

Labour Pains: Scenes of Birth and Becoming in Old Norse Legendary Literature

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THE MATERNAL BODY

In its ability to produce sons, the maternal body offered one of the few means for women to attain power and influence in the medieval world. However, it is constantly depicted as being broken down in Old Norse legendary literature, a loose generic distinction taken here to encompass principally the poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the prosimetric narratives of the *fornaldarsögur*. Sometimes, as with Atli's shape-shifting mother, who takes on the form of a snake in the snake-pit, or Siggeirr's mother, who inhabits the body of a monstrous she-wolf, the maternal body can be reconstituted after this disintegration of human form. At other times, the damage is permanent and fatal. Svanhildr, Sigurðr's daughter, is trampled by horses. The unnamed mother of Hildir in *Sörla þáttur* is bodily crushed under the prow of a ship. Particularly brutal is the fate of Sifka in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, who is deliberately pushed from her lover's shoulder as he carries her across a river, so that her back is broken and her body is left to float unceremoniously downstream. In the more fantastical narratives the maternal body may simply disappear, neither destroyed nor changed but definitely not present, as with the elf-

woman in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, who deposits her daughter, Skuld, with her father, Helgi, and is never seen again. The maternal body is thus continually characterized as fragile, breakable and above all vulnerable: vulnerable to change and vulnerable to corruption. As such, weak though it is, the maternal body constitutes a threat to the smooth progression of lineage, which is so important to legendary literature. The sorcerous and often deadly power of mothers like Grímhildr or the unnamed mothers of Atli and Siggeirr are evidence of the danger and fear associated with maternity. Such fear partially explains the violence often meted out to the maternal body, confirming that body's reassuring conquerability at the same time as the continued assaults reinforce anxieties around its ultimate indefensibility and potential to admit of corruption.

The fragmentation of the maternal body, and of the royal maternal body in particular, has been much discussed in medieval scholarship. Finn E. Sinclair talks of the 'conflict and fragmentation [...] in the figuring of the mother and the maternal body' found in the Old French *chansons de geste*.¹ Peggy McCracken writes that the 'maternal body is figured as a disturbing spectacle in its ability to cross borders of state, religion and paternity'.² It is precisely this transgression of boundaries which has been used to link maternity to Julia Kristeva's discussion of the Abject, that which 'does not respect borders,

¹ Finn E. Sinclair, *Milk and Blood: Gender and Genealogy in the 'Chansons de Geste'* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 19.

² Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 69.

positions, rules'.³ The body of the mother seems inherently changeable and vulnerable to transformation, perhaps because of the literal expansion and contraction which the maternal body undergoes during gestation and birth. The literary depiction of maternity is inextricably tied to the maternal body's biological ability to change so drastically and yet it is rare for the maternal body to be depicted at the moment of its transformative apotheosis, in the act of labour and birth.⁴ Paradoxically, though it is during late pregnancy that the changeable nature of the maternal body is most obvious, it is also when that body is most concealed. Not only does the mother disappear into the traditionally female enclosure of the birthing room but the euphemisms used to describe the experience, such as *eigi heil* (not well), *sótt* (sickness) or even that a woman *gengr eigi einsama* (does not walk alone), may further obscure the physical realities of childbirth.⁵

³ See Paul Acker, 'Horror and the Maternal in "Beowulf"', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 702–16 (p. 703); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁴ For the fullest survey of birth in Old Norse literature to date see Gert Kreutzer, *Kindheit und Jugend in der Altnordischen Literatur: Teil I, Schwangerschaft, Geburt und Früheste Kindheit* (Münster: Kleinheinrich, 1987), pp. 108–45, though Kreutzer's analysis is necessarily brief given the scope of his work.

⁵ For a full discussion of the terminology used to describe pregnancy in Old Norse literature see Grethe Jacobsen, 'Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North: A Topology of Sources and a Preliminary Study', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 9 (1984), 91–111 (pp. 96–97).

It is unsurprising, then, that scenes of giving birth are not frequently found in Old Norse legendary literature, the more so, given the presumably male authorship of our sources and the gendered nature of childbirth as an experience. More interesting is that, even though birth was presumably fraught with danger for both mother and child,⁶ there are comparatively few incidents in the literature detailing mothers who actually die in childbed. The nature of our sources may once again be to blame here; the genealogically driven narratives of the *fornaldarsögur* encourage an emphasis on successful lineages, successful births and successful mothers. Other genres, however, present a different picture. Jenny Jochens notes that ‘although the sagas of Icelanders report surprisingly few cases of death in childbirth and no difficult births, the miracles performed by Icelandic saints narrate many realistic stories of prolonged and difficult births, dismemberment

⁶ Elisabeth Iregren and Ulf Högberg, in separate studies, have estimated the number of deaths per thousand childbirths as eight to nine in medieval Sweden and ten in prehistoric Sweden, respectively, but Anders Fröjmark (p. 298) maintains that ‘many maternal deaths are not visible in archaeological data and that the real mortality rate would have been higher,’ citing Ulf Högberg, Elisabeth Iregren, Claes-Henric Siven, and Lennart Diener, ‘Maternal Deaths in Medieval Sweden: An Osteological and Life Table Analysis’, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 19 (1987), 495–503. See Elisabeth Iregren, ‘Kvinnor och barn under medeltid: ett antropologisk perspektiv på några skeletmaterial’, in *Kvinnospår i medeltiden*, ed. by Inger Lövkrona (Lund: Lund University Press, 1992), pp. 55–92; Ulf Högberg, ‘Mödradöd i förhistorisk tid’, in *Sydsvenska medicinhistoriska sällskapets årsskrift* (Lund: Sydsvenska medicinhistoriska sällskapet, 1983), pp. 103–14; Anders Fröjmark, ‘Childbirth Miracles in Swedish Miracle Collections’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 21 (2012), 297–312.

