

Antonia Murath*

Invisible Kingship

Liminality and the Maiden King in *Nítíða Saga*

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Abstract: Like all maiden kings, *Nítíða* initially rejects her suitors only to accept marriage eventually. Rather than accepting the saga's 'happy ending' as its heroine's choice, this article argues that her kingship is cast as liminal in Victor Turner's sense. Her character reflects liminal traits: visual, temporal and sexual ambiguity, mediated through the motif of invisibility, body-thing relations and notions of space. *Nítíða*'s kingship is structured as a transition to the role of a queen, which she does not take on voluntarily, but because she lacks choice in the face of her increasingly fragile power. Her suitor Livorius ultimately succeeds neither by trickery, military power, nor a courtly approach, but by employing structures *Nítíða* is excluded from due to her sex. Spared physical violence, she nonetheless suffers structural violence coercing her into a norm-appropriate role and erasing her kingship.

Keywords: literature and literary studies, bridal-quest romance, *Riddarasögur*, *Lygisögur*, gender, meykongur, thing theory, new materialism

A Proto-Feminist Tale?

Nítíða saga, a late fourteenth-century *riddarasaga*, tells the story of a single heiress who becomes the sole ruler of her patrimony after her father's death and then struggles to maintain her power in the face of increasingly aggressive bridal suits.¹ She is rendered not a queen or empress, but what Icelandic sagas refer

¹ Composed in the 14th century under the influence of European romance, but lacking a direct source (McDonald 2012: 303), over 90 versions of the story survive to the present day, the manuscripts dating from the 15th to the 20th centuries, making *Nítíða saga* one of the most popular Icelandic romances (McDonald Werronen 2016, 30, 19–25). McDonald Werronen has made the saga accessible to non-specialist readers in her 2010 edition and translation based on Agnete Loth's diplomatic edition of the 16th century fragments AM 529 4to and AM 537 4to. She provides a

***Corresponding author: Antonia Murath**, Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany, e-mail: amurath@zedat.fu-berlin.de

to as maiden kings (*meykóngr*). Maiden kings, depicted at once as desirable and unattainable, cruel while subject to extreme violence, independent but eventually submissive to a successful suitor, have garnered critical attention focusing on questions of misogamy and misogyny, intersections of power and violence, female fantasies of independence or male anxieties about vulnerability, gender performativity, and specifically medieval models of sex and gender.² Somewhat exceptionally, *Nítíða saga* takes on its female protagonist's perspective and refrains from the typical narrative of brutally disciplining the maiden king (Jakobsson 2009, 175–6). It has thus been assessed as a deliberate response to more violent bridal-quest and maiden king tales (McDonald Werronen 2016, 169), and even as “proto-feminist” (Friðriksdóttir 2013, 104). This article argues that her apparent agency and power is designed as transitional and is thus best understood in terms of liminality, which lends her character elasticity and flexibility while ultimately reinforcing a patriarchal order.

As one of the lesser known sagas, *Nítíða saga* shall be summarised briefly:

After the death of her father Ríkon, the beautiful and intelligent Nítíða rules France as a maiden king. She travels to Apulia, where she meets her foster-mother Egidía and takes her foster-brother Hléskjöldur on a quest beyond the North Pole to find the island of Visio, which contains supernatural stones, apples, and herbs. Nítíða takes the objects and escapes the island's guardian, the magician Vergilius, by waving one of the stones over her head, thus disappearing in front of his eyes.

Nítíða's suitors are introduced: Ingi from Constantinople; the brothers Logi, Vélogi, and Heiðarlogi from Serkland, and Livorius from India. Ingi abducts Nítíða after she rejects him. She escapes unscathed by virtue of her stones. Disguising a bondwoman in her likeness, she pre-empt's his second abduction, prompting him to invade. She further ingeniously defeats Heiðarlogi and Vélogi, when they approach her with an invincible army. Her success brings her to Livorius' attention, who abducts her. Again, she escapes aided by her stones, taking Livorius' sister Sýjalín with her.

Logi and his father Soldán approach with an army to avenge his brothers, so Nítíða sends Hléskjöldur in defence. Livorius also approaches, defeats Soldán and takes Hléskjöldur hostage, but releases him after nursing him to health. Following his aunt's advice, he then enters Nítíða's court in disguise, entertaining her and Sýjalín with music and stories. She

slightly amended reprint in her 2016 monograph (221–48), which is also the most extensive study on the saga, its provenance, intertextual relations, notions of space, and its characters to date. All citations refer to this reprint. Page numbers are provided in brackets in the text. Emphasis is added by the author.

