

The Heroine in the Fornaldar sögur.

Women do not play any part of importance in many Fornaldar sögur (hereafter Fs.). The Fs. mostly deal with men and the affairs of men. But in some sagas we meet women who really do play an active part in the story, and in fact one Fs. is in some of the manuscripts named after the heroine, Hervarar saga. This point should not be overestimated. A title which names the saga after the heroine, is not necessarily as old as the saga itself. But in all the different classes of manuscripts behind this saga, there seems to be a tradition of a title named after the heroine, though other titles also exist.¹⁾ And this fact shows that those who gave the title Hervarar saga, and those who later used it, looked upon Hervör (especially the first one in the saga by that name) as a very important character in the saga. Compared with the Íslendinga sögur (hereafter Ís.) no woman have there given her name to a saga. Although one woman's name in the title of some of the manuscripts behind one saga is very little to draw conclusions from, this reflects, I think, that the position of women in this kind of literature is more similar that which appears in the continental Riddara sögur (hereafter Rs.) and in Eddaic poetry. The outstanding position of the heroine in these genres is very often reflected in the title. Many Edda-poems

1) An outline of the manuscripts of the saga and the different titles in the manuscripts can be found in Jón Helgason's edition, Kbh. 1924.

are named after the heroine, and many Rs. are named after the heroine as well as after the hero.

The position of women seems to be another in mediæval heroic literature than in realistic literature, as Is. The Fs. belong to the literary heroic tradition; they are part of the same literary tradition as Eddaic poetry.

The image of the heroines in the Fs. is of course very stereotyped, and therefore the heroines do not interest us as individuals. It is the type of woman and the typical characteristics of the type that interest. It would perhaps be possible to divide the heroines - and the subordinated female characters - in the Fs. into groups or subdivisions on the basis of way of acting, the most apparent characteristics etc. The skjaldmeyjar could for example be looked upon as such a subdivision. But here the question of subdivision will not be emphasized, and in fact there are some characteristics that are more or less typical of nearly all the female characters in the Fs. And here I would like to direct the attention to these very typical characteristics which give the depiction of women in this kind of literature other traits than in realistic literature.

The heroines that we meet in the Fs., differ from the women in the Is. in that they are more independent and actively take the initiative. These women may very well adopt a masculine role, and they are not made comic in their male role by revealing that they do not have the capacity to fill it - as may happen in realistic literature. In fact adopting a masculine

concerned, the unkind nature seems to be regarded as positive qualities, it indicates that these women have the same nature as men.

In the realistic literature, as the Is., women are far from humble and oppressed, but their chances to realize themselves are limited. Only in exceptional cases they express their own will and wishes if they by doing so will oppose the men of the family. If a woman does so after all, it will - with very few exceptions - be apparent that the woman is wrong; and if she expresses her own wishes and acts against the men of the family, husband, father, brothers, even sons, it will give her a bad reputation.

Women who personally revenge themselves, are also rare in the realistic literature, especially if the object of the revenge is a man. And if a woman does so, it will probably not be tolerated.

This means that in the realistic literature a woman's good qualities as courage, vigour and eagerness for revenge are good qualities only as long as she uses them to support the men of the family. At the same moment as she turns against a man, her good qualities will be regarded as bad ones.

The Fs. give at least partly another picture of the women's chances to act in accordance with their wishes. The women in this kind of literature, both the heroines and more subordinated characters, will fairly often express a will which opposes the men in her surroundings, and in most cases a woman will have it her own way. She will carry her point through argumen-

tation, cunning threat, and she may even use force. The rich and beautiful Brynhildr in Völsunga saga threatens to leave her husband if he will not kill Sigurðr. And the poor and ugly Gríma in Ragnars saga uses the same threats with the same success, she even threatens her husband with death:

ok þat mun mitt ráð vera at taka hann mér til manns,
en reka þik í brott eða drepa, ef þu vill eigi eftir
því gera, sem ek vil. 1)

The women in the Fs. very often express their own wishes about their marriage, and - as the women in realistic literature - they are seldom forced to marry. But in matter as these the women in the Fs. seem to have a more independent position than their sisters in the Is. They very often decide themselves on what conditions they will marry, and they may make it a condition that their husband to be, should have certain qualifications. So does Brynhildr in Völsunga saga. She decides that she will only marry the man who can ride through the fire which surrounds her castle. In Ásmundar saga Æsa in fagra decides that she will marry the one of her two suitors who returns from the battle with the most beautiful hands. In both cases the women probably mean to exclude men they do not want. Brynhildr believed that only Sigurðr was able to enter her castle. Æsa wants to marry her own foster brother, who was one of her suitors, not the other one, a viking and berserkr, and her foster brother understood her message,

1) Ragnars saga, c.1. Fornsögur Norðurlanda I.

role is one way in which the women in the Fs. can show what they are worth. Women can also make success in traditional female roles, but it seems to give more prestige to succeed in male roles. This does of course involve a condescending attitude towards traditional female roles, but at the same time it shows that a woman can fill a masculine role.