of infants, and problems with lactation'.⁷ Even in what might be termed 'successful' childbirth miracles, the child may be spared only long enough to be baptized before dying, or the delivery of a dead foetus may prepare the way for the miraculous recovery of the mother, demonstrating that, even with the aid of a saint, birth was a dangerous and difficult experience.⁸ Grethe Jacobsen focuses instead on the Scandinavian ballad tradition, finding that 'ballads seem to have been one outlet for women to express their experience. The dominant impression is that [childbirth] was dramatic, painful and, more often than not, fatal'.⁹ Here, where the genre does not so easily allow for any kind of miraculous rescue or recovery, the picture is more pessimistic and the dangers of childbirth are even more heavily stressed. Archaeological evidence, though slight, adds further support to Jacobsen's analysis, since 'the skeleton material, even in a limited sample, demonstrates that fatal pregnancy and delivery had several causes, ranging from congenital disease to malnutrition, which made pregnancy and delivery a hazardous venture'.¹⁰

⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 80.

⁸ Frøjmark, pp. 302, 309–10.

⁹ Jacobsen, p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102. Jacobsen draws on a sample of 209 female skeletons interred in the cemeteries at the Augustinian monastery of Æbelholt, of which five were found to be pregnant at time of death.

SCENES OF BIRTH: BIRTH AS A CRISIS EVENT

While maternal bodies are certainly vulnerable in Old Norse legendary literature, it is frequently not the act of birth which breaks them down, in spite of the manifold dangers it presents. Indeed, the maternal body and the maternal perspective is hardly central to the three scenes of childbirth which are depicted in any detail in Old Norse legendary literature and which will form the heart of my analysis: Borgný's labour in the eddic poem *Oddrúnargrátr*, transcribed in the thirteenth century but probably composed considerably earlier;¹¹ Rerir's wife's six-year pregnancy in the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*, chapter 2, which culminates in the heroic Völsungr being cut from her womb at the cost of her own life; and finally, the nineteen-day labour of an elf-woman in the fourteenth-century *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, chapter 15, to which Hrólfr is mysteriously led while hunting a stag in the forest. In *Oddrúnargrátr*, Borgný gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl, after the intervention of her midwife, Oddrún, who is the lover of Gunnarr, the brother of Högni whom Borgný's lover Vilmundr had killed. Though the *bitrir galdrar* (powerful spells)¹² Oddrún sings enable Borgný to deliver

¹¹ On the complexities of dating eddic poetry see Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, 'The Dating of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹² *Oddrúnargrátr*, 7:7, in *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 4th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962–68), I (1962), 235. All translations are my own;

her babies successfully, she emerges *fiðrsiúcr* (deathly sick)¹³ from her ordeal. As the title of the poem would suggest, it is not Borgný's but Oddrún's experience of the birth that is foregrounded by the poet, as her lament contrasts her tragic kinship relations with the dynastic success of her friend. In *Völsunga saga*, Rerir's wife's conception has a magical origin, prompted by the consumption of a special apple delivered to the childless couple by one of Óðinn's valkyries. In the six years which it takes for the queen to come to term, Rerir himself grows sick and dies, and thus Völsungr emerges in the shadow of both his parents' deaths. No mention is made of birth attendants, though someone must have performed the caesarean procedure, and the queen appears as an isolated figure, unable to find a helper who might hasten the birth and thus save her life. The important thing from a narrative perspective is that Völsungr's exceptional nature should be demonstrated from the first by the unusual circumstances of his conception and birth, which distracts from the horrific mutilation his mother must undergo in order to deliver him. Finally, the labour of the elf-woman in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is presented entirely from a human and a male point of view and it is Hrólfr himself who functions as midwife, laying his hands upon the pregnant elf-woman at her mother's request, since her daughter is fated to remain undelivered of her child until a human being should touch her. The episode's chief purpose is to gain for Hrólfr a magical ally, who will offer him support in

eddic translations are informed by Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹³ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 8:6, p. 235.

the trials to come. Though the child is safely delivered, we do not even discover the sex of the baby nor anything about its ancestry, since in the entire episode only Hrólfr is mentioned by name, while the elf-women are continually defined either by kinship or racial signifiers. The bodies of both women disappear as soon as the episode is concluded and nothing further is heard of them.

There is no set pattern to these episodes. Two are embedded in prose sagas, brief scenes providing little opportunity for introspection. The poem *Oddrúnargrátr*, however, presents a longer and more vocal response to the moment of birth, as we might expect from an artistic medium which engages to a greater extent than prose with the value and power of language. Nevertheless, the poem is still in dialogue with the larger legendary narrative of the Fall of the Gjúkungs, just as the prose episodes each serve a purpose within their broader saga narratives. Crucially, all three are drawn from consciously fantastical, legendary narratives, giving them a broad tonal or generic similarity. They bear little resemblance to the likely historical facts of childbirth, difficult as those facts are to ascertain. Historical sources pertaining to childbirth in Old Norse society are extremely limited, forcing previous studies to rely mainly on evidence from literary depictions of childbirth. Thus, Jochens cites *Ála flekks saga* and *Flateyjarbók* to support her description of the birth process:

Only women were present. The normal birth position was for the woman to kneel on the floor, with helpers ready at her knees or supporting her arms. As the birth progressed,

she would shift to a knee–elbow position, and the child would be received from behind.¹⁴

Jochens accords with the traditional consensus that men were excluded from the birthing space in the Middle Ages, except in the case of royal births for which male witnesses were required.¹⁵ More recent scholarship, however, has begun to reassess the role of men in the birthing process.¹⁶ From an examination of men's

¹⁴ Jochens, p. 80. See also Kreutzer, pp. 134–37.