² See Clover 1986 on the intersections of the maiden king and warrior women; in the context of other *riðdarasögur* Glauser 1983; on female agency Jochens 1986 and 1996; as participating in the bridal-quest tradition Kalinke 1990; on notions of monstrosity and otherness Lambertus 2013; specifically on Nítíða's agency: Friðriksdóttir 2013, Jakobsson 2009, McDonald Werronen 2016.

invites him to her bower, where she exposes him, but accepts his subsequent marriage proposal. Ingi, now in France, is then defeated by Livorius. Livorius arranges for Ingi to marry his sister Sýjalín in exchange for Ingi's sister Listalín for Hléskjöldur. A triple wedding is celebrated, leaving the couples to rule Constantinople, Apulia, and France, respectively. Nítíða and Livorius have children, among them their son Ríkon, who rules France after their death.

Juxtaposing multiple unsuccessful bridal suits with an ingenious and misogynous female ruler, the *Nítíða saga* is a maiden king romance, an Icelandic sub-genre of the European bridal-quest tradition where, according to Marianne Kalinke, the *meykóngur* faces “a conscious choice between a career as an unmarried regent and marriage” (1990, 83). Yet, she also points out that the maiden king is typically reluctant to enter marriage, which would be an “encroachment on her social position, power, and wealth” (1990, 108). Consequently, her ‘conscious choice’ is in fact informed by external pressure: trickery, sexual abuse and other forms of violence exerted by the successful suitor, often the true protagonist of the tale. *Nítíða saga* refrains from such graphic violence. Recent scholarship is thus quick to agree that Nítíða does indeed marry out of her own choice “when the circumstances are right” (McDonald Werronen 2016, 145).³

However, while Nítíða does not experience physical or sexual harm, her betrothal to Livorius betrays her earlier stance on marriage delivered to Ingi: “*Nenni ég og ekki að fella mig fyrir neinum kóngi nú ríkjandi [I am not inclined to give myself over to any king ruling]*” (224; 238).⁴ This statement conveys a general sense. It is not directed at Ingi personally, but the institution of marriage itself. Phrased as a conviction to not let herself “fall” for a king, it shows a concern for falling from status and power. This is exactly what she will eventually experience with Livorius. One of the final phrases, “*Livorius og meykóngur stýrðu Frakklandi*” (234) hints at co-rulership, but nonetheless places Livorius first. He is referred to by name and hence as an individual, while Nítíða is represented only as the stock character of a maiden king. The saga subsequently mentions the birth of heirs, highlighting the reproductive function of queenship to which Nítíða is now limited. It marginalises her kingship even further by closing with “the famous Nítíða” and “King Livorius” (234), thus commemorating him as a king and ruler while erasing her former status as a maiden king behind declaring her as generally famous. Nítíða's lucid pre-

³ Like McDonald Werronen, Friðriksdóttir argues for choice, stating Nítíða's marriage to be “of her free will because she decides that he [Livorius] is truly worthy” after he “chooses the courtly approach” (2013, 215).

⁴ Ármann Jakobsson also draws attention to this line, making a general point about the generic maiden king's reluctance to marry (2009, 176).

diction of what a future as a spouse might hold for her comes true. Why, then, does she let herself fall from power after all?

For the most part, the saga is structured around Nítíða's invisibility as a ruler, and such invisibility may be specific to the maiden king figure. The term *meykóngr* conjoins two oppositionally gendered identities, creating a place beyond normative social structures. Heiresses become maiden kings when they are no longer a king's daughter and not yet a king's wife. This invites a reading through structural anthropology, particularly Victor Turner's notions of liminality. Observing rituals accompanying the transition from one social state to the other – rites of passage – Turner posits a tripartite structure of detachment, marginalisation, and (re)aggregation of the ritual subject into a new, stable social state after the passage is consummated (1979, 235). He refers to the subject's marginalisation as "*limen*, signifying 'threshold' in Latin" (1991, 94–95), thus defining it as being in-between two clear-cut social identities. Liminality, then, is a fluid state marked by the individual's passing "through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (1979, 235) and thus accounts for an existence beyond normative expectations. Beyond the social system, such an existence however also remains without consequence – norms are not challenged, but in fact reinforced as the subject is eventually reintegrated as a representative of the social matrix. Liminality is reflected in certain traits, most notably ambiguity and invisibility. These traits inform Nítíða's character.

