

## “[She] was very eager for men and hated living alone”

### Supernatural Women Who Pose a Threat to Men in Icelandic Legends

Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir, Department of Folkloristics and Museum Studies, University of Iceland, Iceland, [doj5@hi.is](mailto:doj5@hi.is)

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This article examines the ways in which various supernatural women who pose threats to men are presented in the Icelandic folk legend collections from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It focuses on narratives dealing with both female trolls and “hidden” women (elves) that appear to present a danger to male hegemony because of how they challenge the ruling ideology of the time with regard to femininity and sexuality. As the article demonstrates, in most cases, the legends show these threats being mitigated. The article therefore argues that these legends can be read as reinforcing the idea that women should not be tempted to violate hegemonic norms regarding femininity.

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## Icelandic Legends and Society

The Icelandic legend “Eyjólfur vinnumaður og álfkonan” (Eyjólfur the workman and the hidden woman), told by an unknown storyteller to collector Jón Árnason, tells of a priest who has a habit of disappearing every New Year’s Eve. One year, a young worker called Eyjólfur decides that he wants to know where the priest goes and asks to accompany him. The priest agrees reluctantly. They leave together and come to a big rock, on which the priest knocks. The rock opens up and two hidden women (*huldukonur*)<sup>1</sup> appear, one older and the other younger. The older knows the priest well and invites them in. They all eat and drink until it is time for bed:

The evening passed by with glamorous entertainment until the women prepared their beds, the older woman with the pastor, while the younger women showed Eyjólfur towards the other bed; there were only two beds. “Where are you going to sleep?” he asked. “With you,” she said. “I’ve never before stolen a woman,” he said, “and I don’t mean to now.” “I won’t force you to sleep with me,” she said (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 131).<sup>2</sup>

The young hidden woman then curses the young man, saying that he will become a thief. The curse takes hold and he remains a thief until he dies (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 131). Theft was something that caused both the thief and others a great deal of trouble and was seen as a very serious crime in the agrarian Icelandic society (Gunnlaugsson 1991a: 57–60).

The image of dangerous women posing a threat to men and social order is an ancient motif found in legends all over the world and arguably has roots in biblical stories like that of Adam and Eve (see *Genesis* 3; also Lawless 2003: 239). In this article, which forms part of a wider project researching the portrayal of women in Icelandic legends of the past and the messages about women contained in them, my focus is on those Icelandic legends that tell of supernatural women (hidden women and female trolls), who pose a threat to men. My main question is: what do these legends tell us about the ways in which women and femininity were viewed by men and women in Iceland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

The archive drawn upon in this project comprises those legends collected in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iceland. These were (sometimes later) published in legend collections, material that was mostly told, collected and published by

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<sup>1</sup> The *huldufólk* (hidden people) are similar to the Norwegian *huldre* and the Shetlandic *trows*, in other words nature spirits that live in the ground (Gunnell 2006: 10–14; Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1999: 205).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all lengthy translations from Icelandic are by Terry Gunnell.

men (see, e.g., Magnúsdóttir 2018: 134). As Angela Carter (1990: xiii) has noted, women that come from patriarchal communities commonly absorb and recapitulate the values and worldviews of the society, not least in regard to gender (Jónsdóttir 2020). Here it is also important to note that in Iceland clerics played a big role in folktale collection, as many collectors either were clerics themselves or came from clerical families (Gunnell 2012). In the case of the Icelandic legends, Christian morals and the church were thus very influential (see, e.g., Jónsdóttir 2022b). In nineteenth-century Iceland, these legends were told for example at communal “evening wakes” along with readings from sagas, the Bible and other religious texts. These evening wakes played an important role not only in maintaining the social hierarchy, but also in educating everyone on the farm about Christian values and good manners, which often emphasized patriarchal values (see Gunnlaugsson 1991b: 61–65). Therefore, one may argue that the portrayal of women in legends reflect dominant ideas and expectations of society with regard to women and femininity.

In order to select the narratives that were most relevant for analysis, I searched through the largest and oldest legend collections.<sup>3</sup> I used the online Icelandic legend database, *Sagnagrunnur*, alongside these collections to find additional legends revolving around supernatural females who somehow posed a threat to men in the plot (*Sagnagrunnur*).

