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Ála flekks saga: A Snow White Variant from Late Medieval Iceland

Jonathan Y. H. Hui, Caitlin Ellis, James McIntosh and Katherine Marie Olley¹

1. Background

There has been very little scholarship on the transmission of the Snow White tale-type in medieval Icelandic literature, or in any pre-modern literature.² Scholarship on most folktale-types tends to focus on modern variants, with particular attention usually paid to a variant which has come to be seen as the ‘standard’ version of the tale-type. In the case of Snow White, tale-type number 709 under the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system, the ‘standard’ version is the 1857 edition of the Grimm Brothers’ *Sneewittchen*, published in their influential collection of fairytales;³ it was on this version that Disney would base their 1937 animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the cultural impact of which continues to the present day. Not all variants of the tale-type will have the very same motifs as the Grimms’ version, of course, as is evident from the variation within the fifty-seven tales found in Ernst Böklen’s 1910 collection of Snow White variants.⁴ In particular, ancient and medieval variants of well-known fairytales need not bear immediately recognisable similarities to the ‘standard’ versions

¹ This article supplements the authors’ text and translation of *Ála flekks saga*, which also appears in this issue: Jonathan Y. H. Hui, Caitlin Ellis, James McIntosh, Katherine Marie Olley, William Norman and Kimberly Anderson, ‘*Ála flekks saga*: A Text and Translation’, *Leeds Studies in English*, 49 (2018), 1–43.

² Although several pre-modern texts, which will be discussed in this article, have been shown to contain a noteworthy number of Snow White motifs, scholars have tended to consider these early texts not to adhere closely enough to the structure of the tale-type to be considered full literary versions of Snow White. Thus, Charlotte Artese considers Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, composed in the early seventeenth century, to be the ‘earliest known literary version’ of Snow White (*Shakespeare’s Folktale Sources* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), p. 175; *Cymbeline*’s Snow White affinities were first pointed out in Karl Schenkl, ‘Das Märchen von Sneewittchen und Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*’, *Germania*, 9 (1864), 458–60), while Christine Shojaei Kawan, rejecting *Cymbeline*, considers a Russian tale first published in 1795 to be ‘the first authentic version of *Snow White* at all known to date’ (‘A Brief Literary History of *Snow White*’, *Fabula*, 49 (2008), 325–42 (pp. 337–38)).

³ The Grimm Brothers first published *Sneewittchen* in 1812, but it underwent several revisions between 1812 and 1857; see Kay Stone, ‘Three Transformations of Snow White’, in *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, ed. by James M. McGlathery (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 52–65 (pp. 57–58). For the ATU classification, see Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, FF Communications, 284–86, 3 vols (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 2004).

⁴ Ernst Böklen, *Sneewittchenstudien: Erster Teil, Fünfundsiebzig Varianten im engern Sinn* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910).

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of the fairytale that we know today, firstly because different variants of the same tale-type will often be dressed in generically different clothing corresponding to contemporary literary trends, and secondly because, unlike many younger variants, an ancient or medieval variant could not have been based on a modern ‘standard’ variant as we know it.

Any identification of a folktale variant is ultimately based on that variant’s adherence to the structure of the tale-type. With regard to Snow White, the most comprehensive work on the tale-type’s structure has been done by Steven Swann Jones. Seeking to amend the motif-specific Aarne-Thompson structure of the tale-type, which comprised five steps (‘Snow-White and her Stepmother’; ‘Snow-White’s Rescue’; ‘The Poisoning’; ‘Help of the Dwarfs’; and ‘Her Revival’),⁵ Jones outlined nine key episodes, in two parts, as follows:⁶

Part 1:

1. Origin: the specific circumstances of the heroine’s creation or conception.
2. Jealousy: the persecutor becomes jealous of the heroine.
3. Expulsion: the persecutor orders the heroine’s death or has her expelled from the household, but she does not die, sometimes thanks to a compassionate executioner.
4. Adoption: the now-homeless heroine finds a house, and its occupants let her stay.

Part 2:

5. Renewed Jealousy: the persecutor hears of the heroine’s survival, often through a specific allomotif (such as the magic mirror).
6. Death: the persecutor apparently kills the heroine, either with one attack or with multiple.
7. Exhibition: the heroine’s companions exhibit her body in a coffin, which may be placed near a distinct natural feature (for instance hung from a tree, cast out to sea or placed on a mountain).
8. Resuscitation: the heroine is revived, often by the fortuitous removal of the magic object upon moving the coffin or inspecting the ‘corpse’.
9. Resolution: the heroine’s marriage and the persecutor’s punishment.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the close correspondences that *Ála flekks saga* (‘the saga of Áli flekkr’), an entertaining Icelandic saga probably written in the early fifteenth century, has with the key structural aspects of the Snow White tale-type. Although its Snow White connection has previously gone unnoticed, the saga seems to be the clearest Snow

⁵ Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, trans. and rev. by Stith Thompson, 2nd edn, FF Communications, 184 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), p. 245.

⁶ Steven Swann Jones, ‘The Structure of *Snow White*’, in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. by Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1986), pp. 165–84. This chapter was a slightly expanded reprint of Jones’ article of the same name in *Fabula*, 24 (1983), 56–71, and the same material appears as part of a wider discussion in Jones’ *The New Comparative Method: Structural and Symbolic Analysis of the Allomotifs of Snow White*, FF Communications, 247 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1990).

White variant in the corpus of extant medieval Icelandic literature. Because this discussion will involve a close structural analysis of the saga, a short plot summary will be provided here, but the reader may first wish to read the saga in its entirety: a text and translation can be found in this issue.⁷

Áli, the saga hero and an English prince, is exposed as a child on his father's instruction. After being adopted by a poor couple, he returns to the royal court, where he is recognised and reincorporated into the royal family. He is cursed by a troll-woman, Blátönn, to marry her sister, Nótt, but with the help of Nótt's half-human daughter Hlaðgerðr, he escapes and wanders to Tartary. There, he wins the favour of the maiden-king Þornbjörg through his military defence of her kingdom, and they marry. On their wedding night, he is cursed for a second time, by Blátönn's brother Glóðarauga, to transform into a wolf and kill livestock in both Tartary and England. After some time, he is freed from this curse by his foster-mother. He is then cursed for a third time, by Nótt, who appears to him in a dream and inflicts debilitating wounds on him which can only be healed by her brother, Jǫtunoxi. With the incapacitated Áli in tow, Þornbjörg infiltrates Jǫtunoxi's court and agrees to marry him if he has Áli healed. After this is done, they instead burn Jǫtunoxi's hall, but with his dying breath, he inflicts a fourth curse on Áli, condemning him never to find peace until he locates Hlaðgerðr. He eventually finds her in Scythia, saves her life and marries her to the Scythian king. Afterwards, he returns to England and lives happily ever after with Þornbjörg.

While the plot of the saga bears little superficial resemblance to the story of Snow White, further analysis reveals convincing underlying similarities. *Ála flekks saga's* affinity with the Snow White tale-type comes not simply in the form of several familiar Snow White motifs, nor even solely in the strong resonances with the individual episodes listed above, but also in the fact that the narrative structure is tightly sequenced around the typological structure of the Snow White tale-type laid out by Jones.⁸ Before our structural analysis, however, brief introduction will be made of the few Snow White connections previously identified in Old Norse literature, in order to contextualise properly *Ála flekks saga's* affinity with the tale-type.

2. The Snow White tradition in medieval Iceland

Compared to the Cinderella tale-type (ATU 510A), of which the fourteenth-century *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* and *Vilmundar saga viðutan* have been demonstrated to be clear variants,⁹ far fewer traces of the Snow White tale-type have been identified in Old Norse

⁷ Hui and others, '*Ála flekks saga*'.

