

The Feminist Potential of Beatrice Helen Barmby's *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*

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Abstract: The late Victorian Britain was fascinated with the ancient North. British literary authors of the second half of the nineteenth century sought inspiration for their novels, poems, and plays in medieval Icelandic imagery. One of these authors was Beatrice Helen Barmby, author of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*. Since her authorship has largely been forgotten, this paper is an attempt to reintroduce her as one of the Victorian enthusiasts of Old Norse literature. *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* (1900) is a play based on the medieval *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Notably, the adaptation centres around the relationships between the main characters rather than the existential drama of the outlaw Gísli. I argue that the play can be interpreted as an invitation to consider women's rights, or the Woman Question, a topic which excited heated debates in late nineteenth-century Britain. The play's depiction of marriage is especially close to the early liberal feminist critique of the inferior role of women as harmful for both women and men. On the other hand, the play portrays Gísli's wife Aud as a universally stoic and moral character, a domestically emancipated free woman. This paper thus analyses *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* as a Victorian work on Old Norse-inspired themes with activist potential.

Introduction

O bleak and cold, O isled betwixt the seas,
O home of snow and lava and spring flowers,
How have I longed for thee through all my hours,
And felt thy message in the northern breeze,
And yearned to see thee, though I saw not these

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Great lands to southward, set 'mid rosy bowers,
 That which was Greece, and white Italian towers,
 Far-fabled isles, and fair Hesperides ...
 (Barmby 1900, vii)

Though immersed in the Old Norse culture through the majority of her adult life, Beatrice Helen Barmby never got the chance to visit the island of her dreams. The young British author passed away barely thirty-one years old, leaving behind a substantial body of work, most of it inspired or based on Old Norse themes. Her name is little known today despite the praise of her contemporaries.

Barmby is one of the numerous Victorian authors who drew inspiration from medieval Icelandic culture. One of the most famous Iceland enthusiasts in Victorian Britain was William Morris. Unlike Barmby, he was blessed enough to visit Iceland twice. "So I have seen Iceland at last ... a most dreary region ... a most dreary place," Morris records in his diary after sighting the country on board a ship for the first time in 1871 (Greenlaw 2017, 25). After a few days on land, Morris' initial impression was softened by the variety of natural forms and textures: "Most strange and awful the country looked to me we passed through, in spite of all my anticipations: a doleful land at first with its great rubbish heaps of sand, striped scantily with grass sometimes; varied though by a bank of sweet grass here and there full of flowers ... the lava itself, grown over here with thick soft moss, grey like hoarfrost ..." (37). It was through excerpts from Morris' diaries, which I read some months after I had moved to Iceland, that I discovered the Victorian Icelandophiles. I was, perhaps unknowingly, looking for answers for why Iceland and its medieval literary heritage had attracted me ever since the undergraduate classes in Old Norse and modern Icelandic at Vilnius University taught by Rasa Baranauskienė. On the one hand, there was the exotic strangeness of the landscape Morris describes that I too adored and romanticised. On the other hand, I was enthralled by the universal and the familiar in the Old Norse literature – the timeless vibrancy of the sagas, which had also brought Morris to Iceland. With a somewhat desperate attitude of a young student in between countries and educations, I found in the Victorian enthusiasm for Iceland a reassurance and support for my own enthusiasm. One footnote led to another, and through the description of Morris' companion Eiríkur Magnússon in Andrew Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2002), I came upon the most curious

little book, simultaneously British and Icelandic, medieval, Victorian, and modern at once.

In this article, I (re)introduce Beatrice Helen Barmby as a representative of the widespread British fascination with the medieval North in the late nineteenth century. By analysing her play, *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, through the lens of early feminist writing, I suggest that her theatrical adaptation not only grappled with the topics of Nordic bravery and stoicism, but also with the position of women in the medieval Icelandic as well as the Victorian British society. This paper is loosely based on my MA thesis, which I wrote at the University of Oslo under the supervision of Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (Katarskytè 2020).¹

The author of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*

Beatrice Helen Barmby was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire in 1868 to Ada Marianne Barmby (née Shepherd) and John Goodwyn Barmby. After Goodwyn Barmby's death in 1881, the family – his widow Ada and his daughters Maria, Mabel, and Beatrice – moved to Devon in southwest England (“Beatrice H Barmby” 2021, “Goodwyn Barmby” 2022). The family had connections with the women's suffrage movement and subscribed to unorthodox political and religious views. For example, Beatrice's mother's name appears in the 1866 Suffrage Petition (Crawford 1999, 34). Her father's first wife and mother to her half-sister Maria, Catherine Barmby (née Wattkins), who died in 1853, was a published advocate of women's suffrage and is described by Ruth Watts (1998) as a “Unitarian Owenite feminist” (195). Beatrice's paternal aunt was honorary secretary of the Wakefield Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (Crawford 1999, 34). Perhaps the most politically well-known member of the family was Beatrice's father Goodwyn Barmby (he rarely used his first name John), a Unitarian minister, an outspoken socialist, a self-proclaimed communist, an activist of different sorts, and a poet (Lee 2004).

