with her and treat her well. The hurt Ólöf is causing Helgi is absolutely channelled through Yrsa, who is hurt in the process herself, but it is also a much more decisive blow against Helgi than anything Ólöf might have done on her own. Yrsa is not taken from Helgi by force, but through the shame his own actions have caused. It is worth remembering that while Yrsa came to love Helgi, she asked him not to take her when they first met. It is Helgi's consistent transgressions which cause shame and it is by revealing these actions that Ólöf gains her final revenge. It is also worth noting the accountability Ólöf seems to take towards Yrsa. She notes that it is not merely Helgi who is to blame for Yrsa's misery, but also her own 'reiði' (anger). The narrative voice has not described Ólöf as angry in the saga, but as proud, cheerful, avaricious, and, after her second encounter with Helgi, sad. As was suggested above, however, Ólöf is excellent at concealing her real thoughts and feelings when necessary and so her anger is present in the subtext, rather than at the

surface of the narrative. The pain it has caused Yrsa is explicitly Ólöf's ill-treatment of her, but also Ólöf's inaction when Helgi took her. Her anger, then, takes the shape of both action and inaction, an active imposition of neglect and poverty on Yrsa and a passive sitting-back when something happens to her which Ólöf knows to be bad.

There are two words which echo throughout *Helga þáttr*. One of these is the noun 'svívirðing', usually translated as shame, disgrace, or humiliation, and its associated adjective, 'svívirðiliga'. This is how Ólöf perceives Helgi's proposal, how Helgi's men perceive him on the ship, how he thinks of what Ólöf has done to him, and what Ólöf hopes will happen to him once he takes Yrsa with him. Grace O'Duffy also notes the role played by 'svívirðing' which 'is nucleic within *Helga þáttr*, acting as the verbal axle upon which [Ólöf's] and Helgi's back [and] forth is affixed' (O'Duffy, 2025, p. 205). The other crucial word is 'ódæmi', which is a little less straightforward. Baetke glosses it as 'was ohne Beispiel ist, etwas Unerhörtes, ungeheuerliche Tat' ('what is without example, something unheard of, an outrageous deed', Baetke, s.v. 'ódœmi'). I have translated it somewhat coldly as 'misdeed' in the above passages, where it is employed by the voice of public opinion to describe Ólöf's actions and then by Yrsa in reference to the incest, for which Ólöf is at least partially to blame. What this episode in the saga turns on, then, are questions of shame and humiliation, which are applied to both female and male pride and to the transgression of female anger and female vengeance.

In Ólöf's final appearance, she welcomes King Aðils and somewhat encourages his proposal to Yrsa. When Yrsa departs with him and Helgi's misery at this is explained, the saga simply remarks that 'Ólöf er nú burt ór sögunni' (Ólöf is now out of the saga, *Hrólf*. 27). This might appear like a rather curt dismissal to readers unfamiliar with the sagas, but it is in fact a rote phrase which appears across various saga genres. It is nonetheless unusual here because of the role Ólöf has played in the saga. She has just been accused of being a monstrous mother and yet she is allowed to gracefully leave the saga without any overt punishment. She has taken brutal, if not actively violent, revenge for the rape she suffered, thereby inflicting suffering onto not just Helgi but also her daughter Yrsa, and yet she can seemingly go back to playing a good mother and suffer no other consequences. This discordance has led to the complicated reception of Ólöf. Her actions can appear as 'an escapist feminine fantasy in which a female audience could envisage a method of defending themselves from rape' (O'Duffy, 2025, p. 197), but it is also true that she is 'depicted as cruel, vicious, and scheming' (Jóhanna Katrín, 2013, p. 82). How do we, as an audience, respond to a text which seems to break with its own rules and presents such a conflicting picture of one of its characters? Must we choose a side in the false

dichotomy of victim and monster or is it possible to allow both sides to exist?[6] It is here that modern rape-revenge films and the scholarship around it might be able to shed some light onto what goes on in and with her character.