⁸ Although we do not find in Böklen's collection any single variant with an obvious connection to *Ála flekks saga*, which is unsurprising, we might nonetheless note an intriguing parallel in the two Norwegian versions of Snow White which he denotes *norw. 1.* and *norw. 2.* In these tales, the heroine takes refuge with a household of princes who are cursed to become bears during the day, a motif also found in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Unusually for a Snow White tale, in *norw. 1.* the protagonist falls in love with one of those who takes her in, and lifts his curse by stealing the transformational bear-skin from under him when he sleeps (Böklen, *Sneewittchenstudien*, pp. 15–17). Although the narrative is significantly different to that of the werewolf episode in *Ála flekks saga*, it is nonetheless interesting that there are western Scandinavian Snow White variants in which animal-transformation curses and skins appear.

⁹ *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, ed. by Franz R. Schröder (Halle (Saale): Niemeyer, 1917), pp. 27–28; Einar Sigurðsson, '*Vilmundar saga viðutan*' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Iceland, 1962), pp. 69–110; '*Vilmundar saga viðutan*': *The Saga of Vilmundur the Outsider*, ed. and trans. by Jonathan Y. H. Hui (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, forthcoming); and Jonathan Y. H. Hui, 'Cinderella in Old Norse Literature', *Folklore*, 129 (2018), 353–74.

literature. The suggestion has been made by Christine Shojaei Kawan that aspects of the tradition are reflected in the figure of Snjófríðr, the Lappish princess and daughter of a sorcerer, whose marriage to the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri (Haraldr ‘fair-hair’) is recounted in the late twelfth-century *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*,¹⁰ *Haralds saga hárfagra* in Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century *Heimskringla* (in which she is called Snæfríðr, a variant form of the name ‘Snjófríðr’),¹¹ and the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*.¹² These accounts tell that, from Haraldr’s first meeting with Snjófríðr all the way through their marriage until her death, he is so infatuated with her that he neglects his kingdom. Even after her death, Haraldr mourns over her corpse for three years, and the paranormality of this obsession is confirmed when Þorleifr spaki moves her from the bed: foul stench arises, the corpse blackens and worms, frogs and maggots stream forth from it. Noting that Snjófríðr has a snow-name (literally meaning ‘Snow-beautiful’), Shojaei Kawan cites the Snjófríðr story as an example of the prince’s mourning that is found in some Snow White variants,¹³ but it must be stressed that the resonances of the Snow White tale-type in the Snjófríðr story are minimal: she has a snow-name;¹⁴ she is mourned obsessively by the king; and her body is placed on exhibition after her death. The crucial Jealousy, Persecution and Resuscitation aspects of the tale-type are missing, and the story cannot therefore be considered a Snow White variant, but this does not rule out the possibility that the relevant aspects of the Snjófríðr story could have drawn on a pre-existing Snow White tale or tradition that was known in Iceland at the time.

A closer parallel to the Snow White structure can be found in the wolf-transformation episode in *Völsunga saga*. In this episode, Sigmundr, having gravely (perhaps mortally) wounded Sinfjötli by biting him on the neck while in wolf-form, spots a weasel biting another weasel in the same way. The aggressor weasel fetches a leaf and lays it over the wound, healing the assaulted weasel. Sigmundr is brought a leaf by a raven, applies it to Sinfjötli’s wound, and the latter recovers immediately.¹⁵

Carol Clover has pointed out the clear parallels between the strikingly specific resuscitation rituals in *Völsunga saga* and *Eliduc*, one of the twelfth-century Breton *lais* of Marie de France.¹⁶ In the Old French *lai*, Guilliadun, the lover of the married knight Eliduc, falls into a deathly faint upon hearing that Eliduc is married. Eliduc leaves her body in a chapel and returns home, but remains affected by this, and his wife Guildelüec deduces that something is wrong. Finding Guilliadun’s body before her burial, Guildelüec understands the situation.

¹⁰ *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, ed. and trans. by Matthew J. Driscoll, 2nd edn (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008), pp. 4–6.

¹¹ *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit, 26–28, 3 vols (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1941), 1, 125–27.

¹² *Flateyjarbók: En samling af Norske Konge-saegar*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl R. Unger, 3 vols (Christiania (Oslo): Malling, 1860–68), 1, 582.

¹³ Shojaei Kawan, ‘A Brief Literary History of *Snow White*’, pp. 329–30.

¹⁴ It is not even clear that much Snow White significance can be read into Snjófríðr’s name, given that the snow-element may simply be a natural extension, for a country abundant in snow, of the idea of a light complexion as a sign of beauty (which is also expressed in names such as Svanhvít, ‘Swan-white’, in *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*).

¹⁵ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 8, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Akureyri: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954–59), 1, 124–25. All references to *fornaldarsögur* will be to this edition, which will subsequently be abbreviated as *FAS*.

¹⁶ Carol Clover, ‘*Völsunga saga* and the Missing *Lai* of Marie de France’, in *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, ed. by Rudolf Šimek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Vienna: Böhlau, 1986), pp. 79–84. Another saga episode with a number of similarities to *Eliduc* can be found in the fourteenth-century *ridðarasaga Dámusta saga*, in which Princess Gratfána’s ‘death’ is engineered by the demonic Alheimr, whom Dámusti defeats with the support of the Virgin Mary; Gratfána is revived by being given a drink, and the process

Inside the chapel, she then sees a weasel heal its dead mate by placing a red flower inside its mouth. Guíldelíec then places the same flower inside Guílliadun's mouth and revives her.¹⁷ Clover summarises the similarities with *Völsunga saga* as follows:

We have in both cases not only the resuscitation of an apparently dead person through the use of a certain plant, but the revelation of the means of healing through an instructional drama in the animal world — a drama that moreover mirrors the situation in the human world. The animal is in both cases a weasel [...]¹⁸

While a number of Marie's *lais* were translated into Old Norse at the court of the Norwegian king Hákon IV, forming the compilation we now call *Strengleikar*, *Eliduc* is not among them. But although there is no (surviving) Norse translation of it, the above parallel with *Völsunga saga* suggests that the *Eliduc* story was known in medieval Iceland. This is interesting because a connection between *Eliduc* and the Snow White tale-type was suggested by Alfred Nutt back in 1892.¹⁹ Although *Eliduc* is not especially reminiscent of the Snow White tale-type beyond Guílliadun's death and resuscitation, Nutt identified an undeniably close relationship between the *lai* and the Scottish folktale 'Gold-Tree and Silver-Tree', which is clearly a Snow White variant.²⁰ Nutt's ambitious argument holds that *Eliduc* represents a modified version of a pre-existing folktale whose original form must have looked something like 'Gold-Tree and Silver-Tree', that is, potentially a recognisable Snow White variant. Therefore, if we accept Nutt's hypothesis, we have in *Völsunga saga* an episode derived from a *lai* based on a Snow White tale.

3. *Álög*

While the Snow White parallels in the characters of Snjófríðr and Sinfjötli are relatively self-contained elements in their wider narratives, the parallels in *Ála flekks saga* are more fundamental to the narrative. Much of this closer structural affinity is due to the extensive use of the *álög* ('curse') motif. The prevalence of this motif in late medieval Icelandic literature necessitates the introduction of the wider *álög* tradition, in order to contextualise the saga's uses of curses.

The relationship between the Icelandic *álög* and the Irish *geis* has long been recognised by scholars. The primary meaning of *geis* (plural *gessi* or *geisi*, later *geasa*) in Middle Irish is 'a prohibited act or person, a tabu, a prohibition'.²¹ The prohibited acts can seem fairly practical and common-sense, for example that a king should not be away from his kingdom

of resuscitation is concluded with the removal from under her tongue of a leek, which Alheimr had placed there to prevent her from actually dying from a lack of food while buried (*Dámusta saga*, ch. 14, in *Þjalar-Jóns saga; Dámusta saga: I. Texten*, ed. by Louisa Fredrika Tan-Haverhorst (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1939), pp. 93–100). While a very close parallel to this episode has been identified in the Old French romance *Amadas et Idoine* (Margaret Schlauch, 'The *Dámusta saga* and French Romance', *Modern Philology*, 35 (1937), 1–13, (pp. 6–8)), the use of a love triangle as the cause of the 'death' scene and the use of a plant to effect the revival are reminiscent of *Eliduc*.