As has regularly been pointed out, legends commonly reflect the dominant world views of the societies in which they are told (see, e.g., Siikala 1990: 39; Palmenfelt 1993: 157; Holbek 1998: 435). Among other things, they provide valuable insights into the ideas people had about gender and accepted gender roles, as they also played an educational role (Tatar 1992: 94–119). Legends “served as a map of behaviour, underlining moral and social values and offering examples to follow or avoid” (Gunnell 2008: 15). Although many of the legend motifs discussed here also appear in the Old Icelandic sagas or are known in other places of the world, legends need social relevance to ensure their continuing role in oral tradition and are therefore bound to be affected by the local circumstances in which they are told (Dégh 1989: 181; Siikala 1990: 39). As noted by both Ulf Palmenfelt (1993: 151) and Bengt Holbek (1998: 166), conflicts between the sexes is a main driving force in many legends and wonder tales, effectively reflecting the society these narratives belong to.

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<sup>3</sup> The collections are: *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* (extended 6 volume edition published in 1954–1961; original edition published in 1862–1864) collected by Jón Árnason (1819–1888) (with Magnús Grímsson 1825–1860); *Íslenskar þjóðsögur* (extended 4 volume edition published in 1978–1980; original edition published in 1895) collected by Ólafur Davíðsson (1862–1903); and *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og sagnir* (revised 11 volume edition published 1982–1993; original edition in 1922–1959) collected by Sigfús Sigfússon (1855–1935).

Up until the late nineteenth century, Icelandic society had predominantly been a patriarchal rural farming and fishing community (Halldórsdóttir 2011: 83). The farm was both the home and the workplace of most people, meaning that here the sharp separation between the public and private spheres did not apply (Magnúsdóttir 2008; Jónsdóttir 2021; see also Stark 2011). This was a society in which women had limited legal rights, partly because it was believed that men and women had different natures: Women were believed to be more innocent, more fit for nurturing, closer to nature and more emotional (and therefore more irrational), while men were seen as being more intelligent, stronger and more culturally able within society (Matthíasdóttir 2002: 38; Halldórsdóttir 2011: 74–75, 81; also de Beauvoir 1999: 25–46). As many have noted, this led to young women being raised to become either good housewives or loyal housemaids. They were taught to raise children and do housework and chores neatly, as well as to be helpful and obedient to their husbands and/or male farm masters who employed them (Halldórsdóttir 2011: 83).

Using legend material as a source material on society, as I do here, is not a new approach in folkloristics. This project, however, is essentially historical folklore studies, focusing, among other things, on gender history. Here I address power relations and how gender inequality was constantly renewed and reflected in the narratives shared among people (see, e.g., Matthíasdóttir 2002: 32–34). In short, I note in this article how discourse both shapes and is shaped by society and how legends either confirmed or rejected dominant ideas about gender (especially femininity) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Jóhannesson 2010: 252; Phillips & Jørgensen 2002: 61; Jónsdóttir 2021).

In this article I examine legends of hidden women, and look at the more physical legends of female trolls who steal men to keep as lovers. I argue that while hidden women and female trolls appear on the surface to represent dangers to male hegemony due to their sexuality, the legends convey the idea that women should not be tempted to violate hegemonic norms regarding femininity and thus they reinforce the social order and hierarchy, both with regard to gender and to class.

### Hidden Women as a Threat to Men

The hidden people (Icelandic: *huldufólk*) in legends are similar to human beings in size and appearance and are usually beautiful but most often invisible to people unless they want to be seen. They live in rocks and hills and are often said to be Christian<sup>4</sup> (Sveinsson 2003: 171–183; Þorvarðardóttir 1995: 10–15; see further Gunnell 2007, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> In origin stories, in the Icelandic folktales, of how the hidden people came to be they are mentioned to be Eve's children, which she hid from God and He then hid from humans. Many of the folk legends show the hidden people in a positive light. They also have their own churches and go to Mass, according to the folk legends (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 4).