Rape-Revenge Films

Horror and rape-revenge films have a long history, which means it is not possible to give a full overview of its associated scholarship here (see Heller-Nichols, 2021). Instead, I will highlight a number of aspects that are relevant to the discussion of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. As mentioned at the start of this article, rape-revenge films have something of a formula to them, which is refracted almost kaleidoscopically in every individual iteration of the genre. What is at the core of these films is the rape of (usually) a female character, her survival, and her revenge. This revenge is mostly aimed at the rapist(s) themselves but can also involve bystanders/onlookers who did nothing to prevent the rape. The genre fully emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and it is worth considering, as Olivia Zolciak does, that these early rape-revenge films were 'the most brutal manifestations of men's control over women's cinematic images' (Zolciak, 2025, p. 309). She continues that despite possible feminist readings of these films, 'men have historically created rape-revenge films for male audiences' (Zolciak, 2025, p. 309). Rape-revenge films are thus products of a patriarchal culture and therefore they are deeply influenced by a patriarchal ideology and worldview. However, such texts in and of themselves often become a way to test that self-same ideology, thereby occasionally stumbling into something approaching feminist politics.

To test its own patriarchal ideology, the horror film genre, which includes rape-revenge films, makes use of female characters and thereby creates what Barbara Creed has termed the "monstrous-feminine" as well as the Final Girl, as defined by Carol J. Clover. The monstrous-feminine, so Creed, 'might serve the desire of patriarchal ideology to portray women as a threat to male power, and the stability of the symbolic order of law and language' (Creed, 1993/2024, p. xv). The monstrous-feminine emerges in imagery of the witch in *Carrie* (1976), the archaic, parthenogenetic mother and ideas of the vagina dentata in the *Alien* franchise, and the femme castratrice in rape-revenge films like *I Spit on Your Grave*. This monstrous-feminine figure must frequently be (at least somewhat) defeated by the end of the film so order can be reestablished. The Final Girl appears at first sight like a very different kind of female character. She starts as a victim, is the one who 'perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril', and is 'abject terror personified', but she is also

'the one who did not die: the survivor' (Clover, 1993, p. 35). She appears most often in slasher films where she demonstrates that 'gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane' (Clover, 1993, p. 46), as she unites masculine features with her femininity. Clover argued that it was feminism which gave 'a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge' (Clover, 1993, p. 4). I would argue that in the victim-avenger of the rape-revenge film, these two figures come together. The rape-avenger experiences terror and survives, before turning into a monstrous-feminine survivor who in turn dishes out terror and death.

This testing of ideology is not original to the horror film or modern art but also takes place within medieval literature. I have explored elsewhere how the patriarchal ideology of male dominance expressed in Old Norse-Icelandic literature 'is consistently contested through the presence of female characters who reveal the fractures within this ideology by exercising power and authority in their own right and on their own behalf' (Witte, 2026, p. 25). This is true for *Hrólfs saga kraka* as well which, as Phelpstead argues, reflects a '"man's world" [in which] the female is seen as threatening' (Phelpstead, 2003, p. 21). The way these female characters, who move into the monstrous, are delineated is through their willingness to avenge insults against themselves and their free access to rage. Female anger provides something of a gateway both to survival and monstrosity because it is a deeply complex cultural issue. Jilly Boyce Kay puts it well when she states that 'within the long history of western civilisation, women's anger has been construed as deviant, monstrous or otherwise taboo' (Kay, 2019, p. 591). Anger does not align with the submissive, nurturing, and quiet image of femininity demanded by the patriarchal status quo in the West, but there is a further purpose behind the taboo placed on female anger and behind the concerted effort to make it appear dangerous, transgressive, and toxic. Myisha Cherry argues for 'anger's uses for preventing injustice and pursuing justice' (Cherry, 2021, p. 62) and this has been recognised by many in various social and political contexts (see Lorde, 1997). In disallowing women anger, society kneecaps them when it comes to advocating for themselves. Female anger remains a highly sensitive topic socially even in the twenty-first century, which leads Caroline Reitz to question how women 'get the power of disruption [represented by anger] necessary for justice without the toxicity' (Reitz, 2024, p. 4) associated with it. Rape-revenge films might not, at a first glance, appear like a productive forum within which nuanced issues about gender, structures of repression, and violence can be worked out, and yet it is exactly these films which focus most intensely on female anger and female revenge.