Women who take part in war, dressed like men and acting like men, are to be found in the Fs. as well as in Eddaic poetry. In the Fs. this female type, the skjaldmær, has very much in common with the valkyrjur in the Eddaic poetry, but does not possess the half-mythological nature of the last one. She belongs entirely to the world of men, - even if there are exceptions in the Völsunga saga of course.

Typical representatives of these heroines are the two Hervör in the Hervarar saga. The first Hervör is presented in this way in the saga:

(hún) var sterk sem karlar, ok þegar hún mátti sér nokkut, tandist hún meir við skot ok skjöld ok sverð en við sauma eða borða. Hún gerði ok oftár illt en gott, ok er henni var þat bannat, hljóp hún á skóga ok drap menn til fjár sér. 1)

The last Hervör in this saga is killed in a battle while leading the army.

This type of heroine is rather common in the Fs. Queen Olöf in Hrólfs saga kraka and queen Áslaug in Ragnars saga

1) Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks c.4, Fornaldar sögur Nordurlanda II, Reykjavík 1959.

Lóðbrókar and in Þáttur af Ragnars sonum do also lead armies, and so does queen Auðr in Sögubrot af fornkonungum. This type is also to be found among the subordinated characters. In Sögubrot we meet the three skjaldmeyjar Vébjörg, Visma and Heiðr. They are professional warriors. About the first one, the saga says:

svá hefir hún vant sik með hjálmi ok brynju ok sverði, at hún var framarla í riddaraskap, ... 1)

Visma is the king's standard-bearer. She is indeed fighting like a man, and the vikings do not exactly show special consideration for her. There seems to be equality of status.

Visma is fighting the viking Störkuðr, and the saga gives this picture of the fight:

þá mætti honum Visma skjaldmæ, er bar merki Haralds konungs. Störkuðr sækir at henni fast. Hún mælti þá til Störkuðar: "Nú er kominn á þik helfíkr, ok muntu nú deyja skulu, þursinn." Hann svaraði: "Fyrr muntu þó halla merkinu Haralds konungs," ok hjó af henni vinstri hönd. 2)

The heroines in the Fs. are often said to have a rather unkind nature. Hervör "gerði ok oftár illt en gott". Olöf in Hrólfs saga is presented as "væn at yfirliti, en grimmt í skapi ok störmannlig." 3) Guðrun in Völsunga saga kills her own children, and other women in this genre commit crimes of similar brutality. But as far as the heroines in the Fs. are

1), 2) Sögubrot af fornkonungum, c.9, Fornaldarsögur Nordurlanda I, Reykjavík 1959.

3) Hrólfs saga Kraka, c.7, Fornsögur Nordurlanda I.

he returned with his arms covered with golden rings from the wrist up to his shoulder. In cases like these the women use cunning to get the man they want. But in exceptional cases the heroine in the Fs. may also make a proposal for marriage herself, so does queen Silkisif in Yngvars saga víðförla.

To force a woman to marry seems to be very difficult in the Fs. both for the father and the suitor - more difficult than in the Is. About Ögn, one of the subordinated characters in Hervarar saga, it is told that she "lagði sik sverði í gegnum og vildi eigi giptaz Starkaði". 1) Guðrún in Völsunga saga refuses to marry Atli until she is given a magic potion. Queen Ólöf in Hrólfs saga kraka will not marry at all, and she humiliates her suitor, king Helgi. She makes him drunk, crops his hair completely, smears him with tar, and sends him back to his ship in this humiliated condition.

The heroines in the Fs. may also personally revenge themselves or take revenge on behalf of their family. When queen Ólöf humiliated Helgi, it was a revenge upon him because he had humiliated her by trying to force her to marry him. After that episode when Ólöf fooled him, he revenged himself upon her by raping her, and she later had a baby by him, a girl. Ólöf gets her final revenge when king Helgi takes his own daughter for his bride. She does nothing to stop it because she knows Helgi would take it very hard when he learns that he has married

1) Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs, c. 1, Jón Helgason, Kbh. 1924.

his own daughter. And she was right. When he learns this, it makes him seriously ill.

Queen Æsa in Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka is betrayed by her husband who marries a young beautiful woman as second wife. Æsa later tries to get her husband killed, but he is saved by his new young bride, and Æsa is punished. In this case the man gets all the sympathy, but that is not the rule in the Fs. in cases where a man and a woman stand against each other.

A rather large number of women in the Fs. take revenge on behalf of their family. In the short fragment called Af Upplendinga konungum queen Ása has her own husband killed after he had killed her father and brother. Also Guðrún in Völsunga saga kills her husband Atli to revenge her brothers. Queen Audr in Sögubrot rises an army against her own father to revenge her husband. And Áslaugr in Ragnars saga and in Þáttr af Ragnars sonum contributes very actively to the revenge of her stepsons.