Considered in terms of liminality, Nítíða's identity as a maiden king is fluid and transitional rather than fixed. On a broad level, the saga is concerned with the institution of kingship, generating a temporal loop of male kingship in the past, present, and future: Livorius is currently king, while Nítíða's son Ríkon, the future emperor, suggests continuity to the eponymous previous emperor Ríkon, introduced in the saga's first sentence as Nítíða's late father. In the larger genealogical scheme – which is, in later manuscripts, expanded with Ríkon's son and grandson (McDonald 2012, 309) – Nítíða provides a link between past and future male kingship. Her own brief period of regency is thus cast as a mere interregnum in a generally all-male line. This structure indicates and reinforces male kingship as the social norm and by implication highlights the exceptionality of the maiden king, whose rulership can only be transitional. Female kingship as transitional in a genealogical sense holds implications for Nítíða's character on a personal level best understood in terms of structural anthropology: she indeed experiences separation, a liminal phase with all its attributes, and finally reaggregation. Reading the maiden king through liminal theory will provide a nuanced understanding of the politics of gender and power in the saga, as mediated through body-thing relationships, notions of space, the motif of invisibility, the expression of desire, and marriage politics. It may also prove a useful approach to other maiden king

figures and, more generally, female characters presented as at once powerful and marginalised in medieval European literatures.

The Hero(ine)'s Quest: Entry into Liminal Space

Nítíða's separation from social order and her movement into liminal space is indicated by her journey to Apulia, preceding her Visio-quest. This journey removes her from France geographically as much as socially, as she defies expectations held toward aristocratic female characters. Despite a tradition of 'strong' female characters, Old Norse literature frames female agency as indirect.⁵ Travelling on her own account, Nítíða however displays direct and independent agency. Moving confidently in the public space of Egidía's hall and demanding Hléskjöldur to accompany her on her quest to Visio, she behaves like a king with his retainers. The quest-pattern itself is gendered, as it is usually applied to male heros. Nítíða's journey removes her from her ties as the emperor of France's daughter and thus mirrors "the detachment of the individual [...] from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or both" (Turner 1979, 94). It can hence be read as the transition into liminality, which will inform her character until her reintegration into social structure as a queen.

In the Apulia-episode, Nítíða takes on the liminal traits of sexual ambiguity and pollution.⁶ Carol Clover argues that in Old Norse literature, power can override sex when women bridge genealogical gaps, rendering them functional sons (1986, 39–40). Ruling after her father's death in lieu of eligible male heirs, Nítíða may initially appear as a functional son. Clover's argument centres around the performance of masculinity by "warrior women" such as Hervör from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, who goes by a male pseudonym, bears arms and takes on male dress (1986, 37–39). Nítíða however keeps feminine identity markers while her behaviour at the Apulian court emulates models of agency encoded as masculine, as argued above. She thus resists a binary notion of gender altogether. As such, she is "out of place" and adheres to Mary Douglas's definition of pollution (1966, 36). Existing outside of or in-between social norms, pollution has a disruptive potential (1966, 95, 36–46). This is realised by Nítíða who doubles spheres of female rulership. While her foster-mother is introduced as a queen in her own right, Hléskjöl-

5 On female agency in a socio-historical perspective see Jochens 1986, 41; Jochens further outlines the literary types of the goader/ inciter, prophetic, avenger, and warrior woman, only the latter endowed with direct agency compared to male counterparts (1996, 87–194).

6 On these traits, see Turner 1979, 236.

dur's presence suggests she rules only as a placeholder until he will take over. Drafting him from the throne to assist her personal quest to Visio, Nítíða creates a second genealogy vacant of male heirs with a single female ruler left in place, the instability of her own state thus spilling over into kingdoms associated with her.