¹⁷ Jean Rychner, *Les lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Champion, 1968), pp. 187–88.

¹⁸ Clover, 'Völsunga saga and the Missing Lai of Marie de France', p. 83.

¹⁹ Alfred Nutt, 'The Lai of Eliduc and the Märchen of Little Snow-White', *Folklore*, 3 (1892), 26–48.

²⁰ Nutt, 'The Lai of Eliduc', pp. 31–34. The folktale can be found in Joseph Jacobs, *Celtic Fairy Tales* (London: Nutt, 1892), pp. 88–92, and in all subsequent editions.

²¹ eDIL, s.v. *geis* (<http://www.dil.ie/25555>). For discussion of the word's semantics and its overlap with similar concepts see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Geis, Prophecy, Omen, and Oath', *Celtica*, 23 (1999), 38–59. See also the

for too long; but they are often very specific and seem strange and arbitrary to the modern reader. The latter category, combined with the fact that these strictures are usually placed on a protagonist by a supernatural or otherworldly figure, led to scholarly speculations on the possibly mythic or magical origins of *gessi*.²² It has more recently been argued that associating *geis* with the concept of taboo can be unhelpful, and instead we should simply view it as a literary device.²³ Regardless of their untraceable origin, *gessi* can play a crucial role in the narrative. A *geis* imposed on the warrior Fergus mac Róich that he cannot refuse an invitation to a feast, for instance, is used against him in *Longes mac nUislienn* ('The exile of the sons of Uisliu'), forcing him to abandon the eponymous men under his protection, which leads to their deaths, in order to fulfil his obligation to attend a feast. In the most recent discussion of the topic, Ralph O'Connor notes that the *gessi* placed on King Conaire in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* ('The destruction of Dá Derga's hostel') are used by the author to great structural effect.²⁴ A *geis* often serves a similar narrative role to a prophecy in foreshadowing later events and building tension: 'the audience will naturally suspect that the king will somehow fall foul of it in the end'.²⁵ *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* is the text in which *gessi* are most prominent and, according to Thomas Charles-Edwards, the 'most obviously deterministic'.²⁶

The compelling interest of a *geis*, often imposed at birth or even conception, is when it comes into conflict with a character's other social obligations, which are of course felt particularly acutely by heroes and kings. Conaire is a prime example of this, as in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* he faces several such dilemmas in succession and knowingly violates all his *gessi* in turn. Although there is a *geis* against him admitting a lone woman after dark, he gives way to a woman insulting his hospitality rather than have his honour slighted. He flouts another *geis* against settling a quarrel between two of his clients, but he does so to prevent bloodshed and preserve the peace, as a king should. It is the emphasis on impossible choices between contradictory obligations which makes the *Togail*, in Philip O'Leary's words, 'truly tragic'.²⁷

The relationship between *geis* and *álög* has been used as a case study in the wider debate about the relationship between Norse and Irish literature. It was first raised by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson,²⁸ and it features briefly in Gísli Sigurðsson's classic statement of the case for Gaelic contribution to Icelandic literature.²⁹ Rosemary Power argues that they use a similar formula,

etymological discussion in Tom Sjöblom, *Early Irish Taboos: A Study in Cognitive History*, Comparative Religion, 5 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2000), pp. 51–56; Sjöblom further contends that *geis* has been overused in scholarship, obscuring other related vocabulary and sometimes resulting in the identification of taboo in literary episodes where it was not necessarily intended.

²² David Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. by H. Bekker-Nielsen and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), pp. 9–19. The usage of *geis* seems to have spread and its meaning widened, while it is also applied to situations in later versions of a story where the term does not feature in the early version (Charles-Edwards, 'Geis', pp. 57–58).

²³ Qiu Fangzhe, 'Geis, a Literary Motif in Early Irish Literature', *St Anne's Academic Review*, 2 (2010), 13–16 (p. 13).

²⁴ Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 72–81.

²⁵ O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, p. 74.

²⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'Geis', p. 39.

²⁷ Philip O'Leary, 'Honour-Bound: The Social Context of Early Irish Heroic Geis', *Celtica*, 20 (1988), 85–107 (p. 88).

²⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Celtic Elements in Icelandic Tradition', *Béaloideas*, 25 (1957), 3–24 (pp. 19–20).

²⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts. A Survey of Research*, 2nd edn (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2010), pp. 67–70.

but finds greater correspondences between *álög* and *geis* in more modern Gaelic folktales, rather than *geis* in medieval Irish literature. Despite this, she suggests that the motif in Norse can be traced to Gaelic oral tales reaching Iceland during the Viking Age.³⁰

In medieval Icelandic literature, the *álög* motif is predominantly found in the young romances, both in *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. Along with *Ála flekks saga*, which Alaric Hall, Steven D. P. Richardson and Haukur Þorgeirsson labelled ‘the pre-eminent Old Icelandic example of an *álög* tale’,³¹ scholars have noted that the motif is also to be found in *Svipdagsmál* (which is made up of two eddic poems), *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnsonar*, *Hjálmþés rímur* and *Hjálmþés saga*, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* and *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*.³² To this list we might also add a relatively little-known narrative tradition, *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*, a medieval Icelandic ballad probably based on a lost *fornaldarsaga*, **Haralds saga Hringsbana*.³³ Here are summaries of each of these instances of *álög*:

- In the two poems that form *Svipdagsmál*, Svipdagur states that he was compelled by his stepmother to go and find Menglöd.
- In *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnsonar*, the Russian princess Ingigerðr, disguised as ‘Grímr’, curses the protagonist Hálfðan never to have peace until her hand, glove and ring are freely given to him, before departing.³⁴
- In *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, Hjálmpér rejects his wicked stepmother Lúða’s sexual advances, and she later curses him to have no peace until he finds Hervör Hundingsdóttir. He counter-curses that her jaws will gape open (rendering her incapable of further curses), and that she will stand with a foot on each cliff with a fire kindled under her, and no food except what ravens bring her.³⁵ Parallels have been noted in the late Old Irish *Fingal Rónáin* and the Middle Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen*.³⁶
- Also in *Hjálmþés saga*, ‘Hörðr’/Hringr reveals at the end of the saga that he too had rejected Lúða’s advances, and that she had responded by cursing him and his sisters Álsól and Hildisif to transform into monstrous creatures who could only be released from those forms once specific conditions had been fulfilled.³⁷
- In *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, ‘Gríðr’ reveals to Illugi at the end of the saga that she had once been Princess Signý, and that she had been married and had a daughter called Hildr. Signý’s wicked stepmother Grímhildr cursed Signý to become a troll-wife, giving no explicit reason but presumably to eliminate the step-sibling of her own

³⁰ Rosemary Power, ‘*Geasa* and *Álög*: Magic Formulae and Perilous Quests in Gaelic and Norse’, *Scottish Studies*, 28 (1987), 69–89 (p. 84).

³¹ Alaric Hall, Steven D. P. Richardson and Haukur Þorgeirsson, ‘*Sigrgarðs saga frækna*: A Normalised Text, Translation, and Introduction’, *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, 21 (2013), 80–155 (p. 88).

³² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Svipdag’s Long Journey: Some Observations on Grógaldur and Fjölsvinnsmál’, *Béaloideas*, 39/41 (1971–73), 298–319; Power, ‘*Geasa* and *Álög*’, pp. 76–83.

³³ Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 171, 185.

³⁴ *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnsonar*, ch. 8, in *FAS*, iv, 258.

³⁵ *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, ch. 8–11, in *FAS*, iv, 194–204.