Margrethe Bruun Vaage has recently highlighted that rape-revenge films 'are films about anger – and they trigger anger in the spectator as well' (Vaage, 2024, p. 4). What is crucial about Vaage's work is that she centres the female spectator in her analysis, whereas much theorising around horror films generally and rape-revenge films specifically, has focused on the male viewer (see Mulvey, 1975; Clover, 1993, p. 7). Female audiences for horror have been consistently understudied (see Vosper, 2021), although recent discussions of the huge female audience for true crime may lead to further investigations. Due to her focus on female audiences, Vaage uncovers new aspects of the affective nature of rape-revenge films which are relevant to the discussion here. As she notes, it is not merely the explicit depictions of rape which make these films uncomfortable for many: '[a]t the core of the controversy around the rape-revenge film stands a woman who is raped and who turns angry and violent: this is a revenge fantasy' (Vaage, 2024, p. 1). The presence of fantasy is, so Vaage, key to how rape-revenge films work. She argues that these films 'stir up a real fear of rape and then a response [i.e., vindictive anger] to it that is off limits in real life, stepping out of realism and into a clearly imaginary sphere' (Vaage, 2024, p. 30). Therefore, the rape-avenger is transformed after the rape, which 'opens up a fantasy space where the conventional delineation between the feminine and masculine is negotiated, which is what allows her to turn violently punitive' (Vaage, 2024, p. 34). This transformation of the victim is crucial because 'making her so clearly fictional, almost mythological, is a way of making it easier for the spectator to enjoy her violent revenge' (Vaage, 2024, p. 45). Expressive anger and violence are culturally taboo for women in the anglophone, European West, but by crafting a female character who clearly exists outside of our own, primary world, the rape-revenge film, so Vaage, 'facilitates engagement with her' (Vaage, 2024, p. 45; see also Vaage, 2024, pp. 80–104). In doing so, these films enable the (female) audience to experience anger when they otherwise might not allow themselves to feel, let alone express, this emotion.

This is a complicated experience for audiences and therefore triggers strong, often contrasting, responses, which in and of themselves reveal the complexity of rape, anger, and revenge as narrative themes. *Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell, is a relatively recent film which is categorised as a rape-revenge film, although it sits somewhat awkwardly in the genre. This awkwardness, however, has led to a significant amount of both popular and scholarly reception and this is why it provides an intriguing point of comparison for *Hrólfs saga kraka*. While this article does not actively analyse the film, it is worth briefly summarising it. *Promising Young Woman* centres on Cassie who dropped out of medical school after her

best friend Nina was date-raped by a fellow student named Al. Nina later commits suicide after not being taken seriously. The film begins some years later and shows Cassie taking revenge by proxy in various ways. She pretends to be drunk at bars to then terrify the men trying to take advantage of her by asking them soberly what they think they are doing. She sets up a female friend, Madison, who disbelieved and blamed Nina, to become black-out drunk and question what happened to her. She confronts the Dean for her inaction, making her believe (incorrectly) that Cassie has set up her own daughter to be raped. When Cassie goes to meet Al's lawyer, she finds that he is already broken by the experience and calls off the revenge she had planned against him. During all of this, she tentatively begins a relationship with Ryan, also a fellow student, which means that the film's tone shifts from a rape-revenge thriller to something approaching a romcom. This is broken, however, when Madison shows Cassie a video of Nina's rape, in which Ryan's voice can be heard. This sets Cassie on the path of her final revenge against Al, who is about to get married. She shows up to his bachelor party dressed as a stripper and drugs all the men present, except for Al. She ties him to a bed and wants to carve Nina's name into his stomach, but he manages to overpower her and suffocates her to death with a pillow. What follows is a coda apparently insisted upon by the studio (McEntee, 2022, n.p.), which means the film now ends on a somewhat odd note. The police show up at Al's wedding reception to arrest him for Cassie's murder, not Nina's rape, as Cassie informed the lawyer of her location in case she went missing. The final shot is of a text message she scheduled to be sent to Ryan, saying that this is the end, followed by a winky face emoji.

There were a lot of different reactions to *Promising Young Woman* when it first came out and there has been more discussion of its politics, style, and story since then. Some, like Ayesha A. Siddiqi felt that the film 'punish[es] women, absolve[s], men, and let[s] the cops handle the rest' (Siddiqi, 2021, n.p.), while for others it was a 'playfully provocative and ingenious rape-revenge satire' (Bradshaw 2021, n.p.). In short, it was considered a divisive and sometimes baffling movie, its combination of pop culture femininity (popping bubble gum, references to Britney Spears' outfits in *Toxic*, pastel colours, and pop soundtrack) with the serious topics of rape, revenge, and murder striking a discordant note for many (re-)viewers (see Haegele, 2024, p. 196). Haegele explores the response to the film through the lens of popfeminist awkwardness, building on the work of Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle. They proposed awkwardness as 'a theoretical tool for political interpretation' (Smith-Prei and Stehle, 2015, p. 133), which 'evokes feminist traditions of creative work, but … also points to their failures – including the failure to create the desired effects' (ibid,

p. 134). Haegele notes this awkwardness especially towards the end of *Promising Young Woman*, where 'the long take of [Cassie's] murder creates an awkwardness that intercepts the feminist revenge fantasy (commercial feminism) and brings us back into the crude and unremarkable reality of sexual assault in everyday life (a concern of political feminism)' (Haegele, 2024, p. 198). The same awkwardness is noted by her in the closing scene, which seems to turn its back on this reality and thus 'renders affectively palpable the cruel optimism' (ibid., p. 200) of the law coming in to save the day.