Transitional in nature, liminal subjects are “neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere” (Turner 1979, 236). This notion applies not only to Nítíða, but also appropriately describes the island of Visio. Nítíða's quest for Visio's supernatural stones creates a more overt connection between her character and liminality. In Visio, various imaginary spaces overlap. Geraldine Barnes suggests it is reminiscent of Earthly Paradise (2006, 104–5), located in the far East in medieval historiography. Its miracle-stones contribute to this notion, as precious, powerful stones participate more generally in the discourse of the mirabilia of the East. Not only are stones believed to be washed out of Paradise's rivers, but they are frequently linked to the wondrous places and so-called monstrous races located on the fringes of the world in medieval cosmography.⁷ Visio is furthermore associated with more precarious spaces of medieval historiography. McDonald Werronen notes a link to Virgilian pastorals and thus the *locus amoenus*, established by the name of its guardian figure Vergilius (2016, 118–21). Yet, “*vitur og fjölkunnigur*” (222), he is also cast as a sorcerer (McDonald Werronen 2016, 153), thus introducing otherworldly elements to Visio. These are reinforced by generic fairy motifs such as the apple-bearing oaks – recalling perhaps Avalon, also known as “Island of Apples” (Wade 2011, 11) – the unmanned boat, and the magical objects of the stones themselves. Reflecting learned and legendary traditions,⁸ Vergilius as a necromancer introduces demonic properties to Visio and thus taints it as an idyllic space. Visio, then, is drawn as a simulacrum of topical spaces existing in the medieval imagination while unclassifiable as any one of them, being none and all of them at once. Remote, it appears wild but simultaneously resembles the cultivated space of the garden or *locus amoenus*; it is reminiscent of an Arthurian otherworld and, guarded by a necromancer, it links to death, while its topography also insinuates the far East and earthly Paradise.

Neither one, nor the other, Visio's ambiguity has spatial and temporal dimensions. Barnes concludes it to be a “mix of directional contradictions” due to its confusion of the far North – it is located beyond the North Pole – and the far East

⁷ On Paradise, see Cohen 2015, 52; on the link with monstrous races, see examples from Isidorus of Seville's Encyclopaedia, such as emeralds being gained from griffins by the cyclops-peoples of the Arimaspi in everlasting strife (2008, Book XVI, vii, 1–2 (p. 585)).

⁸ From 1200, Virgil appears as a necromancer, first in learned discourse, such as the writings of Gervaise of Tilbury, John of Alta Silva, or Conrad of Querfurt, then in legend (Ricklin 2015, 249).

(Barnes 2006, 36). Such impossible coordinates only reinforce its sense of elusiveness. If all known parts of the ecumene are envisioned to be encompassed by the ocean, like a garden by a wall (Hanauska/Schmid 2018, 412), sailing beyond this oceanic belt might lead anywhere. The beyond in *Nítíða saga* could be constructed in a similar way to the beyond in St. Brandan's voyage, in which he sails West to reach East, Earthly Paradise. The confusion of cardinal directions only emphasises this sense of a beyond that is also beyond human grasp. Indeed, *Nítíða* does not steer her ship, but it is brought to Visio by a favourable wind; and the narrator's inability to provide more details about the journey further suggests Visio eludes human comprehension. Medieval cartography encompasses space as well as time, intertwining salvation history and eschatology with geographical space and ethnography. The margins typically embody the beginning and end of time, for example by showing the garden of Eden before the Fall or the eschatological peoples of Gog and Magog, locked in by Alexander the Great awaiting Last Judgment to wreak havoc (Gow 1998, 68). Situated beyond such marginal spaces, Visio is also situated outside time, an impression reinforced by its landscape. Its remoteness is, according to McDonald Werronen, intensified "as it is not merely an island, but an island within an island" (2016, 121). This principle is in fact exponentiated by a *mise en abyme*: on the second island, there is a stone vessel containing water, which in turn contains the seeing stones, an image amounting to another miniature lake containing miniature islands, the stones. If the stones provide a global panorama (Barnes 2006, 105), the whole world then is contained in Visio which in turn is contained in the world. Visio is thus removed from a spatial historiography spanning from creation to the end of days, and instead unfolds infinite space and time.

Beyond all classification, Visio is the epitome of a liminal space. *Nítíða* is described as similarly beyond grasp, thus creating a likeness that might account for her affinity for Visio and its stones. Mirroring Visio's otherworldliness, she is twice described akin to a fairy mistress of European romance.⁹ Defying expectations of female behaviour, lone female travellers – such as *Nítíða* on her way to Apulia – are frequently othered and often revealed to be fairies or demons in European romance (Wade 2011, 36–8; 118–22). More importantly, however, *Nítíða* is described as exceeding typical courtly beauty while possessing great skill. Exceptional beauty and ingenuity are topical features of fairies in continental romance (Eming 1999, 79–80). Both aspects are reflected in *Nítíða*'s superhuman allure and power. She is "*vitur og væn*"; and besides having a beautiful, luminous body, she

⁹ As foreign romance heavily influenced late Icelandic romance (Friðriksdóttir 2013, 103), it is likely that certain generic traditions are transposed to *Nítíða*'s character.