³⁶ The *Culhwch and Olwen* connection was first raised by Sven Grundtvig, in his introduction to the ballad of Ungen Svendal in *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*, ed. by Sven Grundtvig and Axel Olrik, 12 vols (Copenhagen: Samfundet til den Danske Literaturs Fremme, 1853–1976), ii, 239. On the *Fingal Rónáin* connection, see Ralph O’Connor, ‘“Stepmother Sagas”: An Irish Analogue for *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvers*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 72 (2000), 1–48.

³⁷ *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, ch. 22, in *FAS*, iv, 240–41.

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seven daughters. Part of this curse was that all men would fall in love with Hildir but be murdered by Gríðr. Hildir counter-cursed on her mother's behalf, cursing Grímhildir to stand with feet greatly apart, with a fire kindled under her, into which she would fall and burn to death if Signý and Hildir were to escape her curse.³⁸

- In *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, Princess Ingigerðr of Tartary rejects the offer of her wicked stepmother Hlégerðr to have her two sisters marry Hlégerðr's brothers. Hlégerðr curses her three stepdaughters, two to turn into animals to be abused, and the third, Ingigerðr, to become faithless and greedy. Ingigerðr counters by saying that those will be Hlégerðr's last ever words.³⁹
- In *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, Vilhjálmr loses a board-game match to a giant after being distracted by the giant's daughter, who had disguised herself as a beautiful woman. Vilhjálmr is ordered to find the giant's lair within three years, during which time he must discover the names of the ninety trolls in the lair.⁴⁰
- In *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*, a warrior called Hermóðr is duelling the protagonist Haraldr. Haraldr sustains a head injury, but wins the duel by cutting off Hermóðr's leg. Before executing Hermóðr, the latter curses Haraldr never to have his head-wound healed except by Hermóðr's haughty sister, who, he says, will have Haraldr hanged.⁴¹

In order to contextualise the curses in *Ála flekks saga* within the discussion of the *álög* motif, they are listed overleaf, in a table reproduced from John Roberts' discussion on the saga in his doctoral thesis.⁴²

Rosemary Power identifies three variants of the *álög* motif in Icelandic literature based on the identity of the curser. The first, which she considers to have been a late development, involves a non-stepmother-figure imposing the curse on the hero.⁴³ Power notes that it may be preceded by a game between the two, and her main Icelandic example is *Vilhjálm's saga*. We might add *Haralds rímur*, which has a duel before the curse, to this category. Power also suggests that the curses in *Ála flekks saga* fall under this category, albeit without the game motif.

³⁸ *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, ch. 5, in *FAS*, III, 420–22.

³⁹ Hall, Richardson and Haukur Þorgeirsson, '*Sigrarðs saga frækna*', pp. 107–8.

⁴⁰ *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, ch. 10, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. by Agnete Loth, 5 vols (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962–64), IV, 22.

⁴¹ *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Íslenzkar miðaldarímur*, 1/Rit, 3 (Reykjavik: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1973), p. 48.

⁴² John J. Roberts, 'Dreams and Visions in Medieval Icelandic Romance' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2007), p. 180. We are grateful to Dr Roberts for granting us permission to reproduce this table.

⁴³ Power, '*Geasa and Álög*', pp. 76–78.

	Curser	Victim	Curse	Justification	Retaliation	Remedy
1	Blátönn	Áli	To go into the forest and become Nótt's husband	Áli never greeted Blátönn kindly	Curse 2	Hlaðgerðr's assistance
2	Áli	Blátönn	To become a stone slab in the kitchen and break apart if Áli escapes from Nótt	Retaliation for curse 1	Curse 3(a)	None
3(a)	Glóðarauga	Áli	To become a wolf and kill men and livestock, in particular Þornbjörg's	Retaliation for curse 2	Curse 4	See remedy for curse 3(b)
4	Áli	Glóðarauga	To sit on a chest and yell constantly until Áli is released from his curse; then he will be hanged	Retaliation for curse 3(a)	Curse 3(b)	None
3(b)	Glóðarauga	Áli	When Áli has destroyed all Þornbjörg's livestock, he must do the same in his father's kingdom; he will not be released unless a woman pleads for his life	Extension of curse 3(a) in retaliation for curse 4	No specific retaliation; 4 applies	Assistance of Hildir, who begs for Áli to be spared
5	Nótt	Áli	Áli's wounds can only be cured by her brothers, and if this is not done within ten years, he will die	Escaping from Nótt (curse 1) and killing her brother	Nótt's death at the hands of her brother by means of trickery	Cure by Nótt's brothers, achieved by means of trickery
6	Jötunoxi	Áli	Áli must go and have no peace until he finds Hlaðgerðr	Pre-emptive strike before he is killed	Killing of Jötunoxi	Áli finds and rescues Hlaðgerðr

The second variant has a stepmother impose the quest on the hero.⁴⁴ Occasionally, this is a direct retaliation for the hero spurning her sexual advances, which Power refers to as the ‘Phædra motif’, referring to the Greek mythological character who fell in love with Hippolytus, her husband Theseus’ son by another woman. The ‘Phædra motif’ is found in *Hjálmpés saga* (Lúda and Hjálmpér) and is present in modified form in *Sigrarðs saga* (in which the wicked stepmother Hlégerðr attempts and fails to arrange marriages between her two brothers and two of her stepdaughters). We cannot be sure if the ‘Phædra motif’ was present in the *Svipdagsmál* tradition, since the poems do not tell us why Svipdagr’s stepmother sent him on his quest. Within this second variant, we also have several examples in which the stepmother-imposed curse is on her stepchildren, who are not the saga heroes. In these cases, the curse is only revealed and explained by the stepchildren themselves towards the end of the saga, after the heroes have freed them. The stepchildren had invariably been transformed into monstrous animals or creatures, and it is in this form that the heroes first encounter them. Examples are found in *Hjálmpés saga* (‘Hörðr’/Hringr, ‘Álsól’/Vargeisa and ‘Hildisif’/Skinnhúfa), *Illuga saga* and *Sigrarðs saga*.

In the third variant, ‘the lady herself puts the hero under *geasa* or *álög* to search for her’.⁴⁵ This is much rarer in medieval Icelandic literature, and the only such example that Power provides is *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*.

Power’s subdivision of these variants of the *álög* motif is not entirely clear-cut, because there are strong overlaps between these categories. Áli’s counter-curse to Blátönn (number 2 in the table) involves flames being kindled on her after her transformation into a stone; this mirrors the fate of the wicked stepmothers in *Hjálmpés saga* and *Illuga saga*, who are both cursed to have fires lit under them.⁴⁶ The fact that Blátönn is also turned into a stone and Glóðarauga is later cursed to yell ceaselessly (number 4) denies both of them the faculty of speech, and therefore the ability to utter any further curses, something that is manifested overtly in *Hjálmpés saga* and *Sigrarðs saga*. Glóðarauga’s initial curse on Áli (number 3(a)) transforms him into a monstrous creature, mirroring a common curse on protagonistic characters by wicked stepmothers within the second variant (*Hjálmpés saga*, *Illuga saga* and *Sigrarðs saga*). Jotunoxi’s curse (number 6) imposes the very same quest on Áli as is found in Power’s second and third variants (*Hjálmpés saga* and *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* respectively), namely to have no peace until he finds a certain lady, although in all three variants, the curser has a different relationship to the hero.

Fuller discussion of the dream-aspect of Nótt’s curse on Áli (number 5) can be found in the introduction to our translation of the saga,⁴⁷ but particular mention must be made of the similarity of the *álög*-driven quest to *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*. In both cases, the hero is cursed to be unable to recover from certain wounds unless he locates the only person with the power to heal him. In both cases, the hero has already made an enemy of at least one sibling of this healer’s siblings (Áli has had Blátönn and Glóðarauga killed; Haraldr is about to kill Hermóðr). In both cases, some sort of trickery or coercion is required to have the hero healed: Áli and Þornbjörg disguise themselves to trick Jotunoxi; while Haraldr uses cunning and disguise to find his way to Hermóðr’s sister, eventually forcing her to heal him under

⁴⁴ Power, ‘*Geasa and Álög*’, pp. 78–82.