¹⁵ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski writes that 'medieval birth was entirely in the hands of women'. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 11. Louis Haas describes the process of birth in pre-modern Florence as 'female-centered, female oriented, and female controlled'. Louis Haas, 'Women and Childbearing in Medieval Florence', in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 87–99 (p. 97). Gail McMurray Gibson concurs, saying 'medieval childbearing took place in emphatically closed female space'. Gail McMurray Gibson, 'Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29 (1999), 7–24 (p. 9).

¹⁶ Although writing on the early modern period rather than the medieval, Ulinka Rublack argues that 'in ways which historians have scarcely recognized, husbands played key participatory roles at times of childbirth'. Ulinka Rublack, 'Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany', *Past & Present*, 150 (1996), 84–110 (p. 85). Miracle records, R. C. Finucane notes, 'reveal that often men were emotionally and physically involved in even the very first stages of childhood, but, although probably expected to be nearby, normally men do not seem to have witnessed their children's births'. He goes on to discuss the remarkable exception of Bertrand of Marseilles in the late thirteenth century. R. C.

recollections of childbirth submitted to proof-of-age inquests in medieval England, Becky R. Lee concludes that ‘even though men rarely entered the birthing chamber, they were not excluded from the events that took place there’.¹⁷ In her study of medieval midwifery, Fiona Harris Stoertz likewise suggests that ‘while birth was an event attended mostly by women, men actively intervened with considerable regularity during the High Middle Ages, ideals of women’s shame notwithstanding’.¹⁸ It is fair to say that the details of the birthing process in Old Norse society remain speculative at best, most especially as regards the use of magic in the pre-Christian period.

Magic contributes to all three of the legendary scenes of childbirth and it has long been treated as childbirth’s natural partner in critical scholarship. Jochens writes that ‘runes and songs were offered as age-old remedies for difficult births’, while Katherine Morris makes repeated claims for a perceived link in medieval Iceland between midwifery and witchcraft in her book

Finucane, *The Rescue of Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 33. For a discussion of men’s occasional medical role in childbirth see Monica Green, ‘Women’s Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (1989), 434–73 and Monica H. Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Becky R. Lee, ‘A Company of Women and Men: Men’s Recollections of Childbirth in Medieval England’, *Journal of Family History*, 27 (2002), 92–100 (p. 93).

¹⁸ Fiona Harris Stoertz, ‘Midwives in the Middle Ages? Birth Attendants, 600–1300’, in *Medicine and Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Sarah M. Butler and Wendy J. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 58–87 (p. 73).

Sorceress or Witch?, pointing to *Sigrdrífumál* stanza 9, *Fáfnismál* stanza 12 and *Oddrúnargrátr* stanza 7 to argue for ‘the association of childbirth and magic in the pagan culture of Iceland’.¹⁹ We should be wary of Morris’s glib association, however. It would be a mistake to let the mere presence of magic in scenes of birth blind us to the way in which magic is utilized in such accounts. The association is clearly a complex one. Both the curse laid upon the labouring elf-woman to be unable to deliver unless touched by a human and the magical apple which leads to Völsungr’s conception suggest that magic is just as often a danger to mothers as it is a remedy for the difficulties of childbirth. Much like the religious power depicted in miracle accounts, magic is far from a neat solution, and it is only in *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga* that both mother and child survive the hazards of birth. Though magic features prominently in all the above examples, it does not define the way the texts’ authors understood and described childbirth, but is instead symptomatic of how they did so. Magic, under which heading I embrace both pagan runes and Christian miracle, particularly in the way it both responds to and reinforces the dangers of childbirth, is only a response to the characterization of birth itself as a crisis event.

Such a term is borrowed from Margarita Artschwager Kay’s *Anthropology of Human Birth* where she suggests that most

¹⁹ Jochens, p. 80; Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 72, 81, 158. See also James V. McMahan, ‘Valkyries, Midwives, Weavers, and Shape-Change: Atli’s Mother the Snake’, *SS*, 66 (1994), 475–87; L. M. C. Weston, ‘Women’s Medicine, Women’s Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms’, *MP*, 92 (1995), 279–93.

societies present birth as a crisis event ‘but may differ regarding who is in danger and who may view and participate in the event’.²⁰ She draws attention to the way in which ‘the childbearing system relates to the social organization of each society’.²¹ More specifically, she argues that ‘the locus of societal power may be found in the dynamics and definition of childbirth’.²² More recent anthropological studies have reinforced her conclusions. Birth is utterly central to Marshall Sahlins’ 2013 investigation of what constitutes kinship, *What Kinship Is — And Is Not*, in which his declaration that ‘the larger structures and values of society are realized in the microcosm of human reproduction’ echoes Kay’s ‘locus of societal power’.²³ Sahlins is adamant that birth cannot be considered in a social vacuum, warning in particular against taking ‘the parents of the child out of their social contexts and [presuming] they are abstract beings, without any identity except a genital one, who produce an equally abstract child out of the union of their bodily substances’.²⁴ ‘As parents,’ he goes on to say, ‘they already have kinship identities and relationships, the specific logics and attributes of which are transmitted even in the substances they

²⁰ Margarita Artschwager Kay, ‘Writing an Ethnography of Birth’, in *Anthropology of Human Birth*, ed. by Margarita Artschwager Kay (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1982), pp. 1–24 (p. 4).