One legend type which comprises around 14 variants in the Icelandic collections,<sup>5</sup> is an excellent example of women posing a threat to men. These legends tell of the revenge enacted by *huldufólk* females who feel that they have not received the respect they deserve. The legend “Eyjólfur vinnumaður og álfkonan” at the beginning of this article belongs to this type of legends. This legend type, in which two men visit hidden women in their homes and the younger man is punished for not having sex with the younger hidden woman, seems to be particular to Iceland. In these legends, the young women have a leading role as sexual agents. They want to sleep with the men, and their mothers seem to approve as well. The young women are also the ones who bestow punishment upon the young men in these legends. This raises the question, what messages do these legends convey?

Icelandic scholars have argued that these were legends intended for men and were told in order to mediate young men’s fears of their first sexual experience (Þorvarðardóttir 1995: 15). Indeed, one can note the emphasis on food, dance and sex in these legends. No mentions are made of any element of romance nor talk of marriage. In the Icelandic legends it is certainly interesting to note that most of the variants attributed to named storytellers are credited to men.<sup>6</sup> In some of the legends, explanations are given for why the men reject the women, suggesting that the hidden women are uncomfortable to share a bed with, that is, are burning hot when touched or have a strange smell (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 134, 141–142, 143–145). Others place emphasis on the shyness and insecurity of the man: “he turned away from her, the desire to have commerce with her having faded and been replaced by fear and anxiety instead of the lust that usually accompanied such activities” (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 79). Here there are different dynamics shown between different generations: while the younger man fails to do what is expected of him, the older and more experienced man does not have the same problem. The older man (always of an upper class and intriguingly often a priest) has a hidden woman as a mistress. In most of the legends, the older man is reluctant to bring the younger one with him, usually warning the younger man that he suspects that this will not end well for him.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this, the young men really want to go, suggesting that the moral of these legends is that young men should never be too curious and rush into something they are not prepared for, such as a relationship and sexual activities with women. Such an idea might be reflected in the earlier-noted

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<sup>5</sup> Árnason 1954–1961 I: 78–81; III: 122–123, 130–134, 141–147; Davíðsson 1978–1980 I: 42–43; Hólm 1962: 5–8.

<sup>6</sup> Only one of the legends is attributed to a woman. However, half of them are attributed to unknown storytellers (*Sagnagrunnur*).

<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions to this rule. In some cases, the older man invites the younger to come with him (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 78–79; III 132–133, 134). In these cases, the power balance is somewhat different, the younger man being the friend or brother of the older one.

legend “Eyjólfur vinnumaður og álfkonan” when the priest tells Eyjólfur that if he does everything as he is told he might escape harm, in spite of his “pushiness and obstinant curiosity” (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 130–131; see also Árnason 1954–1961 I: 78–79). As has been noted by ethnologist Camilla Ingemark and archeologist Dominic Ingemark, peoples’ fear in general often concern threats to the most vulnerable in society, and young men are often also regarded as vulnerable in stories, not in the proper sense of the word but rather “as unprotected due to their impulsive and immature character, they easily succumbed to lust and passion, which posed a threat to the survival of the family” (Ingemark & Ingemark 2020: 243). Young men seeking sexual pleasures outside of marriage, as can be seen in the legends examined here, could be seen as a threat to the values of the society such as the family and the home, thereby making them deserve punishment and therefore vulnerable (Ingemark & Ingemark 2020: 243).

The question of class also comes to mind here, as the older man, most often a priest (who occupied one of the highest classes in Iceland), is never condemned for having a mistress or consorting with the hidden world. His overall portrayal is positive. He treats his hidden mistress properly and obeys her. Here it is also important to note the portrayal of priests in Icelandic legends in general, where they are often seen as connected to the supernatural, often being sorcerers themselves, and even consorting with the devil, while still being portrayed in a positive light (Hilmarsdóttir 2013). The younger men in these legends are said to be either the sons of clergymen or workers.