⁴⁵ Power, ‘*Geasa and Álög*’, pp. 82–83.

⁴⁶ See motif M431.6 in Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana, 27 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), p. 197.

⁴⁷ Hui and others, ‘*Ála flekks saga*’, pp. 9–10.

threat of rape.⁴⁸ One other potentially important similarity is the fact that both Áli and Haraldr assume aliases after wandering through a forest (Haraldr goes by ‘Dulinn’, ‘the disguised one’), but the two stories share little else in common. On this evidence, it must remain a possibility that Áli’s quest to find Jǫtunoxi was directly influenced by the Haraldr Hringsbani tradition.

In *Ála flekks saga*, then, we have not only the largest number of *álög* in any extant medieval Icelandic text, but also a range of manifestations, with clear parallels in other roughly contemporary legendary sagas. Indeed, almost all of the *álög* in the other sagas listed above find a strong parallel with at least one of the curses in *Ála flekks saga*. It does not seem as though the author of *Ála flekks saga* was simply attempting to craft a saga shaped around numerous and varied *álög*; rather the framing and sequencing of the *álög* shows them to be important structural and thematic units in the saga. Their central role can be demonstrated through their facilitation of the saga’s adherence to the structure of the Snow White tale-type, which, along with other relevant structural and narrative elements of the saga, will now be discussed.

4. Structure

4.i. Structure: Origins

The parallels with Snow White are apparent from the very outset of the saga in Áli’s Origin episode, which emphasises the unusual circumstances of his birth and childhood. It is tempting to read into King Ríkarðr’s powers of foresight, and possibly the king and queen’s sudden conception of a child after an unspecified period of childlessness, the supernatural element that generally accompanies the conception of Snow White. Additionally, Ríkarðr’s foresighted injunction, that his child must be exposed if it is male, might also reflect a common aspect of the rivalry between Snow White and her persecutor which leads to the Jealousy episode. Where Snow White variants frequently set up a sexual rivalry between two women, here an implicit male rivalry might be reflected in Ríkarðr’s rejection of Áli, who, as a male heir, might one day be a source of conflict to his father. His father’s insistence on Áli being exposed is similar to the jealous (step-)mother’s insistence on the same fate for the younger, more beautiful Snow White, especially given that in some variants the father is party to this and abandons his daughter himself.

Though convenient, such an explanation for Áli’s exposure is not overly convincing, due to the lack of any Oedipal aspect in medieval Icelandic versions of the child exposure motif, that is, versions of the motif in which the child is exposed because he represents a future threat to his father.⁴⁹ Infant exposure is a fairly commonplace event in the Icelandic sagas and, while Sean Lawing considers that ‘little reason needed to be given’, most sagas mention some specific motivation, whether it be illegitimacy, revenge or a negative premonition about the infant’s future, as in *Ála flekks saga*.⁵⁰ Of course, these literary instances should not be

⁴⁸ *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*, pp. 49–59.

⁴⁹ In the child exposure episode in *Samsons saga fagra*, the child’s inheritance is a factor in the father’s decision to have him exposed, although (as in *Ála flekks saga*) the exposure is well-intended in this case, because Sigurðr, as Goðmundr’s bastard son, is said not to be entitled to any inheritance according to the laws of Glæsisvellir, and would instead have to live out his life as a slave; see *Samsons saga fagra*, ed. by John Wilson, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 65 (Copenhagen: Jørgensen, 1953), ch. 17, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Sean B. Lawing, ‘The Place of the Evil: Infant Abandonment in Old Norse Society’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013), 133–50 (p. 136). Not all these motivations are to be considered equal, however. *Finnboga saga, Gunnlaugs*

taken as an accurate reflection of the historical practice.⁵¹ Most children exposed were unlikely to survive whereas the exposure of Áli principally serves to mark his birth and early childhood as exceptional or memorable; his survival is never seriously in doubt.⁵²

As in many Snow White variants, the task of exposing the child is assigned to servants, who fail to kill the child, although in the case of *Ála flekks saga* they do technically fulfil their orders. In another feature common to many Snow White tales, the child is taken in by people that live on the edge of human society: in this case the impoverished Gunni and his wife Hildir, whose low social status is denoted by their outermost position during feasts. Áli's forced departure from the royal, courtly milieu and incorporation into their family seems to represent a mini Expulsion and Adoption episode within the Origins section as a whole, complete with compassionate executioners in the slaves who lie about having killed him.⁵³ The compassionate executioner is 'not a compulsory figure' in Snow White variants,⁵⁴ but the servants do seem to fulfil just such a function. The order to expose a child does not necessarily encompass the active killing of the child, but the fact that the slaves lie about it is reminiscent of the compassionate executioner's choice to defy the (actual) kill-order and allow the hero or heroine to live. As in Snow White variants both with and without the motif, the protagonist is then forced to gain a new identity in a lower social circle, which in *Ála flekks saga* is achieved through Áli's adoption by Gunni and Hildir.

The ritual of birth which follows Áli's rescue, in which Hildir lies on the floor and pretends to give birth to Áli, constitutes a physical re-enactment of labour and clearly functions as a way for Hildir and Gunni to claim Áli as their own. The ritual can also be understood as an attempt by Hildir to restore to the child the sense of personhood and the legal rights which exposure denied it.⁵⁵ Abandonment places the infant in a liminal position where it is neither living nor dead, not unlike the unborn child: hence it must be born again in order to be reincorporated

saga ormstungu and *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* all include comments emphasising that infant abandonment was only considered acceptable for those who could not afford to raise the child, suggesting other justifications were open to criticism.

- 51 Infant abandonment was an accepted part of Old Norse pre-Christian society, one of two traditions (along with the eating of horse-flesh) that was briefly maintained after the Conversion in 1000 AD (*Íslendingabók*, ch. 7, in *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1986), p. 17). However, the Church was quick to proscribe the practice except in exceptional cases of severe deformity, though the existence of 'strongly worded laws' regarding the practice after Conversion have been taken by Sean Lawing as evidence 'that infant abandonment was sufficiently established to persist beyond its post-conversion ban' (Lawing, 'The Place of the Evil', p. 137).
- 52 The child's rescue is a motif common from folklore (R131ff.), and rescue by a peasant a recognised sub-motif within that category (R131.6). Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, rev. and enl. edn, 6 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58), v, 279–81. See also motif R131 in Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, p. 231.
- 53 Instances of the compassionate executioner motif are also found elsewhere in Old Norse literature. Several Snow White variants extend the motif to involve the substitution of animal viscera as proof of the heroine's supposed death (see footnote 57 below), and in *Drauma-Jóns saga* we find a clear parallel to this, in Ingibjörg's decision not to kill Jón and instead substitute a dog's heart as proof of his supposed death. In the chivalric *Beyvers saga*, we find the hero's clothes dipped in pig's blood for similar purposes, and in *Þjalar-Jóns saga*, the hero's clothes are dipped in his own blood.
- 54 See motif K152 in Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, p. 170, and Shojaei Kawan, 'A Brief Literary History of *Snow White*', p. 326.
- 55 Lawing ('The Place of the Evil', pp. 136–37) points out that '[i]nfants appear to have lacked legal status in pre-Christian law — something that was gained only after an infant had been sprinkled with water (*ausa vatn*), named or given food'.

into society. The noted inability of any name to stick to the child afterwards problematises the success of the ritual in *Ála flekks saga* and further reveals the scene as part of the couple's struggle to give the child a sure identity. That the bestowal of a name customarily provided protection from the threat of abandonment makes Áli's initial lack of a name,⁵⁶ even after the birth ritual, all the more problematic and his abandonment and rebirth thus sets the scene for his continual struggle with recognition and identity, through further cycles of Jealousy, Expulsion and Adoption.