²¹ Kay, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is — And Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

convey to their offspring'.²⁵ The moment of birth is one embedded in wider structures of kinship and power. It is, in Sahlins' analysis, 'a semiotic function of a kinship order' rather than an *a priori* phenomenon and as a product of such structures it cannot be considered in isolation from them.²⁶ Similarly, Maurice Godelier, although he understands kinship somewhat differently to Sahlins, is no less convinced of the centrality of birth to social organization. In his 2004 monograph *Métamorphoses de la parenté*, he states unequivocally that 'the child is at the heart of kinship, at the heart of the stakes involved', elaborating that 'a family is founded not on the union between the sexes but on the *birth and care of the children the women will bear over their lifetime*'.²⁷

Thus, while it is obvious that birth represents the quintessential moment of becoming for the unborn child, in which the previously ambiguous and concealed foetus finally manifests itself as a self, it should be emphasized that the child is not the only figure whose identity is shaped by the birthing process, the effects of which extend to all who are brought into contact with the moment of crisis. The child created by its parents creates them in turn, entering them into new kinship roles as mothers and fathers in the genealogical matrix. Even birth attendants are not unaffected, using these same moments, in which they are empowered by their role as midwives, to renegotiate their own social identities. By centring my analysis

²⁵ Sahlins, p. 74.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷ Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, trans. by Nora Scott (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 479, 455 (emphasis in original).

around birth as a crisis event, rather than approaching it as an aspect of the female experience or as evidence to mine for information on magical beliefs, the communal nature of birth emerges, with scenes of giving birth forming important narrative nexuses where systems of gender, power and kinship all meet and coincide. Rather than considering the principal participants in isolation, like set roles in a drama, the midwife or the mother, these scenes should be examined as whole entities, revealing how the birthing space affects everyone brought into its narrative orbit and opens such roles and systems up to questioning. As such, this remains a literary analysis; although informed by the anthropological perspective, it is not an anthropological investigation into the rituals of Old Norse childbirth. It should be emphasized that these legendary scenes of birth are narrative rather than ritual events, being neither dramatized accounts of historically rooted childbirth rituals, nor themselves having any possible ritual function as texts, unlike, for example, the Old English metrical childbirth charms. Rather, the consciously fictional nature of these accounts makes them ideal for a literary anthropological analysis which seeks to determine not the details of birth but prevailing attitudes toward it and an understanding of its significance by analysing its use in a literary setting.

All three episodes differ according to their narrative purposes and form. The sensationalist account of Völsungr's birth speaks to his prominent position as apical ancestor of the Völsung dynasty, while the mysterious and unexpected intrusion of childbirth into *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is fitting for a narrative whose hero wanders from one adventure to the next. Meanwhile, *Oddrúnargrátr's* pairing of Borgný's physical birth with the

literary creation of Oddrún's lament more explicitly explores the creative possibilities of the birth event, on which more later. However, it is immediately striking that all three scenes demonstrate a clear association between a prolonged pregnancy or labour and danger for both mother and child, an association surely rooted in medical reality.²⁸ Völsungr is born after a full six years' gestation, while the elf-woman struggles for nineteen days, both transparently fatal delays in any realistic setting only to be entertained in this world of legendary fantasy. Borgný's case is not quite as dramatic, but her labour obviously extends long enough to cause concern and provoke the summoning of Oddrún to save her. There is a particularity, too, about how to alleviate such a delay. For the elf-woman, only a human can hasten her birth, perhaps on the understanding that it will be difficult to persuade one to help. For Borgný, it is stressed that:

engi mátti fyr iqrð ofan
Heiðrecs dóttur hiálpir vinna.²⁹

²⁸ Speeding a prolonged birth was evidently a widespread concern. Fiona Harris Stoertz, examining medieval English childbirth, notes that 'according to an Anglo-Saxon explanation of the formation of the fetus, a child not born in the tenth month would become a "life destroyer" in the belly and the mother could not be expected to survive. Guy de Chauliac, in the fourteenth century, was of the opinion that should the child not be brought out in due time, the woman would be endangered by the bones of the child exiting through her navel'. See Fiona Harris Stoertz, 'Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth', in *Medieval Family Roles*, ed. by Itnyre, pp. 101–20 (p. 107).

²⁹ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 1:5–8, p. 234.

No one on earth could
help Heiðrekr's daughter.

It is unclear what makes Oddrún special in this regard, but she is greeted on arrival with the words 'vittu, ef þú hiálpir!' (see if you can help), both a plea and a command.³⁰ As Judy Quinn has noted, 'elliptical as the style is, it spans the possibilities of torn friendship and of power unique to Oddrún'.³¹ The prose compiler is less ambiguous, however, asserting that Borgný 'mátti eigi fœða born, áðr til kom Oddrún, Atla systir' (could not give birth to her children until Oddrún came, Atli's sister).³² Only Oddrún is apparently capable of relieving Borgný's pains. These delays deliberately provoke a very precise set of circumstances which must prevail if a birth is to reach a satisfactory and safe conclusion and thus work to bring further people into the birth's sphere, extending its effects. Both Oddrún and Hrólfr are only present *because* the birth has been delayed and in Völsungr's case it is his extended gestation that brings his father's death within the same narrative space, a juxtaposition to which I shall shortly return.