Because of this awkwardness and ambiguity, *Promising Young Woman* has been seen both as a new feminist take on rape-revenge films and as a betrayal of everything won by the #MeToo and modern feminist movements (see Sielke, 2024). This divisiveness emerges in part out of its ambiguous genre, moving from a rape-revenge narrative into a romcom and back, but also due to its refusal to align with the fantasy so crucial, as Vaage noted above, to the rape-revenge story. While Cassie dresses up and thereby transforms for her final revenge, she does not become some kind of mythical avenger figure but remains a very real woman who can be and is killed. Cassie's anger is also an issue within the film, with various other characters asking her to just let the issue go. Director Emerald Fennell herself has stated that she finds anger and the release of it frightening (Bástien 2021, n.p.). She does not merely target the original rapist; she casts a wide net to trap all those who *might* become one. In the process she also confronts other women, such as Madison and the Dean, who facilitate sexual assault and violence through excuses and by looking away. Finally, Cassie does not get to walk away from her revenge unscathed but is killed, gruesomely, and yet she seems to have the last, discordant, laugh.

What the various responses to *Promising Young Woman* demonstrate is that texts about rape, female anger, and revenge are consistently mired in ambiguity, complexity, discomfort, and awkwardness. The earliest rape-revenge films were violent, gory, and deeply predicated upon the male gaze, thereby proving difficult texts to view through a feminist lens. As female directors took on the rape-revenge genre and issues of sexual assault took centre stage in popular discourse, a different viewpoint was introduced but, as *Promising Young Woman* proves, this did not automatically remove the ambiguity inherent to these issues. What emerges out of the tradition of rape-revenge films and the concomitant scholarship and popular reception, then, is that narratives about female anger and female revenge are marked by conversations about the patriarchal status quo, female monstrosity as rooted in anger, and the role of fantasy. Cassie, as an example of a complicated modern rape-avenger, attempts to address not just a singular rapist but what is known as "rape culture" generally.

Her anger is one which hides behind bubble gum and rainbow-coloured wigs but is nonetheless potent and catalytical. Finally, her ending shatters some of the fantasy of the rape-revenge genre and leaves the audience unsure of where it stands.

Reconsidering Ólöf and *Helga þáttr*

The audience might be similarly unsure of what to do with Ólöf, not just at the end but at various points throughout *Helga þáttr*. This is definitely true for a modern audience but might also have been true for a medieval one. As Ólöf fends off Helgi's initial advances, an audience might consider this part of the bridal quest's tit-for--tat violence, finding a certain enjoyment in it. But when *Hrólfs saga kraka* blurs its generic boundaries, the narrative, and thereby the fantasy that was being projected, breaks. In raping and then rejecting Ólöf, Helgi causes Ólöf's anger and subsequent revenge, paving the way for a different kind of story. In doing so, the audience also comes face to face with the question of whether what follows is justified or not. Ólöf is cruel to their daughter Yrsa, does not prevent her rape and abduction by her own father, and then confronts Yrsa with the harsh truth. From this it might appear as if Yrsa is the target of Ólöf's revenge, rather than Helgi, yet the saga itself states that all of this was done to cause Helgi misery and humiliation. What these twists and turns have truly done, however, is uncover the lasting damage caused by sexual violence against women, meaning that the audience has to sit with the uncomfortable reality that easy vengeance cannot be gained and that a happy marriage does not undo the damage. Despite her status as maiden-king, Ólöf cannot summon an army to avenge her crimes. Despite their love, Yrsa now also cannot move on from the knowledge of where she came from. In the same way, the audience cannot continue with the story it was expecting.