It should be noted that in Iceland at this time, people of lower classes were not legally allowed to get married, have sex or have children (which naturally still occurred) (Hálfðánarson 1986: 459–464). Thus, it seems somewhat contradictory that the young worker should receive punishment for not having sex with the hidden woman. In some cases, the older women ask the younger ones to soften the sentence, for example by adding that the men will not be hanged for their crimes, thereby showing a degree of sympathy for the men (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 80–81; Hólm 1962: 5–8). In most legends in which the young man is a worker, he nevertheless ends up getting killed as a result of the curse. In legends where the young man is of a higher class (a priest’s or a farmer’s son) the punishment tends to be lighter, and often involves him having trouble with women in the future; and in one case, the young man only loses his ability to taste food (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 78–79; Davíðsson 1978–1980: 42–43).<sup>8</sup>

The nature of the punishments mentioned in these legends, which all tell of two men: one young and unexperienced and the other older and often from the upper

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<sup>8</sup> In two cases, the men escape punishment altogether (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 79; III: 132–133).

classes, is also intriguing: the hidden women do not issue physical punishment; they only use words. The curse, however, is not the only punishment: the young men also suffer humiliation and threats to their manhood, as they have been witnessed by the respected priest and his mistress to turn down their partners. Since the men are essentially the main characters of the legends, I also argue that the women in these legends are essentially willing sex subjects to those men. All the same, these women are no ordinary women. In Icelandic legends, hidden women should be respected and obeyed, and those who fail to do so are usually punished. These women own the surroundings, and do the inviting, but are never criticized as being “fallen women” or prostitutes. Indeed, as noted, the focus of the story is on the young men being punished for rejecting the hidden women.<sup>9</sup>

### Sexual Women in Folk Legends

As noted above, the hidden women in the legends have sexual agency, similar in some ways to the Swedish legends of the *skogsrå* in which she is most often described as a: “solitary woman who rules over the animals. When she encounters lumberjacks, charcoal burners and hunters, she tries to seduce them, or she mocks them, causing them to lose their way. If they would not give in to her, she would take revenge” (Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1999: 216; see also af Klintberg 2010: 102–103; Häll 2013; Kuusela 2020 on the *skogsrå*). Especially interesting in this regard is Swedish legend type E15, in which a man is visited by a female forest spirit in a hut and invited to have intercourse with her. If he agrees, he is rewarded, but he receives punishment if he does not do her bidding (af Klintberg 2010: 101). Here one finds the same idea of men being punished for turning down sexual intimacy with supernatural women, although in the case of the Swedish legends the male protagonist is a mature man, as opposed to the younger male of the Icelandic legends. Also, only one male-female couple is involved instead of two. Other parallels can be seen in the Scandinavian legends of sirens, mermaids or water sprites (see af Klintberg 2010: 111; Häll 2014). It is therefore clear that ideas about sexual supernatural women are not specific to Iceland. In short, these figures remind us of the concept of the *femme fatale*,<sup>10</sup> who as Annette Kuhn explains it “is primarily defined by her desirable, but dangerous sexuality – which brings about the downfall of the male protagonist” (Kuhn 1990: 154). Such seductive women are evidently often placed in opposition to the figure of the good and virtuous mother or wife, and indeed the question

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<sup>9</sup> This makes an interesting contrast to those legends about human women who have sex with hidden men, in which the women end up suffering (see Halldórsdóttir 2019: 22, 27).

<sup>10</sup> The idea of the *femme fatale* is often associated with the *film noir* genre of the 1940s and 1950s, but the *femme fatale* in folklore is much older than this (Anderson 1995: 1; Lawless 2003: 240–244).

of producing offspring is never mentioned in legends about hidden women (Anderson 1995: 7). At the time these legends were collected in Iceland, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ruling ideology (as in many other countries) was that women should be sexually inactive, and that a “good” woman should either lack sexual desires or suppress them (see Bordo 1993: 117; Vilhelmsson 2011: 109; Jónsdóttir 2022b). I therefore argue that the hidden women in these legends (much like the *skogsrá*) can be said to contradict the ruling ideas of femininity at the time. Indeed, the women in question are never portrayed in any particularly negative way, as the legends note that these women are “beautiful”, “entertaining” and “affectionate” rather than seductive or threatening (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 80–81; III: 122, 131, 141–142). At the same time, I argue that the women pose no great threat to the dominant ideas about femininity, they rather reinforce them as they are supernatural beings that stand for the unusual and dangerous, but are not regular women who emancipate themselves. As noted below, the agency of these women is also limited to the “supernatural” realm which the men visit willingly and while the curse continues, the women never appear anywhere else.<sup>11</sup> The space and time in which the legends take place is important to bear in mind. Here, as in the *skogsrá* and Scandinavian *siren* legends, rather than being visited at home (as in Scandinavian *mara* legends), the men go to visit the hidden women in their home, leaving human society and entering the hidden world during the evening at a weekend or holiday.<sup>12</sup> The women in question are thus shown to inhabit an inverse world in which there seem to be different rules, and women lead the way and punish. Arguably, this suggests that those young men that go thoughtlessly into this other world, in which the rules and morals of our natural world lack validity, can expect to face punishment. These legends in which women seem to be the key representatives of the “supernatural realm” (no hidden men are mentioned) are worth comparing to Icelandic legends in which another kind of supernatural women, trolls, are also the key representatives and intrude more directly into human society with the intention of having sexual relations with unwilling men.