Equally important, all three scenes emphasize the liminality typically associated with birth. In her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas uses the unborn child as a classic example

³⁰ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 4:8, p. 234.

³¹ Judy Quinn, 'The Endless Triangles of Eddic Tragedy: Reading *Oddrúnargrátr* (*The Lament of Oddrún*)', in *Studi anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell*, ed. by Maria Elena Ruggerini (Cagliari: CUEC, 2009), pp. 304–26 (p. 312).

³² *Oddrúnargrátr*, prose, p. 234.

of the dangers associated with ambiguity and liminality the world over:

Take, for example, the unborn child. Its present position is ambiguous, its future equally. For no one can say what sex it will have or whether it will survive the hazards of infancy. It is often treated as both vulnerable and dangerous.³³

More recently, L. M. C. Weston has emphasized the pregnant woman as a site of liminality in her analysis of the Old English metrical childbirth charms, the first of which includes the instruction to step over the grave of a dead man, followed by the body of a living man, while reciting the words of the spell.³⁴ In Weston's analysis, 'the grave marks a boundary between the living and non-living, this human world and the other: the woman bearing a not-yet-living child embodies a similar boundary within herself'.³⁵ Similarly, in stepping over a living man 'the woman and the child within her womb cross another boundary; indeed, the woman herself becomes the boundary her child will pass through by moving from nonlife to life'.³⁶ In the

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966; repr. 2002), p. 118.

³⁴ Weston, p. 288.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 289. Weston (p. 292) compares a Latin childbirth charm which evokes the figure of Lazarus, suggesting that 'the as yet unborn child is poised, liminally like the figure of Lazarus, between life and death; the woman has become more a vessel than a participant. Indeed birth here

womb the unborn child is ambiguous, neither alive nor dead. Birth provokes a moment of crisis which will resolve the ambiguity one way or another and until it is completed, the lives of both mother and child hang in the balance.

All three of the aforementioned scenes of birth share an understanding of birth as a liminal moment. Hrólfr, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, has ventured *á skóginn* (into the forest), a wild place on the edge of civilization in almost all medieval literature, before following a stag to a hidden *rjóðr* (clearing) where he finds the elf-women dwelling under a hill, which opens up at his approach.³⁷ His encounter with the elf-woman and her daughter occurs on the threshold between the human and the supernatural in the liminal space the forest represents. The hill's enclosure echoes the enclosure of the gestating womb itself, opening only for Hrólfr as only Hrólfr's touch implicitly opens up the elf-woman's body for delivery, releasing whatever obstruction had previously prevented her labour. Moreover, the enclosed setting parallels Hreggviðr's burial mound, which Hrólfr proceeds to visit in chapter 16, immediately following the birth episode. Strikingly, it is the gold ring granted him by the elf-mother, which enables him to do so. Despite the dangers which usually accompany interaction with the undead, equipped with the ring Hrólfr succeeds in reaching the mound and speaking with the ghost of Hreggviðr unscathed. The undead Hreggviðr's liminal

partakes of the miraculous, not the natural, and if the child is to come forth like Lazarus, the woman must be his tomb.'

³⁷ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan forni, 1950), III, 199.

position in the mound parallels that of the unborn child in the womb and under the hill. The juxtaposition of the two episodes draws an explicit connection between birth and death in the narrative, with Hrólfr in the privileged position of being able to mediate between the living and the non-living in both scenes.

In *Völsunga saga* and *Oddrúnargrátr* liminality is likewise expressed not in terms of space or place but by the proximity of birth and death, which go hand in hand in both episodes. For Völsungr, his birth is bought at the cost of his parents' lives. His mother's death is directly and causally linked to Völsungr's survival since it is expressly at her own instigation that the child is cut from her body — 'bað nú, at hana skyldi særa til barnsins' (she now bade that the child be cut from her)³⁸ — but Rerir's death may also be related to his son's birth. Rerir does not die in battle, although he is on a campaign to pacify his land; in a rather less heroic turn of events, it is related how 'í þessi ferð var þat til tíðenda, at Rerir tók sótt ok því næst bana' (on this journey it happened that Rerir took sick and soon died).³⁹ The manner of Rerir's death invites parallels with his wife's pregnancy, which is itself frequently described as a sickness in Old Norse literature.⁴⁰ The same word, *sótt*, is used almost immediately (barely four lines

³⁸ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan forni, 1950), I, 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 112.

⁴⁰ Among the negative terms for pregnancy listed by Jacobsen (p. 96) are 'eigi heil (not well), óhraust (weak) or vanheilsa (not well). The onset of labour can be described as *kenna sér sóttar* (feel an illness coming on). It is as if the labour the queen so desperately desires has been displaced onto the body of her husband, for whom it proves equally fatal.

later in Guðni Jónsson's edition) to refer to the queen's pregnancy: 'ok þessu ferr fram sex vetr, at hún hefir þessa sótt' (this went on for six years that she had this sickness).⁴¹ Though not causally linked, a thematic association is established between the father's death and the son's birth, which is only strengthened by the structural interweaving of birth and death in the narrative. Rerir's death is enveloped in the text by the account of Völsungr's conception and the account of his birth, a birth which is itself enveloped by the death of Völsungr's father and the death of his mother, whom the boy is able to kiss before she dies.⁴² Quinn