¹ I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their priceless advice and encouragement on the first draft, as well as supervisors of my PhD thesis at the University of Oslo, Jorunn Økland from the Centre for Gender Research and Kristen May Mills from the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, for reading and commenting on the revised article. Any remaining shortcomings and inconsistencies in the article are entirely my own.

Beatrice Helen Barmby's biography plays an important role in my research for at least two reasons. First, her background and the politics of her family members suggest that the young writer must have been aware of, if not openly involved in, the discussions on women's suffrage and social rights. Barmby also lived at a time when the so-called Woman Question, a debate concerning women's societal and political position, was exceptionally heated in Britain (Delap 2011, 319). On the other hand, the aim of this article is to (re)introduce Barmby as a remarkable author and, to use Wawn's (2002) term, a Victorian Icelandophile. The scholarly sources referring to her are scarce, and her family background, to my knowledge, has not been outlined in print before.²

Barmby studied Icelandic with Eiríkur Magnússon, a librarian at Cambridge University. In the British context, Eiríkur is best known for his Saga Library translations from Old Norse in collaboration with William Morris. During the approximately fifty years of his career in Britain, Eiríkur had numerous students in person and by post who wished to learn medieval as well as modern Icelandic (Wawn 2002, 356). Barmby corresponded with Eiríkur for around 10 years. A warm friendship between the teacher and the pupil developed over time (359). The young author eventually became so fluent in Icelandic that she used the language in her letters to Eiríkur as well as to Matthías Jochumsson, an Icelandic priest and poet, who would later translate *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* into his mother tongue. It is therefore certain that she could analyse *Gísli Súrssonar* and other Old Norse sources in the original.

The full title of Barmby's compact book from 1900, *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama. Ballads and Poems of the Old Norse Days and Some Translations*, indicates a certain historical quality of her work that the publishers wished to emphasise. "The Old Norse days" are recounted in this book by the play, on which this article focuses, as well as original poems and various translations of Old Norse and modern Icelandic verse. The volume is accompanied by an introduction by Frederick York Powell, professor

2 Leeds-graduate Helen M. Haldane might have been assembling a biography of Beatrice Helen Barmby in the 1990s. In a short note in *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, a North American newspaper for Icelandic expats, Haldane asks readers for any information about an unsuccessful Canadian publication of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* (Haldane 1990). I have not yet managed to identify or contact the author of this newspaper message.

of history at Oxford University, colleague and friend of the philologist Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and himself a translator and editor of Old Norse texts. Powell is full of admiration for the author, deems the play “evidently actable” and “not in any way inferior to those plays of Ibsen’s earlier period that have in their day met with much applause” (Barmby 1900, xiii). Of other works in the volume, he emphasises the poem *Bolli and Gudrún*, considering it far superior to William Morris’ *Lovers of Gudrún*, which he regards as “sentimental in Tennysonian fashion” (xv) – not exactly a compliment from a historian’s point of view.

In 1902, an Icelandic translation of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* by Matthías Jochumsson was published in Akureyri (Barmby 1902). The edition opens with *In Memoriam* and an introduction, in which Matthías shows no British-like understatement. He praises Barmby for fully understanding the Icelandic past and its literature and for flawlessly recreating the Old Norse atmosphere in a new artistic form. According to Matthías, Barmby’s approach to literature is closer to the Icelandic *listaskoðun* (artistic perception, taste) than the British, and her understanding of *Sturlunga saga* is unparalleled in the Nordic countries, including Iceland (V). To support his lavish praise of Barmby’s authorship, he refers to the opinions of Powell, Jón Stefánsson, and W. P. Ker and claims that this adaptation of *Gísla saga* can compare to the works of Henrik Ibsen and Bjørstjerne Bjørnson (V). Even though the acclaim that *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* and Barmby’s other works receive in the introductions of Powell and Matthías Jochumsson might have a promotional function, the contemporary reception of the volume is overwhelmingly positive (for British reviews, see Katarskytė 2020).

After its initial publication in 1900, *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* continued its life almost solely in print and, to my knowledge, was never staged in Britain. The letters of the author’s sister Mabel Barmby affirm that the text of the play was distributed to Canada, Australia, and Argentina (Wawn 2002, 361). Matthías Jochumsson’s translation was reissued decades later in a single volume with his Icelandic rendition of Ibsen’s *Brand* (Matthías Jochumsson 1966). The play was also broadcast on Icelandic radio in the late 1940s (G. St. 1948).