4.ii. Structure: Cycles of Jealousy, Expulsion and Adoption

The persecution proper, however, does not begin until the first curse against Áli. The reason that Blátönn explicitly supplies for cursing Áli is that he never greeted her 'með góðum orðum' ('with kind words').⁵⁷ It is not the most obvious manifestation of Jealousy, but the implication is that Blátönn feels slighted by perceived inequity. Two things are notable about Blátönn's reason: firstly, it seems jarringly contrived in terms of the construction of the saga, in that we are never even told that Áli has ever met Blátönn, let alone snubbed her; and secondly, the Jealousy does not take place within the familial sphere. Although it is common in Snow White variants for the persecutor to be within the family unit, the fact that Blátönn has no familial relationship with Áli need not be problematic, as Graham Anderson notes in his discussion of ancient Snow White variants that '[c]lose family tensions tend to be toned down in the romances, and their role supplied by external rivals instead'.⁵⁸ Indeed, Blátönn's equivalents in another variant of the *álög* motif are stepmothers (in *Hjálmþés rímur/Hjálmþés saga* and *Sigrarðs saga*). Blátönn's accusation of impoliteness is reminiscent of the actual disdain shown to Lúða and Hlégerðr respectively, immediately before their curses — and both of these cursers are the victims' stepmothers. We may therefore detect in Blátönn traces of the wicked-stepmother-as-curser motif, which fills the same functional role as the wicked stepmother motif commonly found in Snow White variants. That this is a Jealousy episode is implied by the narrative artificiality of Blátönn's reason for her curse.

We must, however, be wary of reading too much Snow White significance into the Blátönn-Áli interaction on its own. Wicked stepmothers are found in many other tale-types, and we have already seen in Section 3 that *Ála flekks saga* has common substance with the 'stepmother sagas' such as *Hjálmþés saga* and *Sigrarðs saga*, a category independent of the Snow White tale-type. However, if we accept the possibility that Blátönn's curse represents a Jealousy episode, it is important that it directly triggers an incontrovertible Expulsion episode. Blátönn's curse expels Áli from the civilisation of his father's royal court into the wilderness; more specifically, Áli is explicitly sent into a forest, and implicitly, by being sent to Nótt, into a cave afterwards. Forests appear as places into which the protagonist is expelled in some twenty-five of the variants listed by Böklen, while the cave into which he is sent to take on a pseudo-domestic role as Nótt's husband could be seen as an ironic subversion of the Adoption episode before his Adoption proper.

⁵⁶ Juha Pentikäinen suggests that the 'decision as to whether a child was to be kept or abandoned [...] was actualized, at the latest, at the moment of name-giving or baptism' (*The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition: Nordic Dead-Child Beings. A Study in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Antony Landon, FF Communications, 202 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1968), p. 74).

⁵⁷ Hui and others, '*Ála flekks saga*', p. 21.

⁵⁸ Graham Anderson, *Fairytales in the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 53.

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The dog which Hlaðgerðr sends to help Áli escape from Nótt's cave may also be posited as a feature of significance to the discussion of Snow White parallels in the saga. Boberg categorises this dog under the motifs 'Dog as Messenger' and 'Helpful dog',⁵⁹ but one specific aspect of its appearance remains difficult to explain, namely the full purpose of the pork that it brings to Áli. In her instructions to Áli, Hlaðgerðr states that cutting up this pork and leaving it on the path behind him will prevent Nótt from pursuing him. Though Hlaðgerðr does not explain how it will do so, one possibility is that the dog — whose ability to break through the wall of Nótt's cave with its muzzle is an indication of its formidable physicality — would linger on the path to eat the pork, and that Nótt would be deterred by its presence there.⁶⁰ The appearance of a dog with the primary function of obstructing an antagonist's pursuit of the protagonist finds broad resonance in several other Snow White variants, though this is usually manifested in one of two ways: the compassionate executioner's killing of the dog in place of the heroine;⁶¹ or the consumption of poisoned food by the dog instead of the heroine.⁶² This latter manifestation is of particular interest, even though a connection may not be immediately apparent due to the lack of harmful food in the saga episode. During his identification of the *Ephesiaca*, written by Xenophon of Ephesus in the second century, as a Snow White variant, Graham Anderson suggested that an episode from this ancient tale, involving the heroine Anthia surviving her imprisonment in a pit with several dangerous dogs thanks to the regular feeding of the dogs by a sympathetic captor, shared a specific function with the instances in Böklen's collection of the consumption of poisoned food by a dog.⁶³ Even though the *Ephesiaca* episode does not involve the self-sacrificing consumption of harmful food, and even though its dogs are more dangerous than those found in Böklen's variants, Anderson considered these narratives to share the same underlying idea: the dog must be fed, or dire consequences will follow. Anderson regarded this shared idea as a significant piece of evidence for the affinity of the *Ephesiaca* with the Snow White folktale, and his suggestion is important for our discussion because it raises the possibility that this same idea underpins Hlaðgerðr's instructions to Áli regarding her dog; in Áli's case, failure to leave the pork behind on the path for the dog to eat would lead to Nótt being able to pursue him.⁶⁴ This would account for the significance of the otherwise unexplained pork, and reinforce the implication that Hlaðgerðr's dog, like the dogs in the *Ephesiaca* episode, can be dangerous. Hlaðgerðr's dog may therefore be a version of a Snow White element that stems back to the second century at the latest, and is also found, in a very different form, in some more modern Snow White variants.

After Áli's escape from Nótt's cave, he enters the kingdom of Tartary for the first time. This constitutes entry into a new social sphere, and a strong case can be made for it as an Adoption episode, not least because a change in 'situation, status, and environment' is crucial

⁵⁹ See motifs B291.2.2 and B421 in Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, pp. 46, 47.

⁶⁰ If the pork is intended to be consumed, it is unlikely to be by Nótt, whose diet is shown to consist of the flesh of horses and humans.

⁶¹ Böklen's collection contains ten variants in which a dog fulfils this function. These variants come from Scandinavia (*dän.*, *norw.* 2., *swed.*, *isl.*), the Iberian peninsula (*port.* 3., *cat.*), Italy (*lig.*, *tosc.* 2., *abruzz.*) and Romania (*rum.* 2.). Different animals sometimes fulfil this function in other variants, but dogs are by far the most common.

⁶² In the Polish and Russian variants in Böklen's collection (*poln.* and *russ.* respectively), an enchanted apple meant for the princess is eaten by a loyal dog. A Sicilian variant (*sic.* 2.) also contains this motif, but in that tale, the animal is a cat and the poisoned item of food is a cake.

⁶³ Anderson, *Fairytales in the Ancient World*, pp. 52, 55. The *Ephesiaca* episode can be found in Longus: *Daphnis and Chloe. Xenophon of Ephesus: Anthia and Habrocomes*, ed. and trans. by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 318–21 [IV.6.1–7].

⁶⁴ It is perhaps no coincidence that Nótt later lays her curse on Áli by reaching him in a dream, rather than in person.

to the heroine's escape from hostility in both Part 1 and Part 2 — the Adoption episode being, according to Jones' structure, the heroine's only escape in Part 1.⁶⁵ It is in this Tartary episode that Áli constructs a new identity for himself and adopts the name *Stuttheðinn*, meaning 'Short-Pelt' or 'Short-Cloak', possibly foreshadowing the animalistic transformation yet to come. He is accepted in the court and soon proves his worth by leading Þornbjörg's army to victory over the invading Indian force. In so doing, he gains Þornbjörg's hand in marriage. The military role for which Áli volunteers is a demonstration of the proof of his worth, not dissimilar to how the Grimms' Sneewittchen makes herself useful by doing the housework for the dwarfs whose house she discovers. A hero leading an army to victory on behalf of a king or queen (whose kingdom the hero does not necessarily need to be from) is not in itself an unusual course of action for a hero in medieval romance, but its functional significance — and by extension the plausibility of reading Áli's entry into Tartary as an Adoption episode — is heightened by the fact that it immediately follows the episodes of Jealousy and Expulsion.