⁴¹ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, p. 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 111–2 (emphasis mine): 'Þat er nú at segja, at **drottning finnr þat brátt, at hún mundi vera með barni, ok ferr þessu fram langar stundir, at hún má eigi ala barnit.**

Þá kemr at því, at Rerir skal fara í leiðangr, sem siðvenja er til konunga, at friða land sitt. Í þessi ferð var þat til tíðenda, at *Rerir tók sótt ok því næst bana ok ætlaði at sækja heim Óðin, ok þótti þat mörgum fýsiligt í þann tíma.*

Nú ferr inu sama fram um vanheilsu drottningar, at hún fær eigi alit barnit, ok þessu ferr fram sex vetr, at hún hefir þessa sótt. Nú finnr hún þat, at hún mun eigi lengi lifa, ok **bað nú, at hana skyldi særa til barnsins, ok svá var gert sem hún bað. Þat var sveinbarn, ok sá sveinn var mikill vexti, þá er hann kom til,** sem ván var at. *Svá er sagt, at sjá sveinn kyssti móður sína, áðr hún dæi.*

Þessum er nú nafn gefit ok er kallaðr Völsungr. Hann var konungr yfir Húnalandi eftir föður sinn.'

(This is now to be told, that **the queen quickly discovered that she was with child, and this [pregnancy] went on for a long time, so that she could not give birth to the child.**

Then it happened that Rerir had to go on a campaign, as is the custom of kings, to pacify his land. On this journey, it happened that *Rerir*

considers that the kiss demonstrates Völsungr ‘is already socially responsible’ in spite of his isolation as an orphan, presumably a side-effect of his six-year gestation, which allows him to emerge from the womb already mature.⁴³ Structurally, however, the kiss also confirms that Völsungr’s mother does not die in childbirth but shortly afterwards, thus completing the envelopment of Völsungr’s birth between two deaths. It also means that, in a rather gruesome twist, she is still alive when her son is cut from her body.⁴⁴

took sick and soon died and intended to go to Óðinn, and that seemed desirable to many at that time.

Now the queen’s illness continued in the same way, that she could not deliver the child, and this went on for six years, that she had this sickness. Now she found that she could not live long and **bade now that child be cut from her and so it was done as she bade. It was a male child, and that boy was well grown when he came out**, as was to be expected. *It is said that that boy kissed his mother before she died.*

That one was now given a name and was called Völsungr. He was king of Hunland after his father.)

⁴³ Judy Quinn, ‘The Realisation of Mythological Design: The Early Generations of the Völsung Dynasty’, in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed*, ed. by Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen, Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2009), pp. 123–42 (p. 133).

⁴⁴ The historical evidence suggests that such a scenario is pure fantasy. In reality ‘Caesarean section was always an act of desperation’, carried out only on a dead mother in an attempt to save a still living child. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, p. 2.

Oddrúnargrátr tells a similar story; the birth itself is done with very quickly. Between stanzas seven and eight, a pair of twins are born and without any further explanation:

Knátti mæR oc mōgr moldveg sporna,
born þau in blíðo við bana Hōgna;
þat nam at mæla mæR fiḡrsiúca.⁴⁵

A girl and a boy were able to tread the earth-way,
cheerful children for Hōgni's slayer.
Then the deathly sick girl [Borgný] began to speak.

Once again, the juxtaposition between birth and death could not be more pronounced. No sooner are the children born than the shadow of their father's sin, the slaying of Hōgni, lies over them, closely followed by the admission of their mother's mortal sickness.

What we have in these three cases, then, are three scenes of birth, all exploring a prolonged moment on the threshold between the living and the non-living (that is both those who have died and those who are yet to live) which must be navigated by all those present in the scene, whether parent, child or attendant. Not just the unborn child but the entire scene occupies this liminal space and all within it become infected with its ambiguity, provoking an opportunity to renegotiate previously established positions of power and kinship.

⁴⁵ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 8:1–6, p. 235.

SCENES OF BECOMING: BIRTH AS A NARRATIVE INTERSECTION

As has already been noted, until recently, analyses of birth tended to emphasize it as a female space, into which men intruded at their peril, but its narrative influence is felt far more widely. Far from being denied access, men are everywhere in these accounts. Not only does Hrólfr actively assist in the elf-woman's childbirth, the queen remains unnamed in *Völsunga saga*, in contrast to Rerir, Völsungr and even Óðinn, who is both Völsungr's paternal great-grandfather and the more direct instigator of Völsungr's conception; this, combined with the utter lack of any female attendants, makes the birth a thoroughly male affair. In *Oddrúnargrátr*, the paternity of Borgný's twins is vital to the interpersonal dynamics between the poem's two leading women. As Quinn explains, 'the paradox of Oddrún's lament is that the expression of her grief over her lover's death is triggered by her act of fostering life for the family that murdered him'.⁴⁶ It is the fact that Vilmundr, Borgný's lover, was the slayer of Hogni, Gunnarr's brother, that underpins Oddrún and Borgný's relationship, explaining some of Oddrún's hostility toward her supposed *vina* (friend).⁴⁷ Men are very much present in these narratives of childbirth; far from being a closed female enclave, birth is an intersection which embraces both male and female

⁴⁶ Quinn, 'Endless Triangles', p. 306.

