



# “Engi er allheimskr, ef þegja má”: Women and Silence in the Sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders

By Kirsten Wolf

It is well known that women in medieval Iceland had limited opportunity to take part in political and legal affairs, but that often they were able to somewhat influence the political and legal structures affecting their lives by being quite verbal. While acknowledging the importance of women’s words and, by extension, the fact that power is routinely exercised through speech, this article draws attention to the fact that, paradoxically, silence was also an important tool available to women in medieval Iceland. An examination of the Sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders reveals that women used and relied on non-verbal expression in their interactions with men in order to achieve their goals.

It is recognized that women in medieval Iceland had limited opportunity to take part in political and legal affairs, and that the public sphere was largely the realm of men (see Jochens 1989: 109). However, it is also recognized that often women were able to somewhat influence the political and legal structures affecting their lives, and that they were able to do so through words. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013: 10), for example, argues that “the primary tool available to women is words”, and Judy Quinn (2005: 519) makes the point that “[i]n much Old Norse literature, the performance of males is monitored not just by competitive males, but by women who did not stand by silently when male performance failed to pass muster, indeed whose words were what made the social gears shift”. Several articles and book chapters have been devoted to discussions of women’s whetting, that is, using words to goad men into action in order to make them do what they want done,<sup>1</sup> even though the

<sup>1</sup> Examples include Heller (1958: 98–122), Clover (1986: 141–183), and Jochens (1996: 184–194).

results were often disastrous. In the words of Gunnarr in *Svarfdæla saga*, “[o]pt stendr illt af tali kvenna” (188; often evil comes from the speech of women).<sup>2</sup> The comment hardly comes as a surprise; after all, it is generally speech – and not silence – that causes people to get into trouble.

While acknowledging the importance of women’s words and, by extension, the fact that power is routinely exercised through speech, this article draws attention to the fact that, paradoxically, silence – the absence of words – was also an important tool available to women in medieval Iceland, at least according to a literary examination of the Sagas and *þattir* of Icelanders. Inspired by Adam Jaworski’s (1993: 66) claim that “in the study of communication, speech and silence should be treated as equally valid and complementary categories”, it demonstrates – on the evidence of the Sagas and *þattir* of Icelanders – that saying nothing should not necessarily be equated with negativity, mutedness, or powerlessness, although certainly there are examples of women, who are generally silent, lack words because of emotion, or are unable to speak due to a speech defect. A woman who is generally quiet is Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir. In *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, she is described as being a “væn kona ok kvenna mest, vitr ok heldr skapstór, en hversdagliga kyrrlát” (242; beautiful and fine woman, wise and rather hot-tempered, but usually quiet). Two women are unable to speak, because they are upset and/or feel powerless. One is Friðgeirr’s sister in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, which tells that while staying with Gyða and her son Friðgeirr, Egill asked Friðgeirr’s sister why she was crying and unhappy, and it is related that she couldn’t answer and cried all the more (“Hon mátti engu svara ok grét at meir” [201]). It turns out that a berserk had requested her hand in marriage, and since the family had refused, the berserk had challenged Friðgeirr to a duel. The other is Þorbjörg in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*. It is related that when Grímkell told Þorbjörg the news of the killing of his father Hǫrðr, she was so moved that she couldn’t speak (“mátti þá ekki mæla, svá fekk henni mikils” [89]).<sup>3</sup> Only one woman in the corpus examined is unable to speak because of a speech impediment. This is Þorkell Geitisson’s sister Oddný in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, which tells that she had a

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this episode, see Helga Kress (2001: 88).

<sup>3</sup> Mention may in this connection also be made of Gunnhildr in *Laxdæla saga*, who gave Hrútr, her lover, a gold arm ring in farewell. It is reported that she hid her face in a shawl and quickly walked home (“brá síðan skikkjunní at höfði sér ok gekk snúðigt heim til bæjar” [44]), while Hrútr boarded the ship and sailed away.

major speech defect in that she was dumb and had been so from birth (“var mikill mállaki á ráði hennar. Hún hafði ekki mál og var með því alin” [2304]). Accordingly, she communicated by carving runes on wooden rods (“reist rúnar á kefli því hún mátti eigi mæla” [2305]).

