

Laugar, Gudrun, Geology, and Gender in *Laxdaela Saga*

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“Though I treated him worst, I loved him best.” So speaks Gudrun near the end of her life, a confession she has never spoken aloud prior to this moment. A dominant figure within *Laxdaela Saga*, which depicts the circumstances of Icelandic settlement, Gudrun is just one example illustrating individual and social adaptation to new circumstances of life, especially as regards the transition from the pagan Viking Age to early Christianity. This saga centers on disputes over lands, marriages, divorce settlements, and inheritances, disputes that culminate in a blood feud. As such, setting is crucial, since it provides the framework as the events unfold. The love affair between Gudrun and the man she confesses to love unfolds at Laugar through the course of conversations shared near the Saelingdale spring. It is in this setting that Gudrun’s life is presented in the saga, providing insights into gender roles in Norse society.

The saga of the people of Laxardal provides historical context and explanation for settlement in Iceland. The saga begins with the figure of Ketil Flat-nose, who resisted the unfair treatment King Harald Fair-hair imposed. Growing very powerful in Norway, King Harald Fair-hair ensured that no other man of rank could succeed unless granted a title from him. Upon learning that the king expected him to submit to his authority while denying any compensation for his kinsmen killed by the king’s men, Ketil called a meeting of his relatives to address the situation. One of his sons spoke up in favor of fleeing the country rather than waiting to be chased off their lands or being killed. Once it was agreed to leave the country, “Bjorn and Helgi wanted to go to Iceland, as they claimed they had heard many favorable reports of the country; there was enough good land available without having to pay for it. There were reported to be plenty of beached whales and salmon fishing, and good fishing every season” (Kunz 4). At this point in the tale, there is a gendered switch placing emphasis on a woman, Unn. After learning that her father and son were killed, she felt her prospects to be bleak. However, she had a ship built and “took along all her kinsmen who were still alive, and people say it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers” (6). An exceptional woman, Unn sailed for Iceland where she took as much land as she wished. Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir states in her introduction that the very foundation of the saga is rooted in a reversal of traditional gender roles. In the portrayal of Unn, we see a woman who plays the role of patriarch as if she were male and the men accept her leadership; however, clashes are imminent should they neglect to show her the respect she feels is her due. (xii-xiii). As communities began to be settled, further evidence of societal structure is provided in detail by the saga. As she grew older, Unn encouraged her son, Olaf, to marry and settle, to which he responds “the only wife I will take will be one who will rob you of neither your property nor your authority” (9). This statement draws attention to the expected gender roles in the community and their societal roots. A woman such as Unn is more than capable of wielding power, but the society she lives in is a patriarchal one where women are expected to play the silent role of wives and mothers.

One strong female character after another is subsequently introduced in the saga, each cast in Unn’s mold. These women challenge any man who offends their honor or that of others, and aren’t opposed to fighting each other for wealth and power. It is at this stage that the primary protagonist of Gudrun is

introduced. As Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir comments in her preliminary summation of the text, part of the significance of *Laxdaela Saga* is the fact that it is one of the few sagas whose protagonist is not male but female, and where the strife resulting from its main love triangle is not between two men but rather between the lovers themselves: a woman and a man. (xi). Gudrun at her first introduction is described as “the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland, and no less clever than she was good-looking [...] she was the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous as well” (63). Early on, the other players in the love triangle are presented in juxtaposition, and we learn that Kjartan is the ideal male counterpart to Gudrun: “no man cut a better figure than Kjartan, and people were always struck by his appearance when they saw him [...] he was superior to other men in all skills, and yet he was the humblest of men [...] Bolli, next to Kjartan, was the best at all skills and in other accomplishments [...] the foster-brothers cared deeply for one another” (57). Even before encountering each other, it is clear that Gudrun and Kjartan are seen in the eyes as their peers as equals within each of their gendered roles. However, before they first meet, further details are provided about Gudrun and her life that illustrate how she is unafraid to take care of herself. Gudrun was married to a man, a standard and expected role. Confident in her role within the domestic sphere as well as her own self worth, one episode in particular is recounted: “when Gudrun subsequently asked Thorvald to buy her a new treasure, he retorted that there was no limit to her demands and slapped her in the face. To this Gudrun replied: ‘fine rosy color in her cheeks is just what every woman needs, if she is to look her best, and you have certainly given me this to teach me not to displease you’” (69). Although she responds in a seemingly passive manner that is at once both self-deprecating and manages to convey that he may have had justification, she will not suffer that humiliation unchecked. She manages to avenge herself on him by making a shirt cut low enough to call his masculinity into question, thus giving her grounds for divorce. While making it clear that will she not stand for undeserved abuse, she also manages to do so in a way that still highlights her feminine role and is expected womanish behavior.