⁴⁷ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 4:7, p. 234. Oddrún is open about the fact that her motives for helping Borgný have nothing to do with affection, as she admits: 'Hnécað ec af því til hiálpár þér, | at þú værir þess verð aldregi' (I didn't kneel down to help you because of this, | that you in any way deserved it), *Oddrúnargrátr* 10:1–4, p. 235.

figures, implicating both genders in the crisis event's exploration of wider social, political and kinship structures.

Societal power structures are shown to be vulnerable in all three episodes. *Oddrúnargrátr* follows on the heels of the political upheaval caused by the slaughter of the Gjúkungs, a calamity Oddrún is explicitly attempting to come to terms with in the lament she pours out to Borgný once the birth is completed, a figurative delivery of her own, precipitated by Borgný's physical labour. The fact that Rerir is on a mission to subdue his territories when he dies suggests that Völsungr's birth, too, is a time of political crisis in *Völsunga saga*, a crisis solved by Völsungr's delivery and his swift move then to stabilize his father's legacy. No sooner is Völsungr given a name than the saga tells us that 'hann var konungr yfir Húnalandi *eftir föður sinn*' (he was king over Hunland *after his father*),⁴⁸ which emphasizes dynastic continuity rather than the six-year interregnum which divided his own rule from his father's. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the situation is more personal than political but still highlights the vulnerability of the social and political hierarchy. Hrólfr finds himself hunting the stag because he is bound to the wicked, low-born Vilhjálmr in servitude unfitting to his true station. His unfortunate circumstances are foregrounded in the childbirth episode as the elf-woman initially greets him with a stark reminder of his position as a slave: 'Illt hefir þú at verki, Hrólfr, er þú ert þræll þrælsins ok þó til þess at stela annarra manna fé, því at ek á dýr þetta, er þú vilt taka' (You're faring badly when it comes to work, Hrólfr, when you're the slave of a slave, even to the point of

⁴⁸ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, p. 112 (emphasis mine).

having to steal another man's livestock, because I own this deer which you want to take).⁴⁹ The elf-woman's subsequent gift of a gold ring and some advice in thanks for helping her daughter marks a step on the road that sees Hrólfr rise from his humble position. His ultimate transformation into a highly respected ruler and a successful husband and father remains rooted at least in part in the scene of giving birth in which the crisis of his social status is underlined and addressed.

Finally, systems of kinship are, of course, heavily implicated in these scenes of childbirth. The roles played by each of the characters in the genealogical matrix suddenly become uncertain in this moment of ambiguity and transition, where daughters may become mothers, sons become fathers, and identities are being (re)negotiated. *Oddrúnargrátr's* exploration of what it takes to become a mother and who is able to become so embraces a complex multiplicity of images of maternity. Mothers are made but also unmade in the poem, as Borgný's maternal transformation is balanced by Oddrún's denial of her own mother. Oddrún describes her mother impersonally as *móðir Atla* (Atli's mother)⁵⁰ and bitterly curses her for her part in Gunnarr's death, exclaiming 'hon scyli morna' (may she wither away).⁵¹ Taken together with Oddrún's previous allusion to Gunnarr as *sonr Grímildar* (Grímhildr's son), her words suggest a binary

⁴⁹ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, pp. 199–200.

⁵⁰ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 32:3, p. 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32:4, p. 239.

contrast between the two conflicting dynasties which is conveyed in explicitly maternal terms.⁵²

The ambiguous and transitory nature of the maternal role is emphasized throughout. New mother Borgný is referred to first and foremost as *Heiðreks dóttir* (Heiðrekr's daughter).⁵³ Her subjection to paternal authority is further emphasized by the way in which she is said to have attempted to hide her love-affair from her father:

Vilmundr heitir vinr haucstalda;
hann varði mey varmri blæio,
fimm vetr alla, svá hon sinn fõður leyndi.⁵⁴

(Vilmundr he's called, the hawk-bearer's friend,
he wrapped the girl in a warm bed-cover
for five whole winters, so that she hid it from her father.)

Borgný invokes the feminine deities Frigg and Freyja, both mothers themselves, not on her own behalf but on that of Oddrún, who will never become a mother, saying:

Svá hiálpi þér hollar vættir,
Frigg oc Freyia oc fleiri goð,
sem þú feldir mér fár af hõndom.⁵⁵

⁵² *Oddrúnargrátr*, 15:8, p. 236.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:7, p. 234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, p. 235.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, p. 235.

Labour Pains

(May the gracious [female] beings help you,
Frigg and Freyja and more of the gods,
as you freed me from that danger.)

To further complicate matters, she evokes an image of close paternal rather than maternal kinship in her nostalgic appeal to her friend:

enn ec fylgðac þér á fiörgynio,
sem við brœðrom tveim of bornar værim.⁵⁶

(And I used to accompany you on Fiörgyn [mother earth]
as if we had been born of two brothers!)

Maternal imagery here is confined to the static earth, referred to as Fiörgyn, an alternative name for Jörð, the mother of Þórr, and replaced in the allusion to birth itself by a remarkable vision of male reproduction. In this maze of maternal references, Oddrún's implicit declaration of her own emancipation from genealogically determined kinship roles, neither daughter to her birth family nor wife and mother in Gunnarr's, places her in an ambiguous position not unlike the unborn child's. She hovers quite consciously on a threshold between life and death, as she pronounces herself bemused by her own vitality:

⁵⁶ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 11:5–8, p. 236.

Opt undromc þat, hví ec eptir mác,
línvengis Bil, lífi halda,
er ec ógnhvøtom unna þóttomz,
sverða deili, sem síálfri mér.⁵⁷

(Often I wonder this, goddess of the linen-pillow
How I can hold onto my life thereafter,
When I thought that I loved the fearfully bold man,
The sword-sharer, as I did myself!)