What emerges from the preceding discussion of rape-revenge films and specifically *Promising Young Woman* is that ambiguity and awkwardness, the blurring of boundaries, and a somewhat unsatisfying ending might be the point of narratives such as this. Rape, violence, and female anger are intensely complicated and sensitive issues which have long been a part of our cultural outputs, be they sagas, ballads, or films. What is intriguing about both *Helga þáttr* and *Promising Young Woman* is that they are not focused on merely one female character who experiences violence and avenges this in a fantastic, extra-legal way. Instead, they are stories where the pervasiveness of violence against women is made clear. Helgi violates multiple women, consistently acting against their stated will, and *Promising Young Woman* is full of male, and notably female, characters who are willing to do the same. By breaking

the fantasy that rape is a singular thing which can be directly and violently avenged, they create complicated narratives in which no one emerges as a hero and that make their audiences uncomfortable.

As Ármann Jakobson notes, Ólöf is a 'veritable amazon' (Ármann Jakobsson, 2003, p. 178) who might gain respect from the audience in how she initially rebuffs Helgi, but she is also 'wicked, arrogant, treacherous, and dangerous' (ibid., p. 182). However, there is equally, as Grace O'Duffy notes, 'a shift in Ólöf's character from cruelty to kindness' (O'Duffy, 2025, p. 205). These shifts in perception are possible because of the fractured nature of the saga itself, which sets up one kind of story and then breaks its own promise. It thereby makes use of the maiden-king motif, which moves somewhat into the monstrous-feminine, but also touches on what we have come to know as the Final Girl, a woman who experiences terror and suffering but moves through it to survive. In the process, she wreaks vengeance and the pain this causes others, especially Yrsa, can be difficult to accept. Throughout it all, Ólöf's anger is a quiet presence, not named until it has passed and she asks her daughter for forgiveness.

Just like many female rape-avengers, Ólöf disappears from the narrative as if no true consequences exist for her actions, but her continued presence in the subtext of the saga, much like Cassie's final wink at the audience, suggests that her story is not quite over. There are unanswered questions about Ólöf, about the things she did, and about how her actions have made the audience feel. No one single interpretation or reading of her can fully encapsulate the development Ólöf goes through. I would therefore propose that, building off of rape-revenge films, we allow the awkwardness and the discomfort to remain. This oddness may very well be a key reason why the saga has remained popular for centuries, providing a forum within which such difficult themes can be discussed. In stories of sexual violence, female anger, and female revenge, narrative fractures seem the most productive both to express the complexity of these themes and to create space for their discussion. In turning to rape-revenge films, it becomes clear that the saga's switching of narrative or generic modes is in fact conducive to crafting a tale of female anger and revenge which allows for its complexity to emerge.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to discuss Ólöf and her complicated portrayal in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. She is in many ways a unique character in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, being a female character who takes angry vengeance and can then gently disappear

from the narrative. Her character invites strong reactions, each of which threatens to gloss over aspects of her depiction. However, the reading suggested here encourages the audience to remain with the ambiguity and awkwardness and to thereby reject the dichotomy of either victim or monster. Modern cultural outputs, be they rape-revenge films or high art, frequently demonstrate such ambiguity on purpose in order to encourage their audiences to critically engage with the themes that have been addressed. The same could very much be true for a saga like *Hrólfs saga kraka* which depicts deeply flawed heroes and kings and complicated victim-avengers.

In drawing upon scholarship around rape-revenge films, the aim has been to argue that the conflicting feelings an audience may have towards Ólöf are, to some extent, the point. She is not meant to be either a victim or a monster, but rather she represents a complicated response to a variety of narrative demands and social tensions. The turn in genre, the move towards the fantastical or, in the case of *Helga þáttr*, from the romantic to the heroic/realist, allows a narrative to confront its own audience with their expectations of a story. Our perception of the violence enacted upon and by Ólöf changes with the story direction, forcing us to consistently confront our thoughts about female anger and female revenge.

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Notes

1 Due to the nature of the topics discussed here, I would like to provide readers with a warning. While I do my best to be as considerate and respectful in my discussion as possible, this article contains discussions of rape, physical violence and death, and incest. Readers should proceed at their own discretion.

2 All Old Norse quotes are taken from *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, I, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, Reyjkavík, 1950), pp. 1–105 and references will follow as 'quote' (trans., Hrólf. p.n.). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

3 There are of course exceptions to this rule. One of the first rape-revenge films, *Deliverance* (1972), features the rape of a male character.

4 For a discussion of the appropriateness of revenge in an Old Norse-Icelandic context, see various contributions in Scheel 2020.

5 Old Norse-Icelandic sagas frequently switch between present and past tense, and I have tried to retain this in my translations.

6 A similar kind of ambiguity when it comes to victimhood, violation, and motherhood is discussed by Caitlin Watt in her discussion Olympias, see Watt 2025.

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