### Trolls as Threat to Men

Those supernatural women that pose an even larger (literally) threat to men in Icelandic legends take the shape of female trolls or ogresses (Icelandic: *tröllkonur*, *skessur*), figures that are said to be in human form but are more monstrous and much bigger than humans. In most Icelandic legends, much like those from the other Nordic

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<sup>11</sup> One exception exists in which the older hidden woman goes to rescue the man when they are trying to hang him for his crimes. She cuts the rope but this leads to the man being drowned instead (Árnason 1954–1961 III: 134).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Sigfússon 1982–1993 II: 310–312; Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1999: 54–58 on the *mara*.



countries (see, e.g., Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1999: 299; af Klintberg 2010: 151, 196), they are shown to be heathen, primitive, dumb, greedy and cruel (Sveinsson 2003: 167–169), and therefore very different from the hidden women discussed earlier. In some legends, however, they are said to be good, trusting and trustworthy. They are also closely connected to nature, live in the wilderness (further away from human habitation), and some turn to stone when the sun hits them (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 136; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 293; Sveinsson 2003: 167–168). In Icelandic troll legends, much like those dealing with outlaws, the boundary between legend and wonder tale appears somewhat blurry. Ólína Þorvarðardóttir reaches the conclusion that at the time the legends were collected, people no longer really believed in trolls and that legends about them were mainly told for entertainment purposes (Þorvarðardóttir 1995: 19). Nevertheless, these stories reflect the society in which they are told. It is therefore still relevant to look at the portrayal of women in these legends, which were evidently popular.

In the legend collections, the vast majority of the troll legends tell of female trolls.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the troll world is often presented as a matriarchy, in which female trolls appear to be more dangerous and aggressive than their male counterparts. In many of these legends, the female trolls try to steal people from the farms to keep them company, or to eat or kill them, and in most troll legends, it is mentioned that men, rather than women, are the victims.<sup>14</sup>

This idea can be seen particularly clearly in the legend “Kráka tröllskessa” (Kráka the ogress) told by an unknown storyteller to Jón Árnason. Here the female troll Kráka is said to be:

The most harmful of creatures (...), causing great damage in terms of both damaging herds and the killing of humans. Kráka was very eager for men and hated living alone; it wasn't uncommon that she would take men from the settled areas and keep them with her, but very few were interested in following her wishes, either running off or committing suicide. (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 178)

The legend tells how Kráka twice stole human shepherds, taking them to live with her, and how both times they managed to escape (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 178–180). This popular legend type, in which a female troll steals a farmer or a shepherd to keep as

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<sup>13</sup> The legend collections that form the basis for this research contain a little over 200 legends about trolls, and of those legends, roughly 57% tell of female trolls, while only 15% tell of male trolls. In 28% of the legends, the gender of the troll is unmentioned.