Other works by Beatrice Helen Barmby, all published posthumously, are the short story collection *Roslyn’s Raid and Other Tales* (1903), a volume of verse called *Poems* (1903), and the novel *The Gods are Just* (1904). Beatrice’s translation of *Þrymskviða*, “The Lay of Thrym,” was published in the *Saga-Book of The Viking Club* (Barmby 1903).

Imagining the common “Teutonic” past

Barmby’s interest in Old Norse literature was not unusual in late nineteenth-century Britain. During this period, the British engagement with southern European languages and cultures gradually gave place to the fascination with the North. By some, the contours of British identity were redrawn to suit the image of a common past shared with the Nordic countries, and especially Norway and Iceland. Wawn (2002) notes that the rise of interest in Old Norse and other non-classical languages in combination with the decline of the superior status of Greek and Latin was a product of new philological approaches. The discovery of Sanskrit, the focus on the vernacular, and the engagement with languages and literatures other than the classical paved the way for intense Nordic language studies (62).

The British fascination with the medieval North and its antiquities reached mainstream levels in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the time Barmby was working with Old Norse material, she could already make use of the classic Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s *Icelandic-English Dictionary* which appeared in 1874. As an Icelandic language student, she could compare source texts with various English translations of Old Norse literature that were available by the end of the nineteenth century. Another important indication of this intense British interest in the medieval North was the establishment of The Viking Club (the current Viking Society for Northern Research) in 1892. *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* was read “with musical illustrations” in a gathering of the Club in 1903 (Society for Northern Research 1903, 486).

The Icelandic culture the Victorians fell in love with was, of course, highly romanticised. Old Norse sagas were read almost as historical documents, Eddic poetry – as a source expressing common Nordic virtues and myths. The Victorians made use of Old Norse symbolism freely and with various often conflicting agendas: it supported ideas of “patriarchal family structures and female suffrage; social Darwinism and social engineering; ... constitutional monarchy and republicanism; Scottish nationalism and Scottish Unionism” (Wawn 2002, 32). The Old Norse history and mythology became part of the school curriculum, while the adults embarked on saga-stead safaris on Icelandic soil (32), exemplified in this article by the travels of Morris.

The geographical binary between the North and the South added to the multiple gendered binaries of the Victorian societal discourse: masculine/feminine, culture/nature, reason/emotion, public/private. The image of the northern Viking as a mighty, ascetic, stoic warrior,

who lives according to an inborn moral code, became common knowledge. Esaias Tegnér's *Frithiof* (1825), a Swedish poetic paraphrase of *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, which eventually became a European best-seller, embodied the essence of a Viking for many nineteenth-century British readers. The adaptation's Frithiof was the figure of ideal manliness whose "old northern masculinity involved the Viking hero being physically strong and brave, chivalrous and trustworthy, a witty and resourceful poet, respectful to his father, wary of women, and a cool but clubbable leader of men" (Wawn 2002, 137). Some Old Norse enthusiasts even described the Norman conquest in gendered terms, comparing the Anglo-Saxons to "a female impregnated by the 'great male race,' the Norse Vikings" (136).

The mentions of the transnational Nordic character are not uncommon in Victorian texts which do not directly grapple with Old Norse themes. For example, the northern "Teutonic"³ identity resurfaces in Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial novel *North and South* (1855). In the following passage, the mill owner Mr Thornton from northern England disagrees with Mr Bell, an Oxford professor in Classics, about the English temperament:

"Wait a little while," said Mr Thornton. "Remember, we are of a different race from the Greeks to whom beauty was everything, and to whom Mr Bell might speak of a life of leisure and serene enjoyment, much of which entered in through their outward senses. I don't mean to despise them, any more than I would ape them. But I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England to what it is in others; we retain much of their language; we retain more of their spirit; we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion. Our glory and our beauty arise

3 In the Victorian context, the terms *Teutonic* or *Teutons* are typically used in the broad sense, meaning Germanic or North-Germanic peoples: "In its origin, the term 'Teutons' referred to a Germanic tribe from Jutland that, together with the tribe of the Cimbri, invaded the Roman Republic during the end of the second century BC. Yet, with time 'Teutonic' became a generic name denoting the whole of the so-called Germanic nations, including England" (Steinberg 2019, 22). For example, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After. A Study in the Sociology of the Teutonic Races* by Bertha Surtees Phillpotts (1913) includes chapters on Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, North Germany and Holland, Belgium and Northern France, and England – all "Teutonic races."

out of our inward strength, which makes us victorious over material resistance, and over greater difficulties still. We are Teutonic up here in Darkshire in another way. We hate to have laws made for us at a distance. We wish people would allow us to right ourselves, instead of continually meddling with their imperfect legislation. We stand up for self-government, and oppose centralisation.”