Women like those mentioned above are not content only to stand behind their men urging them, they stand up and act for themselves. This enterprising nature which is reflected in different ways, is one of their most striking characteristics. But there are others.

The women in the Fs. are also characterized as intelligent and good at witchcraft. In all the nordic genres intelligence and wisdom are looked upon as necessary qualifications for a real heroine. It is never enough that a woman is beautiful. On this point the Fs. scarcely differ from the other nordic

genres. But the heroines' intellectual qualifications in this genre are made so apparent because the women play an active part in the story. In the Fs. women may compete with men on equal terms, and in this competition they may make good use of their intelligence, even though some of them don't seem to lack neither courage nor strength - Hervör, mentioned above, was "sterk som karlar". But in other cases it is obvious that the woman gets it her own way by using intelligence or cunning where the man use strength. And as an integrated part of the heroine's intellectual capacity, which is so important to her just because she is a woman, we have to reckon not only with her intelligence, but also with her knowledge of different subjects, as for example her good knowledge of medicine, of language and other topics; also her visionary gifts and her skill in witchcraft must be seen as an integrated part of her intellectual capacity.

So although intelligence is a necessary qualification for a real heroine in all the nordic genres, the heroines in the Fs. have some distinguished features. As mentioned above, the women's intellectual qualifications in this genre are made very apparent to explain how it is possible for her to carry her point. But sometimes it seems as the women's intelligence is stressed in an almost demonstratively way, as when it is said about a family, a sister and two brothers, in Ásmundar saga:
þeir hertugarnir áttu systur, ok var hún mest at ráðum,
því at hún var þeira vitrust. 1)

1) Ásmundar saga, Kappabana c.4. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda I.

In the Is. it is usually men who have knowledge of medicine. In the Fs., on the other hand, it is usually women who have this usefull knowledge - a knowledge which gives power.

Also another difference between the Fs. and the realistic Is. contributes to a more positive picture of women in the Fs. In the Is. we also meet a lot of visionary women, but most of them are old women with no prestige. Visionary people who always know the right thing to do, and who have the prestige that makes other people listen to them, are usually men, like the wise Njáll. In the Fs. visionary women usually belong to the last category. They are more like the wise Njáll than the old second-sighted foster mothers, and their visionary gifts will enhance their prestige still more.

We find however, one of the most striking differences between the Is. and the Fs. as far as the picture of women is concerned, when we compare how knowledge of witchcraft is judged. In the Is. many women are seen negatively because of their skill in witchcraft. But in the border district between dream and reality where the acting in the Fs. takes place, it is not suspicious for a woman to be good at witchcraft. Such knowledge will on the contrary be very useful to her, make her an influential woman, and give her control over her own fate - and others.

A third characteristic, the heroines beauty, is almost obligatory in this genre, but is of less importance to her way of acting than her enterprising nature and her intellectual capacity. Her beauty may on the contrary result in action from

the hero.

The differences which are revealed here, between the Fs. and the Is. concerning the picture of women, are partly related to the fact that the Fs., as compared to the Is., are non-realistic literature, and partly to the fact that the women in the Fs. belong to another social class than the women in the Is.

One may expect that realistic literature, as the Is., in the depiction of characters are bound to real life. The image of women in these sagas can not be much discrepant to the ideas the audience of this literature had on women and the women's nature even though the Is. tell about people who lived in an idealized age some hundred years ago.

But in the non-realistic Fs. this is different. The picture of the heroine is here fictitious in more than one way, it is not bound to real life, and may therefore be utopian.

The Is. tell about common people, wives and daughters of farmers. The Fs. tell mostly about queens and daughters of kings. And it is not so surprising that this last group of women behave differently from women belonging to the first group. When the queens and the daughters of kings in the Fs. are so enterprising and active, the explanation may be that people had greater expectations as regards women belonging to the upper classes. This fact may be confirmed if we make a comparison with the kings' sagas. Also in this group of sagas we meet heroines, queens living far back in the mist of history, who in their behaviour have very much in common with

the heroines of the Fs.

But neither the fact that this literature is non-realistic, nor the fact that the heroines of this literature belong to the upper classes, can fully explain the ideas on women and on women's nature as set forth through the Fs. When the hero of this genre is not subject to the law of nature, so that nothing is impossible for him, it is explained as daydreams. In this literature people run away from their problems and seek excitement in a different world. The question is: Does it also express wishes and daydreams, conscious of unconscious, when the heroines of this genre are allowed to break the common law and the custom of the community and behave more like men? And in case, does this image of women express the women's wishes?