After her marriage with her first husband is dissolved and her second marriage ends with her husband’s death, Gudrun is still seen as desirable even as a widow. At this point, the author devotes more attention to the site of Laugar as this is the principal setting where the drama between the Gudrun and Kjartan transpires. Once having met each other, an undeniable attraction arose: “Kjartan often went to the hot springs at Saelingsdal, and it usually happened that Gudrun was there as well. Kjartan enjoyed Gudrun’s company, as she was both clever and good with words. Everyone said that, of all the young people of the time, Kjartan and Gudrun were best suited for one another” (83). Here, with the fiery and tempestuous nature produced by the geology of the area as the backdrop, their passion blooms. However, observers of their romance were not without their reservations. His father spoke to Kjartan one day noting: “I don’t know why your visits to the springs at Laugar to spend time with Gudrun make me uneasy. It isn’t because I don’t appreciate how much superior to other women Gudrun is, as she is the only woman I consider a worthy match for you. But somehow I have a feeling, although I won’t make it a prediction, that our dealings with the Laugar family will not turn out well” (83). Respectful of his father’s fears but not enough so to deny himself the happiness he expected with Gudrun, Kjartan The romance. continued until they reach such contention as is inherent when dealing with two unyielding, strong-minded dispositions. Kjartan rode to Laugar to inform Gudrun of his proposed journey, and expectedly, Gudrun failed to be pleased. She laid bare her feelings for him as well as expressing her

distaste for the way he reached a decision without consulting her first, declaring: "I want to go with you this summer, and by taking me you can make up for deciding this so hastily, for it's not Iceland that I love" (85). The lovers parted in disappointment: Kjartan asked Gudrun to wait for him for three years, relegating her to the role as female in the house, fated to depend on the whims of a man.

At this juncture, it is crucial to take a step back and consider the importance of the topography and setting of the saga. From the very beginning of *Laxdaela Saga*, including the discussion of Ketil's sons choice to colonize Iceland as well as Unn's efforts, the emphasis was always on Iceland. Due to its very formation, Iceland has a number of unique qualities. Lying on a geologic rift between the Eurasian and North American plates, the island also lies above a hotspot, the Iceland plume, which is believed to have caused the formation of Iceland itself. (Khodayar 207). This results in frequent volcanic activity and the geothermal phenomena of geysers. Repeated earthquakes keep the faults permeable for hundreds of years. The concept of the Iceland plume is crucial to understanding both the formation of Iceland, as well as the volcanism which has always characterized the island. The fascinating quality rests in the fact that this plume, still very active today, is largely contributory for the formation of the Northeastern Atlantic, and especially Iceland. (Trønnnes 2). While the *Laxdaela Saga* is primarily focused on that of the people of Iceland, this colonization narrative takes on new meaning with the knowledge of how Iceland itself was formed. With the raw violence of the landscape combined with a concomitant idyllic quality, what better way to mirror such a volatile setting than with the passionate and violent culmination to the love affair between the principal protagonist and the man she professed to love?