At the pinnacle of Áli's adoption into Tartary, the night of his wedding to its maiden-king, Þornbjörg, he is cursed for a second time. Though the persecutor this time is Blátönn's brother Glóðarauga, it may still be viewed as the first step in a Renewed Jealousy episode. The reason for Glóðarauga's curse is in fact the same as Blátönn's, albeit with much stronger grounds — namely Áli's mistreatment of Blátönn (through his fatal counter-curse) — and this new curse may be read as a dramatic continuation of the first, as it puts Áli in greater physical danger, due to his being hunted as a wolf. Similarly, the wolf-transformation must be considered to constitute a third Expulsion episode; in line with the general affinity of wolves with outlaws,⁶⁶ Áli is this time driven out of human society altogether, not just the English court. He is rescued and adopted for a second time by his foster-mother, Hildir, when she recognises his eyes in those of the wolf cornered by King Ríkarðr's hunters, saves his life and brings him home. When he subsequently emerges from the wolf-skin, rather like a child released from the womb, it is tempting to read the episode as a deliberate evocation of Hildir's ritual labour earlier in the saga, when the adoption motif appeared for the first time.

4.iii. Structure: Renewed Jealousy, Expulsion and Death

This same generic pattern, of combined Jealousy and Expulsion with ever-higher stakes, is also applied to Nótt's curse. Nótt's motivation is stronger than Blátönn's and Glóðarauga's, as she claims revenge for two perceived wrongs: for Áli's earlier escape from her and for his mistreatment of Glóðarauga (again through his fatal counter-curse). The Expulsion aspect of Nótt's curse is once again clear in two ways: in social terms, he is shunned by most humans on account of his stench; and in geographical terms, the search for the cure takes him through Africa and Asia to Jötunoxi's kingdom at the extreme fringes of the world. The manifestation of Nótt's hostility also raises the stakes once again: while Áli faced the threat

⁶⁵ Jones, 'The Structure of *Snow White*', p. 173. Áli's visit to Hlaðgerðr's cottage, which takes place after he is expelled but before he reaches Nótt, might seem like an Adoption episode at first glance, but he does not stay there for any meaningful period of time. His entry to Tartary is a far more plausible alternative.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Inside Outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82 (2010), 365–88 (p. 367), and Marion Poilvez, 'Access to the Margins, Outlawry and Narrative Spaces in Medieval Icelandic Outlaw Sagas', *Brathair*, 12 (2012), 115–36 (pp. 121–22). On the connection between the connected social and geographic aspects of outlawry more widely, see, for instance, Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

of death while in wolf-form, Nótt's curse makes his death inevitable should he fail to escape within ten years. On top of this, Áli's immobile and festering state during his incapacitation reinforces the likelihood that this represents a Death episode. Despite the fact that Áli neither dies nor becomes comatose, his physical state mirrors that of the corpse of Snjófríðr, who was discussed in Section 2: both are said to rot with a great *óþefr* ('stench').⁶⁷ In other words, Áli's deteriorating illness has physical symptoms that are associated with death elsewhere in Old Norse literature, reinforcing the likelihood that his illness was an adequate allomotif for the theme of death.

The escalation of threat is an important part of the repetition of attacks on the hero or heroine in Snow White variants, given that one of the later attacks must cause the Death episode. Because of the strong generic similarities between the curses of Blátǫnn, Glóðarauga and Nótt, any differences between them are all the more pronounced. We have already seen the increase in the curser's motivation, but another key pattern is the diminishing power of Áli's counter-curses: against Blátǫnn he issues a successful counter-curse; against Glóðarauga he issues a successful counter-curse which results in a counter-counter-curse on him; and against Nótt in his dream, he can make no reply at all. Nótt's curse catches Áli at a moment of uttermost vulnerability; he is unable to avoid her paranormal attack or to articulate a reply in his state of slumber. In terms of narrative construction, these different sets of markers feeding into the progression of the three generically similar curses are indications of deliberate literary craft, and may also be reflective of the strong familiarity that the saga author had with the Snow White tale-type, as well as his confidence in adapting it. Steven Swann Jones, commenting on variants which contain an additional cycle of persecution after the heroine's revival, remarks that 'these longer versions, by incorporating a third cycle of persecution, further support the idea that these cycles of persecution are units of dramatic structure apparent to narrators, who may double or treble them in the story'.⁶⁸ *Ála flekks saga* does in fact have an additional post-revival curse which will be discussed below, but here it is sufficient to note Jones' acknowledgement of the structural flexibility that different Snow White variants can have. In essence, Glóðarauga's curse may be read as 'Renewed Jealousy, Expulsion and Adoption', while Nótt's curse may be read as a 'Renewed Jealousy, Expulsion and Death' episode, and this repetition of the same 'units of dramatic structure' seems to be part of the deliberate adaptation of the tale-type.

Alongside this structural repetition, Jǫtunoxi could be considered a second manifestation of the compassionate executioner motif. The wounds that Nótt inflicts on Áli in his dream can only be healed by her brothers, one of whom, Jǫtunoxi, holds utter dominion over the other two, who possess the healing ointment and only apply it at his command. The implicit assumption behind the escape clause that Nótt puts in her curse seems to be that Jǫtunoxi will never agree to heal Áli, presumably because Áli has already had two of their trollish siblings killed, a point Jǫtunoxi raises when he finally realises Áli's identity in chapter 16. In other words, Nótt's curse holds the implicit intention for Jǫtunoxi to be Áli's executioner, whether actively or by simply refusing to heal him before his life expires.⁶⁹ In choosing to grant Áli life, he fulfils the specific function of a compassionate executioner, even though compassion is technically never a motivation for his actions.

⁶⁷ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Jones, 'The Structure of *Snow White*', pp. 173, 176–77.

⁶⁹ A parallel can be drawn here with *Haralds rímur Hringsbana*, in which Jǫtunoxi's equivalent figure — the only one who is able to heal the hero's wounds, according to the curse — is Hermóðr's sister. In that tale, Hermóðr

4.iv. Structure: Exhibition and Resuscitation

Probably one of the most significant reasons that the saga's relationship with the Snow White tale-type has previously gone unnoticed is the lack of an obvious Exhibition episode, which is the most recognisable and iconic feature of the tale-type. Although Áli lies helpless throughout his protracted Death episode, the saga contains little overt indication that he is ever on display. However, it is intriguing that Nótt's curse forces Þornbjörg to travel so widely in search of a cure, scouring first the northern hemisphere, then Africa and finally Asia, all the while with Áli in tow.⁷⁰ Áli is thus implicitly exhibited to the whole of the known world whilst in his death-like state. Indeed, though he emits so foul a stench that only Þornbjörg can bear to attend to him, there is no indication that Áli is hidden away during their travels. On the contrary, when the couple arrives in India, its ruler, Earl Álfr, goes down to the shore to meet them, and, after greeting both Áli and Þornbjörg, we are told that he 'verðr þó hryggr við þat at Áli er svá litt haldinn' ('becomes distressed that Áli was in such a bad way'). In other words, the earl learns of Áli's condition not through a description or report, but by actually seeing him. Furthermore, the travels of the incapacitated Áli also fulfil a fundamental aspect of the Exhibition episode, namely that the Exhibition is inevitably tied to the Death episode by its very nature as a public display of the protagonist's ongoing state of death. The search for a cure for Áli, with Áli himself in tow, places primary emphasis on his ongoing state of death. There are hints, then, that the travels of Þornbjörg and Áli might constitute a reflex of an Exhibition episode, even if it is treated rather briefly and obliquely.

Áli's Resuscitation is similarly understated, to the point of being cursory. Few details are provided about his healing process, other than that the cure is an ointment possessed by Leggr and Liðr, two of the troll-family's siblings who are otherwise entirely insignificant (and the only two who are not killed, because their role is so minor that they are never hostile to Áli). It is unclear how long the healing process takes, but it does not appear to be very long. There is little more that needs to be said about this episode other than that Áli becomes a fully active character again afterwards — he participates in the attack on Jötunoxi's hall not long after he is healed — thereby emphasising, by contradistinction, his utter lack of agency in his earlier state of incapacitation.