can lull birds to sleep with her voice and construct fortresses with her intellect (221). Recalling the mirabilia of the East as much as Visio's miracle-stones, her magnificent golden headdress is another token of her ingenuity. It has four pillars, each welded to a life-like golden hawk-figurine spreading its wings to protect the wearer's face from sunlight (221). Implicitly, the wings also obstruct a plain view of her face. Metalwork endowed with a life-like appearance moreover mirrors or perhaps extends the features of Nítíða's body, which thus crosses the boundaries of the animate and inanimate realm. The description of her body employs organic, floral imagery such as the lily and the rose and mineral comparisons: hair like gold, skin like ivory, eyes like carbuncle (221). The precious matter fashioning both headdress and body has dazzling and light-reflecting properties. Body and headdress, then, might attract attention while obscuring vision of Nítíða's features due to their blinding effects and protective wings. Like Visio, Nítíða is at once seen and unseen, known and un-knowable, and altogether ambiguous and resistant to further specification.

McDonald Werronen notes that comparing women to precious stones first appeared in hagiography in Old Norse literature (2016, 74–5). In Christian discourse, saints and minerals have been linked since early medieval Christianity (Buettner 2011, 43–4). A descriptor of Nítíða's body, the carbuncle, for example, is also a prominent biblical, exegetical, and Edenic item, as is gold.¹⁰ Both minerals and saints are incorruptible: unlike the flesh, they last eternally. While not a saint, Nítíða is cast in an imagery shared with this tradition, which somewhat transfers mineral properties to human flesh, resulting in a luminous body beyond temporal limits. Again, this creates a link to Visio – slipping between notions of a Byzantine empress, a fairy, the saints and thus Edenic or heavenly associations, visual allure and recalcitrance, in a sense she also appears a-temporal due to the incorruptible stones and minerals that seem to have become part of her body. Given such likeness, Nítíða's straightforward access to the elusive island as well as her desire for the stones appear plausible. Their appropriation by Nítíða establishes a lasting link between the heroine and the liminal space of Visio. If the stones, as argued above, contain Visio, Nítíða in a sense carries Visio in her pocket. The stones then reaffirm, exponentiate and extend properties already latently manifest in the heroine's body.

¹⁰ The carbuncle was thought to be carried out of Paradise by the river Phison. In exegetical tradition, it is one of the stones used for building the city of God; it is further associated with the Virgin Mary, and with ritual cleansing, see Meier-Staubach 1977, 104–7; 123; 250.

The Liminal King

Transitioning between being a king's daughter and a king's wife in the overall narrative structure, Nítíða's liminal traits are, as argued, latently manifest in her body. Her quest to Visio as a form of spatial as well as social detachment marks her free fall into social non-structure. Visio's name recalls sight and knowledge, but it is imagined on a constant slippage between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown. This kind of liminal invisibility is transferred to Nítíða once she takes possession of the stones. Her scintillating body, already caught between visual allure and withdrawal from sight, is now endowed with the abilities to visually permeate even the most remote corners of the world, and – by becoming invisible – to obstruct visual access to itself. Her embodiment of Visio's traits is emphasised when she leaves: realising he has been robbed, Vergilius sets out after her. Waving one of the stones over her ship, she evades his sight. This transformation from mutual visual access to her recalcitrance to his gaze is made particularly prominent by having both sentences before and after the event start with *sjá* (to see): “*Sjá nú hvorir aðra. (...) Sá jarl þau aldri síðan [Now they each see the other. (...) The earl never saw them again].*” (222). Upon her return, Nítíða's character is structured along this sliding scale of vision, visibility and invisibility.

Once she returns to France, her position as the heiress to the empire's throne attracts suitors, all of whom she rejects, disinclined to give up any of her power by becoming a second to the king. Nítíða responds to the unsolicited suits by attempting to evade being seen as a bride. She – temporarily – succeeds by virtue of her stones, which provide her with vision of her suitors' moves and which allow her to become invisible as a means to forestall or evade them. As a result, Nítíða resurfaces as a trickster figure operating on the slippage of sight and the unseen, a trait she brings back from Visio along with the stones. Seeing the invincible Serkish army approach through her lithic panorama, she refuses visual access to her body, sending Hléskjöldur out instead. Thus, via her stones, she sees while remaining unseen. She repeats this strategy when she anticipates Ingi's second abduction and evades his gaze by installing a disguised bondswoman in her place. Abducted by Ingi and Livorius respectively, she proves to be beyond grasp as much as Visio itself, resisting access to and knowledge of her body. Using her stones, she slips from Ingi and Livorius's hands and eyes, refusing both their gaze and touch as means of appropriation.