Silence is not just the absence of speech and the absence of meaning and intention; rather, it is a manner of communication, although certainly somewhat context-dependent and definitely more ambiguous than speech (Jaworski 1997: 3; Gal 1999: 175). As Cheryl Glenn (2004: 4) puts it: “Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that”.

“Engi er allheimskr, ef þegja má” (No one is a total fool, if one knows when to be silent). This is Spes’s proverbial comment in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (278), which in many ways echoes stanzas 27 and 29 in *Hávamál* in response to her husband Sigurðr’s request to know the whereabouts of a man he heard singing in their house.<sup>4</sup> Spes and Þorsteinn have fallen in love, and Spes’ extra-marital affair gives rise to quite a few instances of silence. After Sigurðr had searched the house and found nobody, Spes challenges him to take the man, but Sigurðr “þagnaði þá ok þóttisk ekki vita, við hver brögð hann var kominn” (278; then fell silent and didn’t know that kind of trick was being played on him). Moreover, when Sigurðr confronts her about his suspicions, she immediately silences him, saying that “eigi munu vit tvau ein við talask, ef þú berr þessa óvissu at mér” (277; we will not talk to each other, if you make such insinuations about me), and it is told that “[h]ann lét nú falla niður þetta tal að sinni” (277; he let the subject drop for the time being).

Spes is by no means the only woman who knows the wisdom of saying nothing in trying situations. There are several women in the Sagas and þættir of Icelanders, who know when to hold their tongue. When in *Njáls saga* Hrútr informs his wife Unnr that he intends to make another

<sup>4</sup> The two stanzas read as follows: 27: “Ósnotr, er með aldir kœmr, / þat er bazt, at hann þegi; / engi þat veit, at hann ecci kann, / nema hann mæli til mart; / veita maðr, hinn er vætki veit, / þótt hann mæli til mart” (It’s best for a fool / to keep his mouth shut / among other people. / No one will know / he knows nothing, / if he says nothing. / Ill-informed people are also the ones / who don’t know when to stop talking). 29: “Cærna mælir, sá er æva þegir, / staðlauso stafi; / hraðmælt tunga, nema haldendr eigi, / opt sér ógott um gelr” (You will hurt yourself / with all your talking / if you never close your mouth. / A hasty tongue / unless it’s disciplined, / often earns its owner punishment). (Gustav Neckel, ed. 1983: 21; Crawford, trans. 2015: 22).

trip to the West Fjords and wasn't planning on going to the Althing, Unnr says nothing ("Unnr ... talaði fátt um" [23]). And when in *Fljótsdæla saga* Droplaug hears Þorgrímr's insinuations that the slave Svartr is the biological father of her son Helgi, and Helgi advises her to let the matter rest, she turns away after the conversation and goes inside ("Hon snýr í burt af tali þessu ok inn" [243]).<sup>5</sup> The cases of Unnr and Droplaug show that silence itself is not silent; rather, it is often the beginning of something. Their tactical silence enables them to realize their goals without incriminating themselves by speaking. In *Njáls saga*, Unnr makes Sigmundr take her to the Althing, where she has the opportunity to inform Mǫrðr, her father, that she and Hrótr are sexually incompatible. Mǫrðr then devises a plan. He instructs her to go home; be pleasant to Hrótr; later pretend to be sick; summon men, name witnesses, and declare herself divorced the next summer, when Hrótr again is back in the West Fjords during the time of the Althing; and ride back to Vøllr, Mǫrðr's farm. Unnr did as requested, and Mǫrðr declared them legally divorced at the Althing. In *Fljótsdæla saga*, Helgi could no longer tolerate his mother's coldness or lack of affection, so eventually he and his brother Grímr decided to take revenge. It is told that they travelled to Mýnes, where Þorgrímr was a freed slave living on Þórir's farm, and killed him. Both examples show that silence is as effective as words; it is a component of interaction. They also show that the functions of silence are multifarious: silence can be used to threaten, to judge, and to activate.