[Mr Bell:] “In short, you would like the Heptarchy back again. Well, at any rate, I revoke what I said this morning – that you Milton people did not reverence the past. You are regular worshippers of Thor.” (Gaskell 1973, 334)

However, the raw Nordic solidity was not restricted to male Old Norse characters: the Viking women famously make good use of their “Teutonic blood” in myths and sagas. Be it the cunning or the aggressiveness of Old Norse heroines, they nevertheless provoke disgust in Jane Welsh Carlyle:

I feel there was a savagery about some of the Icelandic *Ladies* which made one shudder even to think of! One wd [sic] not like to think that the *Arch Enemy* himself would be capable of some of the deeds ascribed to these *Ladies*! No wonder that the advice is given ‘Believe not a maiden’s word’ (nor her Mother’s neither) . . . some of the men were very beautiful characters if they had been rightly mated. (Letter to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 1882, cited in Wawn 2002, 154)⁴

It is tempting to think that, for Victorians, the Old Norse society represented a pre-Christian, uncivilised past – a time of savage ladies and gentlemen alike. The feuds and slaughter of the sagas could suggest a society that is governed by force. In such a society, the physically weaker are also socially disadvantaged. This theory of “barbaric” societies reappears in early feminist explanations of patriarchy. It is a common denominator for the texts of Harriet Taylor Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and even Beatrice Helen Barmby’s father Goodwyn Barmby, to whom I refer in the following sections.

One of the nineteenth-century arguments for women’s equal rights and suffrage was the progress towards a liberal society, a society no longer based on physical competition but on rational government. Harriet

4 Original italics.

Taylor Mill argues that the subordination of women is a remnant of “the rule of physical strength” which the (Western) world has long since abandoned in favour of democracy (Taylor Mill 1853, 6). The fact that women are denied the same rights as men is a result of blind traditionalism, a logical fallacy in modern times where leaders are chosen for their education and intellect, not muscle strength. The barbaric patriarchy argument presupposes that all women are physically weaker than all men and would be problematic in the framework of modern feminist theory. However, in the Victorian context, the gendered distribution of physical strength was uncontested. It could be supposed that Taylor Mill’s contemporaries would find in the Old Norse sagas a pagan, pre-modern society that is purely governed by force and in which women are unquestionably disadvantaged.

However, the Victorian reading of the sagas rarely follows this pattern. Instead, the medieval Icelandic form of government is described as an early democracy. The rule of physical strength is challenged by the codes of respectful conduct. In addition, physical force is not reserved for men, while rationality and common sense are frequently ascribed to women. For example, E. J. Oswald (1882) supplies her Icelandic travel narrative with thoughts on Old Norse literature whose married female characters are the heads of household and enjoy absolute freedom in their (private) sphere (50). The traveller describes the culture of medieval Iceland as one in which the genders are segregated but where women use their skill and agency on a par with men. This is in contrast with “the Greek wife, doomed to a narrow life in her own side of the house apart from the interests of the men” (50). Again, the South represents the sensuous uncivilised other, while the North – medieval as well as contemporary – fits well with the Victorian ideal of clear gender boundaries and marital companionship.

In the following section, I argue that *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* shares some optimism about women’s position in Old Norse society with E. J. Oswald. However, I also read the play as a critique of marriage that can be applied to the Victorian realities.

**“Though the heart crack”:
the quintessential Nordic character**

In an article on *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Jeffrey Turco (2016) winks at Judith Butler’s revolutionary book on gender performativity by pronouncing that the Old Norse text “plainly spell[s] gender trouble in medieval

Iceland” (283). *Gísli’s Auðr* is also one of the main figures in the famous article “Regardless of Sex,” in which Carol Clover, drawing on the theories of Thomas Laqueur, outlines the Old Norse one-sex model (Clover 1993). For Clover, the scene in which Auðr smites Eyjólfur with a bag of silver after he has tried to bribe her to betray Gísli represents “a snarl of gender crossings” (364). The saga’s preoccupation with gender is not necessarily the main reason why Beatrice Helen Barmby chose to adapt it, but the vivid female characters of the Old Norse tale nevertheless make perfect material for a theatrical analysis of marital relationships combined with a contemporary social critique.

The play follows the narrative of the Old Norse saga quite closely.⁵ The conflict between four sworn brothers – blood brothers Gísli and Thorkel and their companions Véstein and Thorgrím⁶ – is reproduced with little alteration. However, the ambiguities of the original saga are downplayed,⁷ the main conflict is simplified, the supernatural elements removed, and the focus transferred to the dramatic relationships of the two main couples: Aud and Gísli, Ásgerd and Thorkel.