One interesting point is that the depiction of women which we meet in the Fs, stands in contrast not only to their real status in society in the medieval ages; this view on women also stands in contrast to the official view on women held by the medieval church. The woman had for a long time been regarded as the weaker part of the mankind, both in strength, morally and intellectually. And after Thomas Aquinas, who made use of greek philosophy - especially Aristotle - to give the grounds for his view on woman, it was, according to the church, looked upon as a scientifically established fact that women were by nature passive and intellectually inferior to men.

It is not strange that the picture of the female in the Fs stands in contrast to the view on woman held by the church, since this picture belongs to a literary tradition which has

its roots in a pre-christian age. As stated before, the Fs. belong to the same literary tradition as the Eddaic poetry, and partly some of the written sagas build upon older poems. And the written sagas also build upon tradition handed down from generation to generation. So though the written sagas are young, they belong to an old nordic literary tradition.

On the other hand the written Fs. are young enough to be influenced by the view on woman held by the church, but they are not. The heroines in this genre, in the youngest sagas as well as in the oldest, are characterized by intelligence, beauty and activeness; the first and the last of these characteristics seem to be incompatible with the view on woman's nature held by the church. Furthermore, according to Thomas Aquinas' scientifically established view based on Aristotheles, also the combination of intelligence and beauty, which is so common in medieval literature, is very problematic, not to say impossible.

If the discrepancies between the view on woman held by the church, and the view on woman set forth in secular literature, were limited to a nordic region and to a literature with roots in a pre-christian age, it would not be so interesting. But the fact is that in medieval literature all over Europe women are prized for their intelligence and beauty, and they may also be depicted as active and enterprising. In the troubadour's poems and in romances of chivalry we find an attitude towards and a depiction of woman, which - in spite of considerable differences - have much in common with the

depicture of woman in nordic heroic literature: We find the same characteristics; intelligence, beauty and activness.

The troubadour-poetry and the romances of chivalry flourished in Europe at a time when the church's learnings about the nature of woman had not developed into the irrefutable form it later turned into, when greek philosophy was used to build a scientific system which proved that women in all fields were inferior to men, and therefore had to behave accordingly. But Thomas Aquinas' learnings based on Aristotheles, was not a shock to the european medieval christianity, the ground was well prepared for such ideas, and in the preceding centuries women's rights and their chances to realize themselves were reduced at least partly as a result of church legislation.

The contrast between the learnings of the church and the view found in secular literature, is also very clear on another field concerning women, not their status in society, but still important: the church and the secular literature held quite opposite views on erotic love.

On this background the question is: is it possible that secular medieval literature canalize an opposition against the official view on woman held by the church? Much of the secular literature is, however, written by clergymen, but it may have existed clergymen who did not share their brother's views. In case they did not - and wanted to protest - secular literature would be much safer than a thesis. We also know that women sometimes had a hand in the writing of romances of chivalry, and that there were female troubadours who expressed

their dissatisfaction with their position as women. These facts should also be taken into consideration when we investigate this literature.

The female type in the Fs. is both a very old and a very long-living literary type. She is found in Eddaic poetry, she is still vigorous in the Fs., which flourished in the very last centuries of the medieval ages, and even later she continued to live in ballads, rímur and folktales. This she did in spite of the fact that this literary type from the very beginning stood in contrast to the position of women in the medieval society, and later on also to the church view on women.

The church did of course try to enforce its views on women, and it must have been successful. We can see that if we look at the view on women still prevalent less than a century ago.

But how and why can then a quite different view live in literature for a thousand years? It is of course impossible that those who enjoyed this literature were not aware of the church's view on women.

The resistance of the female type found in the Fs. may perhaps have been strengthened by the influence from the Rs. The romances of chivalry were translated into Norse and became Rs. The Fs. may - still in a pre-literary form - have influenced the Rs. when they were translated, but later it is obvious that the Rs. influenced the Fs., and the two genres were to some extent mixed. But this fact does not explain much, only that a nordic literary tradition with a strong female character possibly was strengthened.

When the female type of the Fs. continued to live under her "bad condition", somebody must have taken care of her for some reason; it is hard to understand that she could live for centuries only as a relic. We do not know who wrote the Fs., but obviously the authors were men. But the literary types of this literature are created on a preliterate stage - in fact all the genres where we meet a female type with the same characteristics as the heroine of the Fs., are genres which live in oral tradition, or to some extent build upon oral tradition - and it is therefore very likely that women took part in the creation of the literary types of this literature.

And I will conclude with a question: Is it possible that the heroine in medieval literature - both in the Fs. and in other genres - with characteristics as activeness, intelligence and beauty represents the wishes and daydreams of women and a more or less conscious dissatisfaction with their position as women and with the view on them held by the church, gradually carried on to embrace the whole society?

Perhaps this romantic literature, which we have regarded only as superficial light reading, after all bears witness to the fact that not everybody was happy and content in the medieval ages.