Guðrún, the heroine of *Laxdæla saga* seems to be a master of the art of knowing when to be silent. Interestingly, she is described not only as "kvenna vænst" (86; the most beautiful of women) but also "bezt orði farin" (86; the most eloquent). As Glenn (2004: 6) points out: "Only an already-accomplished conversationalist ... can produce appropriate and effective silences". When in *Laxdæla saga* Hrefna shows Guðrún her head-dress, Guðrún looks at it for a while but neither praises or criticizes it ("leit á um hríð ok ræddi hvárki um lǫst né lof" [140]); and when the

<sup>5</sup> Droplaug's silence may be contrasted with Þorgrímr's excessive chatter. He is described as a small and lively man, chatty and insulting, foolish and malicious ("lítill maðr vexti ok kvikligr, orðmargr ok illorðr, heimskr ok illgjarn" [240]). When Þorgrímr starts the false claims about Droplaug, a farmhand repeatedly tries to silence him, but to no avail, and it is pointed out that "ferr orð, er um munn líðr" (242; word travels once it leaves the mouth). Cf. *Droplaugarsona saga*. When Þorfinnr travelled to Arneiðarstaðir and told Droplaug what the farmhands of Þórir had said, she took no notice at first, but was silent ("Hon gaf sér ekki fyrst at, útan hon var hljóð" [145]).

people of Laugar express their anger that Kjartan has stationed men at the doors of the outside toilets thereby forcing them to relieve themselves indoors, Guðrún reportedly says little about it (“talaði hér fátt um” [245]). Finally, when towards the end of the saga Bolli asks her which man she loved the most, she mentions the qualities of Þorkell, Bolli, and Þórðr and points out that she has nothing to say about Þorvaldr (“Þorvalds get ek at engu” [228]).

Often, though, these instances of silence are accompanied by other forms of non-verbal communication, such as crying, smiling, blushing or flushing (Wolf 2014: 131 and 136–8). It is told in *Njáls saga*, that when Mǫrðr met his daughter Unnr at the assembly, noticed that she was depressed, and inquired about it, she began to cry and didn’t answer (“Hon tók at gráta ok svaraði engu” [22]). Later in the same saga it is related that when Björn and Kári returned to Björn’s farm after having killed Glúmr and Vébrandr and wounded Ásbrandr, Björn’s wife asked how things had gone. She did not respond to Björn’s answer that their problems had grown and merely smiled (“Hon svarar fá ok brosti at” [436]). The heroine of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún, in particular, seems to have had problems concealing her emotions. While listening to Gestr’s interpretation of her dreams, she grew blood-red but kept silent until he had finished (“Guðrúnu setti dreyrrauða, meðan draumarnir váru ráðnir; en engi hafði hon orð um, fyrr en Gestr lauk sínu máli” [91]). On two more occasions, Guðrún’s facial color betrays her feelings. One is when Bolli returned to Iceland and told her that Kjartan and King Óláfr’s sister were likely to get married. The saga tells that she claimed that this was good news, but ended the conversation and walked away blushing deeply (“lét þegar falla niðr talit, gekk á brott ok var allrauð” [134]). It is reported that she hardly spoke of the matter (“talaði fátt til þess efnis” [134]), but that it was obvious that she was unhappy. The other is when at a feast at Hjarðarholt Guðrún overheard Kjartan giving instructions to some servant woman about giving Hrefna the seat of honor. According to the saga, she looked at Kjartan and changed color but said nothing (“leit til Kjartans ok brá lit, en svarar engu” [139]).<sup>6</sup> Finally, when Bolli’s assassins met Guðrún,

<sup>6</sup> Österberg (1991: 26) offers the following comment on this episode: “Kjartan feels deceived and probably wants revenge on Gudrun. Gudrun understands the insult. But she also realizes that she is far from indifferent to Kjartan, just as he is not indifferent to her. It is more difficult to determine whether Gudrun is silent because there is nothing else to do, in this situation and in front of the servant woman – or

reported what had happened, and Helgi Harðbeinsson used the end of Guðrúns shawl to wipe off the blood on the sword with which he had pierced Bolli, Guðrún looked at him and merely smiled (“leit til hans ok brosti við” [168]). Halldór berates Helgi for this act, but Helgi replies that he should not be sympathetic, since he believes that his own death lies under the end of the shawl (“undir þessu blæjuhorni búi minn hǫfuðbani” [168]). Guðrun is indeed pregnant; hence her silence and her smile, because she knows.