<sup>14</sup> In about 78% of the legends the victims of the trolls are male, and in 22% they are female.

a husband or a lover,<sup>15</sup> seems to have been less common in mainland Scandinavia, but is found in several versions in the Icelandic legend collections. Here one can note as a contrast those well-known legends told in the Nordic countries (and particularly in mainland Scandinavia) about women who are abducted by trolls or hidden people (af Klintberg 2010: 188–190; Conrad 2021: 25).<sup>16</sup> The Icelandic legends, however, underline that troll women have sexual agency. Indeed, it is interesting that in several legends it is stated directly that male trolls have become extinct, this being the reason why female trolls need human men to maintain their kind (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 182–183; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 264–265, 265–266). The legends also often include that for this to be possible, the trolls must make the men “bigger” in some way, as in the legend “Þjóðbrók” told by Guðrún Jónsdóttir to Jón Árnason: “[she] found him too small for a woman of her size, and stretched him so much that he became way taller than he had been” (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 183). The same can be seen in the legend “Loppa og Jón Loppu-fóstri” (Loppa and Jón, Loppa’s foster-child) told by an unknown storyteller to Jón Árnason:

They put everything into treating him as well as possible, and left nothing out in terms of making him more mature. They regularly took him and covered him in some kind of ointment or fat, and stretched him between them; he found it a terrible experience. They also howled into his ears to bewitch him. (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 182–183)

As in the legend noted above, in several cases we can read about two troll sisters that keep one man with a similar intention in mind, making him sleep between them in their bed, something which seems to be far from pleasurable (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 184–186; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 264–265). In the legends, the trolls also seem to use magic to make the men bigger in some way (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 180–181, 185–186; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 265–266). A particularly visual description of this act is found in an account in Jón Árnason’s collection, which notes that when trolls are “empowering and bewitching those men they have lured to them, they commonly rub fat and sour butter into them, two trolls then baking and stretching them over the coals, one holding them by the head while the other took the feet” (Árnason 1954–1961

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<sup>15</sup> A similar motif can also be found in Icelandic legends of trolls, although in the majority the motif of women being abducted by a supernatural agent is more restricted to outlaw legends in Iceland (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 186; II: 189; Davíðsson 1978–1980 I: 163–164). It is hard to imagine why these Icelandic stories should be different to those told in many other Nordic countries, since most Icelandic legends reflect in some way those told elsewhere in Scandinavia. It is possible that this somehow reflects a societal difference, or perhaps it could be part of the entertainment value of the troll legends.

<sup>16</sup> See Árnason 1954–1961 I: 178–186; III: 232–233; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 264–266.

I: 184). The metaphor of the ogresses “baking” the men is particularly interesting in this context, as the concept of cooking and eating has long been connected to sexuality in human cultures (Counihan 1999: 62–65; see further below).

In these legends, the sexuality of the ogresses is evidently more aggressive and brazen than that of the hidden women described in the legends discussed earlier, these legends being much more physical and violent. The legends also take place in a rough and unfriendly supernatural realm in the caves of the trolls, in which the men are clearly held against their will. It is nonetheless clear that the men do not obey the ogresses, despite the magic and “care” they receive from the female trolls. As one story says: “She gave him enough to eat and bewitched him with her magic so that he became larger and more powerful than other men; in spite of this, he never agreed to having intercourse with the ogress” (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 180–181). In another version of the legend, the man seems to gain some protection from his Christianity, the younger troll asking the older one: “How come every time I come near Láfi when he is naked that I feel that I am on fire?” The older one answers her companion that she should not be surprised: this is obviously the work of Oddur the bishop and his prayers (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 184–185).<sup>17</sup> All in all, as the men deny the troll women in all these stories, the latter never become pregnant.<sup>18</sup>

As noted above, in all the legends in question, the men always manage to escape from their captors. They commonly trick the troll women by pretending to be sick, in several versions telling the women that the only way for them to get better is to have shark meat of a particular age to eat. While the troll women are away looking for the shark meat, the men run to the closest church and ring the church bells, something trolls are known to hate in legends throughout Europe, thereby once again underlining the conflict between Christianity and the heathen trolls (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 178–180, 183–185; III: 232–233; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 264–265). While the ingenuity of the men saves them from the ogresses’ cave, often leading to the whole area being saved from the evil troll, their experiences are nonetheless commonly said to have taken a physical toll on them, as they remain too tall after the stretching or become exhausted from trying to escape (see, e.g., Árnason 1954–1961 I: 180–183).