Liminal invisibility, however, works two ways and is ultimately disempowering. Nítíða's success as a king depends on the visibility of her body as a body politic. Her figurative and physical invisibility, while prolonging her kingship by enabling her to escape her suitors, simultaneously demonstrate its frailty. Sitting

on her throne, she presides as a king over a hall – a public space signifying political power – where she welcomes visitors, thus materially asserting her capacity as a ruler. Yet, her attempt to establish political relationships as equals with Ingi and Livorius is foiled by their refusal to acknowledge her as anything other than a potential bride. Ingi intrudes into her bower after his rejection in the hall. McDonald Werronen interprets his impingement on her intimate space “as a sort of rape” (2016, 110). Reducing her to her sexual availability, he challenges her claim to kingship. Invisible under his cloak, Ingi takes her through her hall to his ship unseen, thus rendering her body as a body politic invisible, allowing it to resurface only as that of his bride once his abduction is completed. Nítíða’s escape and her ruse averting his second abduction come at the price of her renewed invisibility as a ruler in her own hall, where she installs the bondwoman in her likeness and herself vanishes from sight. The efficacy of the hall as the centre of political power depends on its ruler’s presence, a requirement Nítíða’s elusive body is increasingly unable to meet.

An invisible king is no king at all – this notion is reinforced in terms of immobility in Nítíða’s interactions with her suitors. In stark contrast to the Visioquest, she now has a limited arsenal of actions, which are reactive rather than self-directed. This is mirrored in her spatial confinement between hall and bower. The impression of her being trapped, thus paralyzed by the actions of others, is inscribed in her body at Livorius’ entry:

Kóngur gengur nú heim til hallarinnar en **drottning** stendur upp í móti honum og setur hann í háseti hjá sér með góðum orðum og kærlegu viðbragði. Liforinus tekur nú sinni hægri hendi með gullinu upp á háls **drottningu**; var þá föst höndin með gullinu. **Kóngur** grípur sinni vinstri hendi undir hennar knésbætur, springandi með **frúna** fram yfir borðið. **Meykóngur** kallar á sína menn sér til hjálpar. Hléskjöldur og allur Frakklands lýður býst til upphlaups, en hann og allir **meykóngsins** menn voru fastir í sínum sætum. Liforinus gengur nú til sinna manna án allri dvöl, og allur hans lýður dragandi upp sín segl flýtandi sinni ferð.

[**The king** now goes home to the hall and **the queen** stands up to meet him and seats him in the high-seat beside her, with good words and a loving countenance. Livorius now takes his right hand with the gold [ring] up onto **the queen’s** neck; the hand was then stuck by the gold. **The king** grips under the backs of her knees with his left hand, springing off over the table with **the lady**. **The maiden-king** calls to her men for help. Hléskjöldur and all the French courtiers prepare themselves for a riot, but he and the **maiden-king’s** men were stuck fast in their seats. Livorius now goes to his men without any delay, and all his army are now hoisting his sails, now speeding his voyage.] (228–29/ 242–43)

Mirroring Ingi, Livorius refuses to acknowledge Nítíða’s attempts to establish a relationship as equals by welcoming him in her hall as an honoured guest. Unlike

Ingi, he does not even engage in formalities such as conversation, but immediately shows his disrespect for Nítíða's claim to equality by silently and swiftly abducting her. In this encounter, Nítíða is initially called a *dróttning* (queen/princess), which draws attention to the vacant throne in the hall and pairs her with Livorius, introduced as *kóngur* (king), implying his capability to occupy the throne. When he jumps off the table with her, she is accordingly termed a *frú*, a low-German loanword that is a marker of class (high-born) and sex (female) rather than of power. Only in response to this utter humiliation, when she is stuck to Livorius's body in a golden-goose-motif and entirely at his mercy, calling out in vain for help, is she called a *meykóngur*. In this context, *meykóngur* seems ironic – utterly vulnerable, immobile, and defenceless, there is no trace of power left in her, the bawdy image of the scene indicating possibly the ridiculousness of a notion of a maiden king in the first place. Conjuring up the image of the entire court paralyzed under her rulership, the saga visualises the lack of a powerful and active ruler, and a realm as vulnerable as its invisible king.