In the opening scene, we find Aud and Ásgerd sewing and talking (the famous *dyngja* episode, Barmby 1900, 1). Aud, Gísli’s wife, and Ásgerd, Thorkel’s wife, are discussing Ásgerd’s unrequited love for Aud’s brother Véstein. Thorkel is sleeping in the adjoining room and overhears the conversation. The scene in the women’s bower establishes the main conflict: Ásgerd’s unhappiness and Thorkel’s jealousy eventually lead to the main feud. To reinstate Thorkel’s honour, his partner Thorgrím kills Véstein. Then, Gísli avenges Véstein by slaying Thorgrím and is outlawed. Finally, Thorkel is killed by Véstein’s sons, and Gísli is hunted down by Thorgrím’s relatives after fifteen years of outlawry at the end of the play.

At first sight, *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* grapples with the topics of honour and justice. Gísli is portrayed as a caring, hardworking, and reserved farmer, who is prepared to defend his companion Véstein’s honour regardless of the circumstances. Gísli’s individualism is emphasised by his treatment of the law. He is forced to kill Thorgrím because of the pledge

⁵ For an in-depth summary, see Appendix 1 in Katarskytė 2020.

⁶ In this article, I spell the names of the characters as they appear in *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* unless the Old Norse saga is referenced (as in the paragraph above).

⁷ In the so-called shorter version of *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, it is unclear whether Vésteinn is killed by Þorgrím or Þorkell (Lethbridge 2010, 135; Turco 2016, 278, footnote 7). The play’s Véstein is unmistakably slain by Thorgrím.

in which the four sworn brothers promised to avenge each other should any of them be slain (34). Gísli holds the promise in higher regard than the law and is prepared to face the consequences: “I broke the law, the law shall break not [sic] me” (61). He is as independent as the inhabitants of Mr Thornton’s Darkshire in *North and South*, who like to “right themselves” and “stand up for self-government.” Though Gísli’s personal self-government differs from Mr Thornton’s ideas of political decentralisation, they are united by their idealisation of independent reasoning and perseverance. When he finally prepares to kill Thorgrím, Gísli embodies his own concept of justice: “I stand here as Justiciar. I will deal / Justice with unstained hands and heart unstained” (42).

Gísli summarises his ethics to Ásgerd at the beginning of the play after Thorkel, having heard of Ásgerd’s longing for Véstein, storms out of the house:

... You may come ere long
 To find there are few things worth living for
 So well as this: to act beseemingly,
 Live worthily of oneself, whate’er betide,
 Though the heart crack.
 (7–8)

Apart from Powell’s introductory appreciation of “that *Northern stoicism* that was to our English and Scandinavian ancestors the true way of manliness and womanliness” (xiii), which the previous quote illustrates, Barmby’s play is a love story. It repeatedly returns to the loving relationship between Aud and Gísli. Their mutual trust is juxtaposed with the disastrous and unhappy marriage of Ásgerd and Thorkel. This is where the social critique of the play is at its most apparent.

The play’s narrative is constructed in such a way that the feud between the sworn brothers seems to originate from Ásgerd’s careless slip of tongue and Thorkel’s unrestricted jealousy. Thorkel is indeed paranoid: he interprets every flush on Ásgerd’s cheeks as a declaration of love for Véstein (19). He is so humiliated by Véstein’s polite attention towards Ásgerd that it is difficult to interpret Thorkel’s behaviour as a sign of love. He rather feels emasculated in front of other men by being unable to control his wife, as if she were his property. Thorkel is as disheartened by Ásgerd’s words in the bower as when “rumours” compare him disadvantageously to his hardworking younger brother Gísli (9).

After Véstein is killed, Ásgerd is met with blameful comments. Gísli is unforgiving because he interprets Ásgerd's emotional vacillation as weakness which should be controlled by reason and will. His ethics, as already mentioned, do not allow the neglect of duties – including Ásgerd's duties as Thorkel's wife – and celebrate perseverance “[t]hough the heart crack.” Gísli, caring and sensitive towards Ásgerd's grief, still blames her for the death of Véstein: “The man is dead you cared for; and maybe / Dead for your words: you shall not wince at that” (35). Careless chatter, according to Gísli, is more dangerous and hurtful than a cold weapon: “Ásgerd, your bright eyes / Should look on a man's wounds and falter not. / One tears a heart so sorely with light words / That steel may pass for kindness” (32).