Other, more culinary-related legends tell of female trolls who steal men with the intention of eating them,<sup>19</sup> something which Marina Warner has argued is often

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<sup>17</sup> These legends tell of sexual violence being used against men. It is noteworthy in this context that at the time when the legends were collected, the only laws relating to rape were concerned with women and children (Alþingi 1867: 93). This naturally raises questions about social attitudes relating to sexual violence against men.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Árnason 1954–1961 I: 81–86; III 148–155.

<sup>19</sup> See Árnason 1954–1961 I: 146–155, 158, 197, 204; III: 226–229, 231, 233, 240–245, 255–258; Davíðsson 1978–1980 I: 176–182; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 247–252, 294–295, 299).

a metaphor for sex in both myths and wonder tales (Warner 1998: 260). As has been mentioned above, women were supposed to suppress their sexual desires, and the same can be said when it comes to greed and hunger (Warner 1998: 260). Susan Bordo, who has researched the connection between hunger, food and sex in Western tradition, nonetheless tempers Warner's argument noting that, in the case of women, hunger is often portrayed through terror and loathing rather than admiration:

Eating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act [in general]; rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male. (Bordo 1993: 117)

I argue that this is also the case in the troll legends examined here. In these legends the sexual appetite of the female trolls poses risk to society, and they convey the message that women's hunger is dangerous. A slightly different approach is taken by Helga Kress who has raised the idea that female trolls are a threat to men's manhood (Kress 1993). Ólína Þorvarðardóttir agrees, adding that such legends of trolls also reflect a fear of the unknown, as men often encounter them when traveling in less known territory, such as the highlands of Iceland (1995: 33).

In Icelandic legends, the connections between the trolls, femininity and nature are quite strong. The trolls belong to the wilderness and are also wild in the sense that they are more animal-like and do not restrain their urges. At the same time, as noted above, most trolls appearing in the legends are female. These connections might be seen as echoing the idea that women were commonly believed to be more "natural", while men were seen as having culturally mastered nature (Ortner 1974: 67–87; Matthíasdóttir 2002: 38; Halldórsdóttir 2011: 74–75, 81), something that opens up a potentially new understanding for the essential conflict that lies behind these legends. As many scholars have noted, there has been a long tradition of thinking of nature and culture in terms of a binary opposition,<sup>20</sup> in which nature has been seen to be something that should be mastered (see Lévi-Strauss 1969; Collins 2000: 76–77). It could be argued that in the earlier Icelandic sagas, troll women might be seen as representing men's

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<sup>20</sup> Today, this opposition has admittedly been widely deconstructed, with new interpretive frames being introduced, whereby nature and culture are not seen as natural binary opposites, but as social constructions, and what is considered to be "natural" or "cultural" varies with time and place (Descola 2012: 468; see also Viveiros de Castro 1998: 469–470). It is also important to note that while trolls and women both reflect the same nature versus culture contrast on the surface, this varies according to context.

inner fear of femininity and nature, both of which men have tried to tame through the ages (Kress 1993: 119). As Patricia Hill Collins has noted, culture is defined as the opposite of an objectified nature: “Feminist scholarship points to the identification of women with nature as being central to women’s subsequent objectification and conquest by men” (Collins 2000: 70–71).

As has been shown above, the portrayal of female trolls in these legends is negative; they pose a threat not only to men but to society as a whole, by killing animals and stealing men – the head of the household and important for the family and society. It is safe to say that these female trolls do not behave in accordance with hegemonic ideas of femininity, not only with regard to sexuality, but also with regard to feminine qualities. As Mimi Schippers has argued with regard to hierarchy and gender in contemporary society, in order for men to maintain their superiority over women, it is important that women displaying characteristics of hegemonic masculinity must be criticized. Those women who somehow threaten the social order are then shown as being aggressive, promiscuous or frigid, characteristics that are defined as being deviant and stigmatized (Schippers 2007: 94–95). As Schippers notes, when women take on these characteristics, they are often shown being punished:

The possession of any of these characteristics is assumed to contaminate the individual, so by having the one characteristic an individual becomes a kind of person – a lesbian, a “slut”, a shrew or “cock-teaser”, a bitch. Not only do the characteristics become master statuses for women who exhibit or enact them, these women are considered socially undesirable and contaminating to social life more generally. (Schippers 2007: 95)

The idea of the dangerous and sexual female trolls reinforces the dominant norms about what it is to be a “good” woman. This can also be seen in the words used to describe female trolls, such as *skass* (English: hag), *skessa* (female troll) and *flagð* (shrew). These names all have negative implications and were (and still are) used about women who do not conform to ruling ideologies about femininity, as Jón Árnason notes: “these are negative words about women, and only used about those women who are uncontrollable in some way or shrewish” (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 137), making them monstrous or animalistic (Kress 1993: 119; Árnason 1954–1961 I: 184, 227–228).