A particularly interesting example is Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, who feigns a speech handicap. Gilli the Russian tells Hǫskuldr, who has his eyes fixed on a particular slave woman, that “[k]ona þessi er ómála; hefi ek marga vega leitat máls við hana, ok hefi ek aldri fengit orð af henni; er þat at vísu mín ætlan, at þessi kona kunni eigi at mæla” (24; this woman is unable to speak; I have tried to speak with her in many ways, and I have never gotten a word out of her; it is indeed my opinion that this woman cannot speak). In this context, it is interesting that Hǫskuldr’s wife Jórunn later tells Hǫskuldr that she has no intention of speaking with Melkorka, since she is both deaf and dumb (“dauf ok mállaus” [26]); inadvertently, then, Jórunn is the one who becomes silent. About a year later, the slave woman gives birth to Óláfr, Hǫskuldr’s son. One morning, when Óláfr is two years old, Hǫskuldr hears voices and follows the sound until he sees Óláfr and his mother. He realizes that she was not at all dumb, since she had plenty to say to the boy (“hon var eigi mállaus, því at hon talaði þá mart við sveininn” [27]). She then reveals to Hǫskuldr her name and the fact that her father is an Irish king. By being silent, Melkorka withholds information, and her silence reflects her subservient defense and protest.

The silences on the part of women are self-elected silences. They use silence purposefully and effectively. The examples demonstrate that generally women knew well when, where, and why not to speak. There are only two examples of enforced silence. One is in *Heiðarvíga saga*, which relates that Styrr has seemingly agreed to let the berserk Leinir marry his daughter Ásdís, provided he and his berserk brother Halli clear a lava field in order to make a path through it and to make an enclosure. In the meantime, Styrr has a hot bath prepared for them as a reward for their

because she thinks that Kjartan is entitled to hurt her. Or is she silent because the insult is so great that it cannot be answered in words?”.

work a day before the wedding is to take place. This is a trap in order to have the berserks killed, and to prevent them from suspecting his plans, he tells Ásdís to put on fine clothing and forbids her to warn the berserk brothers of his plot (“en bannar henni at vara berserkina við, hvat hann hafi í ráði” [223]). It is told that as they were working, she walked from the house and circled them. At that point Leiknir called to her and asked her where she was going, but she didn’t answer (“Leiknir kallar til hennar ok spyrr, hvert hon vili. Hon svarar engu” [223]). The other is in *Grænlandinga saga* on the occasion of the death of Þorsteinn Eiríksson, though it is recognized that in this particular instance silence probably has more to do with Norse folk belief, according to which it was dangerous for men and women alike to communicate with dead people. It is related that Þorsteinn’s wife Guðríðr is sitting on a bench across from his corpse, when he sits up and asks three times where Guðríðr is. However, she remained silent (“hon þagði” [259]). Eventually, she asks the farmer Þorsteinn, with whom the couple is staying, whether or not to answer him. He told her not to answer (“Hann bað hana eigi svara” [259]). In contrast, Rannveig in *Gísli saga Súrssonar* is requested to speak and is then berated – by the composer of the saga – for the fact that words fail her, which he attributes to low intelligence. It is related that Vésteinn has returned from abroad. He rides during the night and arrives at Sæból, where Geirmundr and Rannveig are bringing in the cattle. Geirmundr tells Vésteinn to continue to Gísli’s farm. Rannveig believes that the man is Vésteinn, whereas Geirmundr maintains that he is one of Önundr’s horsemen. Þorgrímr sends Rannveig to Hóll to reconnoiter. Gísli invites her in, and she asks to speak with the girl Guðríðr. Gísli calls her, but nothing to any purpose comes of it. Rannveig then asks for Auðr, but again nothing to any purpose comes of it. It is told that Rannveig went home and was somewhat foolisher than before, if that were possible, and had no news to tell (“ok var þá nokkuru heimskari en áðr, ef á mátti goeða, en kunni engi tíðendi at segja” [42]).