However, a careful reader, especially one sensitive to the Woman Question, would wince at Gísli's moralising speech. Aud, though as dutiful and wilful as Gísli, shows more understanding of Ásgerd's situation. In the opening scene, she soothes her husband's indignation:

Nay, do not blame us, Gísli. Women's lives
 Are hard enough who may not choose their mates,
 And sometimes they must ope their lips on it,
 Or the pain chokes them.
 (6)

Ásgerd has chosen Thorkel “to pleasure kith and kin” (4) because Véstein did not return her love. Yet her marriage seems to lack even the slightest gratification. Apart from the over-controlling jealousy, the reader is made aware of Thorkel's violent behaviour: Ásgerd is sure she will receive “a good beating” for her words in the bower (4).

Even though Gísli seems to despise Ásgerd's character, he is also conscious of the delicate situation of young brides. In one of the last scenes, when the exhausted aging outlaw visits Aud's secluded cottage for the last time, they reflect on their relationship:

Gísli.
 As if a man should root
 A flower from the soft earth, and bear it far
 From all it clings to, – such these weddings be,
 And thence come shame and murder.

AUD.

Not with us.

GÍSLI.

No; for I took my flower in my warm heart,
 And kissed it gently not to dash the blooms, –
 As I do now.
 (91)

Gísli's remark suggests that a careless and disrespectful husband – like Thorkel – might bring about “shame and murder”; however, Gísli still holds Ásgerd responsible for the feud. In his mind, Aud and Ásgerd are completely different creatures. While Aud's loyalty makes him exclaim, “You may still / Trust women when the men give way” (70), he still recalls Ásgerd's speech after fifteen years of outlawry as the main source of the tragedies that follow: “One must pay / So many dear lives for a woman's lightness, / And she laughs on through all!” (86).

Why are Aud and Ásgerd so different? While the former's perseverance and cold-headedness matches Gísli's, why does the latter constantly bemoan her fate? I argue that, from the perspective of the Victorian women's rights discourse, *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* can be read as a critique of marriage and an appeal for women's (domestic) emancipation.

The corrupting union of “unequals”

As already mentioned, early British advocates for women's rights tend to trace patriarchal structures to ancient history where physical force was deemed the principal attribute of social power. Another recurring piece of rhetoric is the argument that the lack of women's rights contributes to the deterioration of the whole society – both women, men, and children are negatively affected by it. Harriet Taylor Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft, who mainly address the position of middle-class woman, are both highly critical of the segregation of gender roles and claim that the power imbalance in married couples might easily deprive both husband and wife of dignity and happiness. Taylor Mill (1853) writes:

... for the first time in the world, men and women are really companions. A most beneficial change, if the companionship were between equals; but being between unequals, it produces, what good observers have noticed, though without perceiving its cause,

a progressive deterioration among men in what had hitherto been considered the masculine excellencies. Those who are so careful that women should not become men, do not see that men are becoming, what they have decided that women should be – are falling into the feebleness which they have so long cultivated in their companions. Those who are associated in their lives, tend to become assimilated in character. In the present closeness of association between the sexes, men cannot retain manliness unless women acquire it. (15)

Taylor Mill argues that any “average” man, when provided with legal and culturally accepted superiority in relation to his wife, “becomes either the conscious or unconscious despot of his household” (18). As long as the direct power to make decisions and control the family belongs to men, women have no choice but to resort to indirectness and manipulation. Such conditions, according to Taylor Mill, corrupt both husband and wife: “in the one it produces the vices of power, in the other those of artifice” (18). Women’s “strong wishes and active minds” are not accepted or allowed the space to flourish, and the suppression of their vivacity inevitably leads to unhappiness and viciousness. Taylor Mill sees the only promise of happiness in a marital union built on “genuine friendship” between equals; however, it is only possible if the women are given rights equal to men to gain education, acquire professions and possessions, and enter public service.

Let us return to Ásgerd, whose every step is controlled by the jealous Thorkel. At the beginning of the play, she is certain that little lies will calm Thorkel down: “You leave him to me, and I’ll find my way / Back to his favour” (Barmby 1900, 8). Ásgerd first turns to “smiles and wiles and womanly devices,” to use an expression by Victorian feminist Mona Caird (1897, 118). When those devices do not achieve the expected effect, Ásgerd resorts to threats of divorce (Barmby 1900, 12–13). Similarly, Thorkel, lacking acknowledgement and acceptance from other men, who always compare him to his more industrious brother Gísli, appears to be the despot of the household that Taylor Mill is describing.