Troll women are not very particular about the type of men they choose to kidnap or eat; they can pose a threat to anyone: workers, farmers and even priests, sometimes taking men while they are travelling in the wilderness or working outside, but also entering farm spaces and stealing men from their homes (see also Gunnell 2004). This

would appear to give the trolls in these legends more access to human society than the hidden women, which makes them more threatening.

An overarching theme in troll legends of this kind is that the troll women are usually fooled and even killed by men in the end. In short, the men are shown to be clever strong Christians, while the pagan females are devious but easy to fool (Árnason 1954–1961 I: 151–154; III: 255–256; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 252). When ogresses are eventually punished for their transgressions (something that is never the case with the hidden women), this punishment is often severe, as they are turned into stone, defeated in a wrestling match, or even beheaded by the men (see, e.g., Árnason 1954–1961 I: 168–169, 171, 173–175; III: 257–258; Sigfússon 1982–1993 III: 252). The fact that the troll women are shown in the legends to deserve such punishment underlines the fact that they are seen as dangerous to the accepted hegemony, and therefore need to be terminated (Tatar 1992: 94–119; Jónsdóttir 2020: 32–33).

## Conclusions

This article has focused on the portrayal of women in Icelandic legends who are dangerous for both men and society. The main reason for this danger seems to be their sexuality, something well known from legends around the world (see, e.g., Lawless 2003; Häll 2013). It is important to bear in mind that folk legends can never provide a complete overview of collectively accepted moral codes, although they often present useful insights. When women in Icelandic legends behave in contradiction to what was considered to be “feminine” they are often shown in a negative light, often depicted as belonging to the world of the liminal or supernatural, something that reinforces accepted ideas of what was considered appropriate for women and what was not (see Jónsdóttir 2021: 300–305).<sup>21</sup> As has been shown here, however, the trolls and hidden women in these legends are nonetheless presented in different ways in these legends: the hidden women being visited by men of their own free will, and then denied sex, while the trolls take men against their will, and are depicted as more aggressive, bestial and violent. One thus wonders whether they might represent different sides of femininity or different kinds of threats.

Answering the main question of what these legends tell us about the ways in which women were viewed in Icelandic society during the time in question, I conclude that while these supernatural women appear on the surface to represent dangers to male hegemony, when examined further, their powers are shown to be limited to their

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<sup>21</sup> See my PhD thesis *Trapped within Tradition: Women, Femininity and Gendered Power Relations in Icelandic Folk Legends* (Jónsdóttir 2022a).

supernatural world. Both the hidden women and female trolls belong to an inverse world in which ordinary rules do not apply, and women appear to be both in charge and sexually active. The legends indicate this is not desirable and poses a risk to social order and human society. The men in the legends of the hidden women are turned into thieves, and the female trolls enter the human society to steal men. However, it is also clear in the legends that if these supernatural women go beyond their own worlds, as in the case of the troll women, they are dominated or killed by men in the end. Even though these women are portrayed as posing dangers to the patriarchal world, ultimately the dominant social order is more powerful. I therefore read these legends as directed at real-life Icelandic women, with the messages that women should not be tempted to violate hegemonic norms regarding femininity or to provoke men – who had more power within the gendered hierarchy. The supernatural, in my interpretation, thus served to uphold the cultural normative world of gender in Icelandic everyday life.

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Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir defended her PhD in folkloristics at the University of Iceland in the summer of 2022. Her research interests are folk legends, femininity, children’s folklore and the supernatural. A recent publication is “You have a Man’s Spirit in a Woman’s Heart”: Women that Break Traditional Gender Roles in Icelandic Legends, in *Folklore* 132(3), 2021.

([doj5@hi.is](mailto:doj5@hi.is).)