Sadly, the love story quickly devolves from the parting of the lovers. Bolli presses Gudrun to marry him, hinting that Kjartan is probably romantically involved during his travels abroad. As Bolli's wife, Gudrun is subject to several insults from Kjartan pertaining to her new status level, and a feud develops between Kjartan and the men of Laugar. Recognizing that no one is willing to check Kjartan's behavior, Gudrun makes a push that Kjartan be taught a lesson so that the men of Laugar maintain their reputations and are no longer walked over: "at Gudrun's urging, Bolli's resentment of Kjartan and his offenses grew, and he quickly gathered up his weapons" (113). Responsible for the death of his foster brother and former best friend, Bolli informs Gudrun of the deed and is met with flippant stoicism. She admits that while he was engaged in the killing act, she was home engaged in a feminine pastime: sewing. Agreeing that this was the necessary course of action, Gudrun concludes that "last but most important, to my mind, is the thought that Hrefna won't go to bed with a smile on her face this evening." Bolli angrily retorts: "I wonder whether she'll pale at the news any more than you, and I suspect that you would be much less upset if it were me lying there slain and Kjartan who lived to tell the tale." To which Gudrun appeases: "Don't say things like that. I'm very grateful for what you have done. Now I know that you won't go against my will" (116). This exchange highlights Gudrun's ability to put personal feelings aside and do what is best for the standing of her community. However, the reverse can also be argued, that Gudrun may have been prompted by a fit of pique, and her very womanly emotions may have blinded her course. While Bolli is ostensibly the agent of the deed, Gudrun makes it clear that it was upon her orders and that her will was done, thus making her seem to be the cold-hearted rational one, serving her community's interests above her own.

When Gudrun first enters the scene she tells of four dreams, interpreted for her as the omens of her four marriages. However, Gudrun's most significant love affair with Kjartan is in no way connected to these dreams. Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir points out that in the saga's structure, this passionate affair stands alone opposite her four marriages. This contrast sharpens the portrayal of women who are only able to shape their own destinies to a limited extent. (Kunz xvii). An intriguing notion, the episodes from Gudrun's life that the author chooses to recount serve to highlight this fact. The principal female characters of the text are beautiful, exceptionally intelligent, imperious, as well as being the most desirable brides of their respective districts, their part of the country or even the country as a whole. Such protagonists do not settle for the roles other medieval Icelandic women were expected to play; they take over men's work when they consider them inadequate. However, peppered throughout the saga are hints that these women may have had a hard time, caught in this sense of double consciousness. While unafraid to receive their due, it is difficult to say the extent of which these women were agents of their own free will. Gudrun was essentially pressured into each of her marriages even though, for a female, she exuded a great deal of power. She was by no means a passive partner in her marriages, but none of them were to the man for whom she conceived a great passion. Even her fall-out with Kjartan can be contributed to the fact that as a female she was bound to the domestic sphere and her home and could not, on a whim, go on exploratory ventures as Kjartan was able to do. Most poignant is the scene in which Bolli returns and informs Gudrun of his slaying of Kjartan. Seemingly coldhearted, Gudrun responds "a poor match they make, our morning's work – I have spun twelve ells of yarn while you have slain Kjartan" (116). Once more a reference is made to the fact that she has been engaged in domestic duties traditionally relegated to women even while it can be argued that she in effect acted through Bolli in the killing of Kjartan. Regardless, this sequence serves to highlight an intriguing disjuncture. As Jenny Jochens notes in her text, *Women in Old Norse Society*, "saga authors spend much time describing men killing each other, whereas they totally ignore weaving, the most important activity of women [...] this brief passage offers a fleeting recognition of a significant difference between constructive weaving and destructive killing" (Jochens 160).

A great deal of the tragedy within the text is tied to the ambiguous roles the feminine protagonists play. Women are constrained by their societal roles, even women such as Gudrun, who must bow to the dictates of a patriarchal society. However, because they are praised for being leaders within their communities and having enough self possession to be these men's equals, they also seem to be at a disadvantage. The point of contention between Gudrun and Kjartan that causes them to part in disappointment from each other stems from the fact that she shared his desire to try his fortunes in a new world. Bound to Laugar for so long, Gudrun too desires to see more of the world, with her lover by her side, yet Kjartan sees this as an infringement on his autonomy and rejects the notion. Acting in many ways prompted by her powerful role despite being a woman as well as being trapped by the confines of this role, Gudrun makes many decisions living with this sense of double consciousness that seems to the reader to only end in unhappiness. Also equating this gender dominance with the traditions of the Old World and pagan religion, the new world order established by the spread of Christianity seeks to establish a more traditional role for women. At the end of her life, when Gudrun lives at Helgafell in a convent, she seems more passive; more than ever the stereotypical presentation of a woman's role in society. However, when she lived at Laugar, she could be seen as the embodiment of the pagan spirit, as

tempestuous and passionate a woman as the volcanic activity responsible for creating Iceland in the first place.