More support for this interpretation of the play can be found in a classical feminist text from 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which retained its radical reputation as well as its relevance in the Victorian period. Wollstonecraft employs the Cartesian concept of genderless reason to condemn the patchy education and superficiality of middle-class women. She also openly despises the passivity

in which married women find contentment. The only power women are allowed to possess is that of beauty and “sensibility,” for which they are treated by men as superior before marriage, only to be patronised and controlled by them in marriage (Wollstonecraft 2009, 62). In Barmby’s play, both Aud and Gísli urge Ásgerd to be more sensible and less sensitive, to stick to her duties and continue with clenched teeth. Eventually, Ásgerd is blamed for the four-fold slaughter of the sworn brothers. There is no one to defend Ásgerd, whose only life project has been love – she has been brought up to seek it against all odds and still idealises it despite Véstein’s rejection.

Wollstonecraft wishes that women “may every day grow more and more masculine” (11) in the socially constructed sense of the term. The philosopher positions (masculine) reason above (feminine) sensibility because she believes men’s lives to be far more fulfilling. In general, she argues for women’s treatment being on a par with that of men and for their inclusion in the men’s world. In an ideal society, there would be no difference between the genders:

A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it though it may excite a horse laugh. – I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour. For this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why understanding is neglected, whilst accomplishments are acquired with sedulous care: and the same cause accounts for their preferring the graceful before the heroic virtues. (62)

Taylor Mill’s and Wollstonecraft’s ideas might not strike the modern reader as extremely radical. Academic feminist theory, whose initial phases those texts represent, also takes the egalitarian arguments with a pinch of salt – why should women become more like men? The idea, however, of women’s intellect and ambition being fundamentally equal to men’s was extremely controversial, if not completely ridiculous, in nineteenth-century Britain (Maynard 1989, 236). It is thus striking that Beatrice Helen Barmby’s father, writing as a young Unitarian priest and self-proclaimed socialist, considers Wollstonecraft to be an ultimate role model. Goodwyn Barmby’s ideal society is also rather genderless, but its structure and values differ from Wollstonecraft’s and Taylor Mill’s liberal philosophy. After discussing Goodwyn Barmby’s gendered value system,

I suggest that the character of Aud in *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama* represents an image of a (domestically) emancipated woman.

The superiority of woman-man-power

In his article *The Man-Power, the Woman-Power, and the Woman-Man-Power*, Goodwyn Barmby describes a Christian utopia, a socialist society where “peace, love, and heaven will be supernal” (Barmby 1841). In order to achieve peace and common well-being, the feminine and the masculine attributes have to be balanced in each individual and in society in general. Even though Goodwyn Barmby’s stance on societal development is infused with imperialist ideas – Europe for him is the most civilised, thus highest on the evolutionary ladder – he seems to share with Wollstonecraft the wish to obliterate socially constructed gender differences. For him, the highest form of human development balances “the woman-power and the man-power – those mystical terms by which we endeavour to express that might of gentleness, that force of intellect, and that strength of body, which opinion (and often fact) has long sexed, but which we wish to behold in the future united in every human individual, without relation to sex.” It is here that Marie [sic] Wollstonecraft appears in Goodwyn Barmby’s article as an example of an “equilibrated” leader, a sort of modern socialist Christ “through whose initiative invocation the world will have its resurrection from its dark tomb” (Barmby 1841). It is unclear to what extent woman-power and man-power arise in women and men as essential attributes; Goodwyn Barmby’s text is ambiguous on this point. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of the traditional female and male characteristics go against the strict separation of gender roles in Victorian Britain.

Taylor Mill’s and Wollstonecraft’s liberal feminism criticises the traditional middle-class female ideals and urges women to enter the men’s world of formal education and professions, with little critique of the men-friendly societal system and its individualistic values. In contrast, Goodwyn Barmby idealises the gentleness and care associated with femininity. His ideas, even though abstract and exalted, evoke a different tradition of feminist thinking, in which the traditionally feminine is revaluated and defended. For example, some late twentieth-century theorists of care ethics, such as Nel Noddings, deem caring as a feminine quality to be superior to the traditional masculine ethics of individuality and abstract moral ideals (Noddings 1984). Goodwyn Barmby is of a

similar belief when he claims that “the woman-power will be higher than the man-power, inasmuch as love is higher than wisdom” (Barmby 1841).

However, in the perfect human being, those gendered qualities co-exist – s/he is “as tender as a saint, . . . as brave as a martyr” (Barmby 1841). In my opinion, his utopian imagery elucidates the values of the main heroine of *Gísli Súrsson: A Drama*, Gísli’s wife Aud, better than the egalitarian philosophy of the classic feminist authors. I have already dwelled upon the stoic Nordic ideal, inseparable from the traditionally masculine Viking. However, the characters of the play are much more complex than the Victorian stereotypes of (Old Norse) femininity and masculinity would allow. Aud as well as Gísli exhibit values that transcend gender stereotypes. Their behaviour is representative of what Goodwyn Barmby calls a combination of “gentleness,” “intellect,” and “strength of body” – namely the woman-man power.