Ultimately, Oddrún is reborn through the labour of her lament, both the child and the mother of her literary delivery. She is isolated from her kin but extremely purposeful and still deeply embedded in wider society through her function as a midwife. Quinn has previously drawn attention to Oddrún's impressive independence in the poem, pointing out how 'she initiates the mission and acts as the agent of a series of verbs in action in stanzas 2–3 — *bregða, leggja, láta fara, koma, ganga, svipta*'.⁵⁸ Oddrún is clearly empowered by her act of magical midwifery. Adrian Wilson observes that 'power [...] was a defining feature of the midwife's office',⁵⁹ and Oddrún uses hers to announce and thereby perform her own transformation into the kind of woman she wishes to be, in the absence of her lover and any marital or

⁵⁷ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 33, p. 239.

⁵⁸ Quinn, 'Endless Triangles', p. 311.

⁵⁹ Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Farham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 156.

dynastic future for herself. Genealogical creativity is replaced by literary reproduction.

A similar ambiguity around the inhabitation and characterization of the maternal role is found in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. The labouring elf-woman is introduced as a daughter, emphasizing her mother's maternity, and there is not a father in sight: 'Ek á dóttur eina, ok er henni þat skapat at komast eigi frá eldi sínu, því hún ætti, nema mennskr maðr hefði hendr á henni. Hefir hún nú legit nítján dægr á gólfi ok má eigi léttari verða' ('I have a *daughter*, and for her it is fated that she cannot be delivered of the child which she has, unless a human being lays his hands on her. She has now lain on the floor for nineteen days and cannot give birth [lit.: get any lighter].)⁶⁰

Hrólfr himself, much like Oddrún, is engaged in a process of becoming, negotiating his underserving social status as discussed above, but in the scene of birth these efforts entwine social hierarchy with systems of kinship. For, in exchange for helping her daughter, the elf-woman gives him a gold ring which will aid him later, much as giantesses elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur* help their fosterlings. The gift suggests a maternal aspect to her relationship with Hrólfr that further contrasts with her daughter's enactment of a more straightforwardly biological maternity.⁶¹

Nor is this ambiguity as to the meaning and nature of kinship bonds confined to the roles of mother and daughter.

⁶⁰ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, p. 200 (emphasis mine).

⁶¹ Compare, for example, the experience of Hálfðan in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, who is both Brana's fosterling and also the father of her child.

Paternal ambiguity is similarly explored. The death of Rerir between the conception and birth of his son extends the ambiguity of the unborn child and the crisis of birth to his status as a father. Rerir dies a potential father but that status cannot be confirmed until his son is born, alive or dead. The kiss Völsungr bestows on his mother before she dies confirms their relationship as mother and son, brief though it is. No personal closure can be offered to Rerir and Völsungr's father-son relationship and their kinship must be confirmed through the political declaration that is Völsungr's inheritance of his father's kingdom, demonstrating once again how inextricably intertwined systems of kinship are with more political structures of social organization. Vilmundr's paternal role in *Oddrúnargrátr* is similarly troubled. The question of whether Vilmundr acknowledges his children casts doubt on his acceptance of his new kinship role and he features in the poem more prominently as an illicit lover than as a father.

THE COMMUNITY OF BIRTH

There is no guarantee of resolution for such ambiguities, only the opportunity for negotiation in the liminal and dangerous moment that is the birth event. Indeed, the moment of birth serves as a reminder that all societal structures are by their nature transitory and open to change, kinship most of all. As Maurice Godelier reminds us, 'through their choices and through the choices of their relatives, individuals pass in the course of their lifetime from one kin position to others, occupying simultaneously with regard to several other relatives several

positions at once'.⁶² The dynamics explored in these three scenes embrace and negotiate systems of societal power, based on status, politics, gender and kinship, all of which meet in the moment of crisis enacted by birth, transforming the singular moment of birth into multiple acts of becoming for all involved. Though the maternal body remains fragile in Old Norse legendary narratives, birth emerges ultimately as a constructive rather than a destructive event, stressing creativity, both genealogical and artistic, and the transformation of identities more so than the breaking of the maternal body.

What is most striking is the contrast between this extremely open narrative nexus and the closed female enclave that certain historians suggest defined the true experience of birth in the medieval period. Such scenes position the locus for societal power in the event's very multiplicity, in the links between different social structures and people. In doing so they demonstrate beyond doubt the truth of Kay's analysis that 'the locus of societal power may be found in the dynamics and definition of childbirth'.⁶³ The communal nature of the birth event in literature suggests that what Old Norse society most highly valued was investment in society itself. The willingness of both Oddrún and Hrólfr to engage in the birth event in spite of their individual deprivations, whether of kin or power, contrasts with the social isolation of Völsungr's delivery and it is surely no coincidence that it is Völsungr's mother who consequently suffers and fragments the most dramatically. In line with scholarship's recent

⁶² Godelier, p. 480.

⁶³ Kay, p. 4.

reappraisal of men's engagement with childbirth in the medieval period, perhaps it is time to question the practicality of utterly excluding men from the birthing area in the cramped conditions of an Old Icelandic farmstead, where the sounds if not the sights of childbirth must have carried. While men may not have been privy to the most intimate details, these narratives suggest that Old Norse society's understanding of childbirth as an open event embraced both the male and the female experience and that we should consider men as well as women an integral part of the vital community of birth.⁶⁴

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