Following Áli's revival, Jötunoxi places the saga's sixth curse on him. This curse seems to be the most out-of-place, as it breaks the pattern of increasing peril. It is, as discussed in Section 3, a different sort of curse to the other three, rather more similar to the curses in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnsonar* and *Hjálmþés saga*, in which a hero will have no peace until he finds a certain woman. In terms of the Snow White typology, it is in fact not problematic; as mentioned earlier, Jones notes that that some Snow White variants contain another cycle

explicitly states his expectation that she will have Haraldr hanged (in other words, playing the role of executioner), though, as in *Ála flekks saga*, Haraldr uses disguise and trickery to get himself healed (as well as threat of rape, something Áli does not do).

⁷⁰ In medieval cosmography, the known world was often represented according to a tripartite division — Europe, Africa and Asia; this idea was derived from classical tradition. This tripartite division is visually encoded in one particular type of map which is found in medieval manuscripts from many European countries, including Iceland; this map is referred to as the 'T-O map', so called because, within the circular representation of the world, the three continents are approximately depicted as one semi-circle (Asia) and two quadrants (Europe and Africa), with the three bodies of water dividing the continents (the Mediterranean, the Nile and the Don) collectively forming a 'T' shape. For a detailed study of cosmographical thought in medieval Norway and Iceland, see Rudolf Simek, *Altordische Kosmographie: Studien und Quellen zu Weltbild und Weltbeschreibung in Norwegen und Island vom 12. bis zum 14. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

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Course number	Relation to Marriage
1	Blátönn curses Áli to be married to the troll-wife Nótt.
3(a), 3(b)	Glóðaraugr curses Áli on his wedding night, before he can consummate his marriage.
5	While Áli is incapacitated by Nótt's curse, his wife Þornbjörg travels the world to find a cure. The cure is secured by Þornbjörg, under a pseudonym, offering herself to Jötunoxi in marriage; his slaying of Nótt, his sister and the performer of the curse, is one of the conditions of their marriage.
6	Jötunoxi curses Áli when his wedding-feast is turned into a hall-burning. The curse involves inflicting Áli with a wanderlust that separates him from his wife, and is lifted when Áli finds Hlaðgerðr and acts as her marriage-giver.

of persecution after the heroine's revival, representing additional manifestations of 'units of dramatic structure apparent to narrators'.⁷¹ Furthermore, although the sixth curse feels out-of-place with the rest of the tightly structured saga — including, for instance, Áli's isolated fight against a giant⁷² — it may in fact have a deeper thematic meaning. Jones notes that

the structural pattern of episodes in "Snow White" recapitulates the personal development of the heroine; in other words, the sequence of episodes is structured to correspond to the basic trials and transitions of the maturing young woman in order to illustrate for the audience the process of maturation.⁷³

The three main watersheds are adolescence, leaving home and marriage.⁷⁴ In other words, Jones suggests that structural repetition — a dominant narrative feature in *Ála flekks saga* — is interlinked with the theme of maturation. It is therefore appropriate that in *Ála flekks saga*, all four curses upon Áli relate in some way to marriage, either as part of the motivation, the resolution or the curse itself, as can be seen in the table above (with course numbers corresponding to Roberts' table in Section 3).

The manifestation of Jötunoxi's curse, though awkward in generic terms, makes some sense in thematic terms. While the first curse threatens Áli with an undesirable marriage and the third and fifth curses test his marriage to Þornbjörg, the sixth curse does not put Áli in a marriage situation at all. Instead, it sees Áli essentially assuming the role of substitute father in marrying Hlaðgerðr off, marking the first time he plays a parental function in the saga. This prefigures his eventual succession in the final chapter of the saga, which forms part of the Resolution episode.

⁷¹ Jones, 'The Structure of *Snow White*', pp. 173, 176–77. One such text containing an additional post-revival persecution is Böklen's *norw. I.*, which, as noted in footnote 6 above, also contains animal-transformations through the use of skins.

⁷² The fact that this giant is named Kolr ('Coal') is perhaps reflective of another deep-rooted Snow White connection, especially given that another minor character in the saga has the name 'Rauðr' ('Red'). The colours red and black, as well as white, are of great symbolic importance in many Snow White variants. Anderson has also noted that names relating to two of these colours, this time white and red, are found in the *Ephesiaca* (Anderson, *Fairytales in the Ancient World*, p. 51), in the form of the servants Leucon ('White') and Rhode ('Rose').

⁷³ Jones, 'The Structure of *Snow White*', p. 177.

⁷⁴ Jones, 'The Structure of *Snow White*', pp. 177–79.

4.v. Structure: Resolution

The Resolution episode of *Ála flekks saga* is straightforward, describing the happy ending of the protagonist's marriage that is customary in both fairy-tales and medieval romances, and the description of their royal progeny that is customary in the latter. In *Ála flekks saga*, the Resolution is compounded by the odd fact that *Áli* and *Þornbjörg* get married again in chapter 18, despite having already done so in chapter 8, when they had formalised everything but their marital consummation. It is possible that their first marriage was considered incomplete because they did not consummate it, but in any case, it is striking that they hold what seem to be the same wedding celebrations again, albeit in England rather than in Tartary this time. It gives *Áli* the rare distinction of experiencing major life events twice, with one forming a full experience and the other an incomplete version of that experience; he has two births (one regular, the other re-enacted), two weddings (one unconsummated, the other properly consummated) and, eventually, two deaths (one a prolonged state of near-death, the other, at the very end of the saga, a natural death).

5. Conclusion

The sum of the above structural analysis is outlined in the table below, with the saga's particular modifications to the Snow White structure in square brackets. Taking the saga as a whole, then, there can be little doubt that the entire narrative tightly follows Jones' nine-episode typological structure. This is emphasised by the fact that not only do all the nine episodes appear in *Ála flekks saga*, but they do so in exactly the same sequence as they are outlined in Jones' structure. In view of this, as well as the methodical use of the *álög* motif, it is extremely unlikely that *Ála flekks saga*'s close adherence to the Snow White tale-type is coincidental. Although the most recognisable episodes depicting the protagonist's Exhibition and Resuscitation are treated rather perfunctorily, this may simply suggest that Snow White tales circulating in Iceland in the late medieval period treated the death-and-resuscitation arc in very general terms. Therefore, because of its close and numerous structural parallels to the Snow White tale-type, *Ála flekks saga* must be considered to represent the clearest Snow White variant in the extant corpus of medieval Icelandic literature. Furthermore, the saga must also be regarded as one of the earliest known literary Snow White variants in the world, and it serves as a *terminus ante quem* for the transmission of the Snow White tale-type into Iceland; the tale-type must have entered Iceland, whether in oral or literary form, by the time the saga was composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

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Snow White episode	Event in <i>Ála flekks saga</i>	Chapter nos. in <i>Ála flekks saga</i>
1. Origin	Áli's conception, exposure and return to the English court	1–3
2. Jealousy	Blátönn's curse	4
3. Expulsion	Consequent departure from the English court to the wild to find Nótt	5
4. Adoption	New identity in Tartary	6–8
5. Renewed Jealousy [Expulsion and Adoption]	Gloðarauga's curse and consequent wolf-transformation	8–11
6. [Renewed Jealousy, Expulsion and] Death	Nótt's curse and Áli's consequent physical decay	12–15
7. Exhibition	Þornbjörg's travels across the world in search of a cure, with Áli in tow	14
8. Resuscitation	Áli healed by Leggr and Liðr	15
(Extra cycle of persecution)	Jǫtunoxi's curse and Áli's consequent departure to Scythia to find Hlaðgerðr	16–17
9. Resolution	Marriages and descendants	18–19