Finally, there are two women, who don’t know when to keep quiet. It is significant that in both cases they are specifically told by another woman to be silent, and that when they don’t heed the advice, the results are disastrous. One is in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, which tells that after Grettir had swum from Drangey to the mainland, he fell asleep in the main hall of the farmhouse at Reykir. During his sleep, his clothes slipped off. The next morning a servant woman and the farmer’s daugh-

ter enter and see the naked man. The servant woman remarks that this is Grettir and comments on the small size of his penis. The farmer's daughter rebukes her saying "Hví berr þér svá mart á góma? Ok ertu eigi meðalfífla, ok vertu hljóð" (239; Why can't you hold your tongue? You are not an ordinary fool, and be quiet). The servant woman claims that she can't be quiet ("Eigi má ek hljóð vera um þetta" [239]), runs back over to take a peek at him, and, in addition, roars with laughter.<sup>7</sup> What she doesn't know is that Grettir hears what she says, so when once again she runs across the floor to look at him, he grabs her, speaks a verse, and rapes her. The other is in *Heiðarvíga saga*, though it should be noted that like the incident in *Grænleendinga saga* mentioned above, this example, too, probably has to do with Old Norse folk belief, and that in both cases communication with dead people was not advisable. *Heiðarvíga saga* relates that after Gestr has killed Styrr, his body is brought to Hrossholt. The farmer there has two teenage daughters, and during the night the elder daughter says to her younger sister that she wants to have a look at Styrr. The sister replies that she should "eigi mæla soddan heimsku, at vilja sjá hann nú dauðan, er mǫrgum stóð mikill ótti af í lífinu, ok biðr hana hætta þessu tali" (234; not speak such foolishness, wanting to see him now dead, who had struck terror into many people while he was alive and told her to stop this talk). At first, the older sister complies, but a little later she brings up the subject once more. Again, the younger sister tries to dissuade her, but the older one has her way, and they both enter the fire room. The older sister walks close to the corpse, at which time it seems to them that Styrr sits up and recites a verse. The elder sister reacts by screaming and runs right into the arms of Snorrir, who at that moment enters to find out what is going on. It is told that she was so crazed that it took four people to constrain her, that she cried and struggled all night, and that she died in the early morning.

Silence has for a long time been the ornament of the female sex. As early as the fourth century B.C., Aristotle claimed that "silence gives grace to a woman," adding that "it is not the case likewise with a man" (quoted from Glenn 2004: 5) The silence of women in the Sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders was probably not the kind of silence that Aristotle

<sup>7</sup> See Wolf (2000: 108), who argues that the farmer's daughter "associates the servant woman's laughter with ignorance and vulgarity; her laughter is the fatuous laughter of the fool".



had in mind, when he wrote his *Politics*. As demonstrated in this article, women's silence is not a sign of passivity or mutedness. Their use of silence is generally strategic, and typically their silences take on an expressive power (Glenn 2004: xii). Österberg (1991: 26) lists what to her seems the six most common types of silence in the Sagas of Icelanders: 1) the silence of uncertainty, 2) expectant silence, 3) threatening silence, 4) cautious silence, 5) brooding silence, 6) injured silence. These categories seem too broad for the purposes of this article, though it could be argued that, for example, some of Guðrún's silences are cautious or brooding or injured, and that the silence of, for example, Unnr is expectant or brooding.

The article shows that women used and relied on non-verbal expression in their interactions with men in order to achieve their goals – likely in order to compensate for their inability to speak in public (Dendridos and Pedro 1997: 219). It seems that women generally chose to be silent when it affected themselves but not, as mentioned in the beginning of the essay, when they were defending their own, in which case they were often quite verbal and eloquent. More importantly, the article shows that silence delivers meaning and can be as powerful as speech, and that in the case of women in the Sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders, silence deploys power rather than defers to power.

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## Sammendrag

Det vides, at kvinder på Island i middelalderen havde minimal mulighed for at deltage i politiske og retsmæssige anliggender. Det vides også, at kvinder ofte havde muligheder for at udøve indflydelse ved hjælp af ord. Denne artikel henleder opmærksomhed på, at kvinder derfor brugte tavshed som et hjælpemiddel for at få en form for indflydelse. En gennemgang af de islandske sagaer og totter viser, at kvinders tavshed er strategisk og ikke nødvendigvis et tegn på, at kvinder var ydmyge og underdanige. Artiklen viser, at kvinder generelt valgte tavshed, når der var

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noget, som angik dem selv — i modsætning til, når der var noget, som angik deres familie, hvor i sådanne tilfælde de brugte ord.

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