In this light, Nítíða's relationship to Livorius's sister Sýjalín can be re-contextualised as an attempt to escape her liminal status by filling both genealogical positions of king and queen, symbolized by the throne and the high seat in her hall. She takes Sýjalín back with her when escaping her impeding marriage to Livorius. Up to this point, Nítíða conforms to the asexuality or sexlessness of liminal subjects, as reflected by her maiden-status. Maidens, occupying a 'middle ground' between the genders, appear "less threatening than the category of 'woman' when propelled into gender-inappropriate domains, apparently because the maiden is [...] represented as devoid of [...] the mark of sex" Sautman and Sheingorn 2001, 9–10. The maiden king Nítíða behaves like a full-fledged king in all aspects but one: she appears to have no sexual desire of her own, a trait highlighted by her refusal to marry. Yet, her relationship to Sýjalín, while it has also been regarded as intimate friendship, arguably has sexual overtones.¹¹ In this relationship, Nítíða fulfils the function of the male suitor in the bridal-quest-narrative, thus inverting not only the motif of bridal abduction, but also of the male gaze. Vanishing from both Ingi's and Livorius's eyes (*ur augysýn*; 225, 229), Nítíða refuses to be appropriated visually as an object of desire. Simultaneously, the abducted becomes the abductor after she herself employs an eroticised gaze on Sýjalín:

Og það var einn dag að **drottning** var gengin fram undir einn lund plantaðan er stóð undir skemmunni. Þá var **meykóngur allkát**; hún hafði þá í hendi þann náttúrustein er hún hafði úr eyggi Visio.

¹¹ Read as friendship by Friðriksdóttir 2013, 126; and as a sexual relationship by McDonald Wer-ronen 2016, 172–79 and Schäfke 2013, 221.

[It happened one day that the **princess** (Sýjalín) had gone down to a planted grove that stood below the chamber. The **maiden king** was **very happy then**: she had then in her hand the supernatural stone that she had from the island of Visio.] (229/ 243)

McDonald Werronen's translation suggests a colon between *allkát* and *hún hafði*, which would link Nítíða's happiness to the possession of Visio's stones. However, the position of the two adverbs *þá* – which have a temporal as much as a causal sense – do not necessitate this link. The first *þá* in fact also makes it possible to link her happiness to the sight of Sýjalín in the grove. The grove recalls the *locus amoenus* as a place of erotic desire, where Sýjalín is exposed to Nítíða's gaze from the upper position in the chamber, unable to gaze back. She thus becomes an object of desire to be beheld. Further, the juxtaposition of the *meykóngur* Nítíða and the *dróttning* Sýjalín suggests a royal couple of king and queen. Abducting Sýjalín from her home, Nítíða is now cast in the role of the suitor employing cunning and trickery, thus reflecting both Ingi and Livorius's devices as well as wider bridal-quest tradition.¹²

Their relationship in France resembles matrimony, with Sýjalín sat in the high seat next to Nítíða, both drinking from the same cup and not parting in sleep. This passage is the basis for Werner Schäfke's reading of the relationship as sexual. He interprets the shared cup as a camouflaged description of cunnilingus (2013, 221). McDonald Werronen cautions against a too straightforward reading of the relationship as necessarily homo-erotic, stressing instead the conspicuousness of the saga's emphasis on homosocial bonds between women, including its latent hints at lesbianism (2016, 172–9). The maiden king's experience of desire, however, is perhaps more remarkable than the question of actual sexual activity itself, veiled or not. This desire is expressed more evidently in her gendered gaze than in the cup-reference. Moreover, in beholding Sýjalín, abducting her as a bachelor king would and placing her in the high seat next to her, Nítíða emphatically refuses being seen as a bride herself. Instead, she retains the position of king signified by the throne and closes the genealogical gap indicated by the vacant high seat beside her with Sýjalín as a bride.

Leaving the 'middle-ground' of the maiden, Nítíða might appear more threatening and indeed, abducting Sýjalín is the last trick she plays before she is re-aggregated into a patriarchal social structure. In the bridal-quest pattern, Sýjalín's abduction would trigger a violent response by her relatives to retrieve her. If defeated, the last obstacle to a lasting union would be removed. Exploiting the

¹² Claudia Bornholdt suggests that cunning on the side of the suitor has been a prominent feature in Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and German bridal-quest tradition throughout the centuries (2005, 209).

bridal-quest pattern, the narrative thus briefly provides the possibility of Nítíða and Sýjalín cementing their union into a legitimate marriage. In the audience, this might create as much suspense as the erotic tension underlying their relationship. As Livorius inexplicably happens upon Soldán's army halfway to France, it is implicit that he has indeed set out after his sister. This turn of events is also a turn of perspective, for now the narrative follows Livorius' rather than Nítíða's point of view. The chance encounter with Soldán presents him with an opportunity to gain Nítíða's hand in marriage as he meets Hléskjöldur on the battlefield. This allows the saga to oppose the model of the maiden king as a trickster with the model of aggressive masculinity as represented by Livorius, who will ultimately prevail.