At first sight, Aud is a traditional housewife who sews in the ladies’ bower (Barmby 1900, 1), serves the house’s guests (13), and patiently waits for her outlawed husband to visit her in a secluded cottage: “How long / Since you last ate?” (72). However, it is exactly her physical and mental strength which allows her to persevere after the lives of the sworn brothers and their families are ruined. Already in the first scene, Aud is singing “rough” songs about war, which make Ásgerd cover her ears and ask for “[s]ome song of love and death” instead (1). The toughness of Aud is juxtaposed with the naiveté and sensitivity of Ásgerd. Aud, just like Gísli, believes in perseverance and truthfulness. When Ásgerd blames fate for her romantic misfortunes, Aud exclaims: “oft we lay those sorrows down to Fate / Which our own weakness causes” (2). Even though she understands Ásgerd’s sorrow, she urges her friend to tell Thorkel the truth (4) instead of employing what Caird calls the “womanly devices.” Aud’s social intelligence and heroism also stem from “old songs and stories,” which she applies to interpret her and Gísli’s personal situation (45).

Aud is a confident leader in her domestic sphere. When the men arrive to summon Gísli to the moot after Thorgrím’s death, Aud reacts with dignity and pride, addressing her distressed servants: “Get you in! / They shall not boast they held us from our work” (56). When Gísli is outlawed, she has no second thoughts about what her duties are. She takes Gísli’s offer of divorce as an offence despite the danger, misery, and isolation she will have to endure: “I must bear it” (58). Aud’s strength seems inexhaustible. She is “brave, shrewd, never-failing,”

and even though these qualities make her “an ideal wife” in the eyes of Powell (xi), they could as well describe any other Viking hero in Victorian attire. The famous scenes, in which Aud strikes Eyjólf’s face with a bag of gold he has brought as a bribe (79) and fights alongside Gísli during his last battle (99), emphasise her transgressive toughness. In the play, Aud acts as Gísli’s companion, but her voice is given significant importance. Even though the main hero Gísli is allowed three Hamlet-like monologues (31, 40–42, 69–71), Aud’s words open and close the entire play.

It would be an overstatement to call Aud a transgressive feminist role model. She is still an extension of her husband, her life is devoted to the people around her, and her trajectory after Gísli’s death remains a mystery.⁸ However, Aud and Gísli are portrayed as equal partners who share the same ideals, values, and level of intelligence. Their marriage seems to resemble Taylor Mill’s (1853) principle of a successful and rewarding relationship: “[t]he mental companionship, which is improving, is communion between active minds, not mere contact between an active mind and a passive” (16). While Ásgerd and Thorkel’s marriage is mutually destructive, Aud and Gísli are able to retain their heroic values even in the face of disaster.

Conclusion

Beatrice Helen Barmby’s play, as a late Victorian text, speaks not only of the Nordic heroism and perseverance of Gísli but also of that of Aud. While Ásgerd’s character can easily be compared with the oversensitive, oppressed middle-class wife described by Wollstonecraft and Taylor Mill, Aud does not lose her agency and cold-headedness. She is given freedom and respect as the head of household, both before and after Gísli is outlawed. It can be suggested that the character of Aud is rather special in the Victorian reception of the Old Norse sagas as a cruelly heroic – and exceptionally male – literary domain. The attention Barmby pays to the saga’s heroines is especially notable considering the mandatory masculinity of the “Wickings,” which becomes apparent in this paragraph from Powell’s introduction:

8 In the Old Norse *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, Auðr and the couple’s foster-daughter Guðrið embark on a pilgrimage to Rome. Barmby’s (1900) play closes with Aud’s last words to Eyjólf: “I know my way henceforward! Go you yours!” (104).

It is because Miss Barmby was so frankly awake to the true charm of the Northern dream-ladies, to the joy of songs and tales that could enthral men of action and brain-power, skilful sailors, stubborn soldiers, crafty statesmen, that her work, though one must regret it has often lacked the last touches of her skilled hand, will, I think, at its best remain to witness, for many who can never attain to the originals, faithfully and sympathetically to the masterpieces of the greatest literature the Teutonic peoples produced till the days of the English Wickings came, and Philip shivered, like his forebear Charles the Great, to hear of the Northern rovers that disturbed his proud dreams of world-empire, when men whose blood and speech were akin to those of Egil and Sturla once more came to their heritage and ruled the realm of song as they ruled the sea. (Barmby 1900, xix)

Gísli Súrsson: A Drama poses questions concerning women's situation and agency in Victorian society, adapting the medieval narrative to the contemporary moods and preferences. Barmby rewrites a bloody heroic saga and turns it into a story of love, affection, and women's selflessness.

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