Restoration

Livorius and Soldán's encounter in battle is the focal point of Nítíða's eventual acceptance of heteronormative matrimony and thus her reaggregation into a binarily gendered social structure. Her entry into a union with Livorius has so far been regarded as entirely voluntarily, resulting in a view of the saga as fairly progressive. However, while Nítíða does not suffer physical violence coercing her into marriage, there are structural obstacles that force her to relinquish her power and masculine-encoded agency and take on the function of a queen. These are tied to her sex, as becomes especially visible in comparison to Livorius, who is described so similarly to her that he could count as a male version of Nítíða herself.¹³ This invited a comparison which reveals all Nítíða lacks in Livorius.

Livorius, unlike Nítíða, acts on his sexual desire, has the privilege to bear arms and participates in the politics of the gift, all of which feed into an aggressive model of masculinity which ultimately allows for his success while Nítíða's kingship is erased. Following his aunt's advice, Livorius chooses to appear in the narrative tradition of a courtly suitor, skilled in storytelling and music. The saga however also emphasises his strength and physical capability as explicitly masculine traits: he is skilled at "*allar íþróttir er karlmann mátti prýða*" [*all physical activities that a man should pursue*] (223, 237). Raiding every summer, he presents as the most belligerent of all suitors, as well as the most promiscuous and sexually predatory (223). Alike in all aspects but these, Nítíða's lack of sexual and physical prowess become apparent, her relationship with Sýjalín being ultimately as

¹³ As McDonald Werronen points out, they even share the descriptor "*ljós og rjóð í andlit*" (2016, 138).

transient as her kingship. Excluded from bearing arms, she is furthermore unable to mediate her power through a warrior's body and thus unable to forge or force alliances on the battlefield, where prowess and power meet in *Nítíða saga*. Her strategy of sending Hléskjöldur in her place works in all instances but the last, when he is overwhelmed by Soldán. Rushing to his aid, Livorius defeats Soldán, and personally tends to Hléskjöldur's wounds. Instead of taking him hostage to pressure Nítíða into an agreement, he lets Hléskjöldur go after lavishing him with gifts lest he return in shame. Gifts come with the attachment of reciprocity, and, awaiting response until the debt is settled, they create lasting bonds of friendship or enmity. Livorius thus obliges Hléskjöldur, whose services to Nítíða meanwhile are not yet rewarded, creating a conflict of loyalty. In contrast, Nítíða only unilaterally receives gifts from Egidía, while her bond with Sýjalín relies on shared intimacy. Unable to instigate new bonds through presence on the battlefield, she cannot, like Livorius, bestow other men with goods, their freedom, or their life, in order to create lasting obligations.

Under these circumstances, Nítíða's response to Livorius's proposal appears less like an expression of agency and more like a recognition of her hopeless situation. Exposing Livorius in the intimate space of her bower, he is entirely at her hands and yet she agrees to marry him. Without Hléskjöldur, she will no longer be able to defeat incoming armies. Indeed, Hléskjöldur solves his conflict of loyalty between kinship and friendship by calling in the debts Nítíða has accumulated from his service – he will take no other reward than her accepting Livorius's proposal, thus settling two debts at a time. While it is true that Nítíða does not suffer violent and sexual abuse by her groom-to-be, as does for example Séréna, the protagonist of *Clári saga* to which *Nítíða saga* is considered a response (Friðriksdóttir 2013, 117), neither does she have much of a choice. Her agency is diminished even further when Ingi approaches in a last desperate attempt to take her by force: Livorius challenges him to single combat, calling Nítíða as a prize. Any notion of independent agency is thus eliminated when she is included in the cycle of gifting politics as a potential gift, not a partner.

If the “normal bridal quest [narrative] is [...] a negotiation between men, part of the age-old business of ‘exchange of women’” (Harris 2014, 428), *Nítíða saga*, despite its focalization of the maiden king, finally falls back into this ‘age-old-business’, in which women can participate only as gifts and not as equal partners.¹⁴ The integration of former enemies into kin via marriage politics is left to Livorius. Nítíða and her courtiers agree to Ingi's request for Sýjalín, but it is Livorius who arranges for his sister to tend to Ingi's wounds and thus initiates an inti-

¹⁴ See also the seminal article on the exchange of women from a feminist point of view by Rubin 2012, 44–47.

mate relationship. He further has the last word on the betrothal – while Nítíða, in keeping with her inefficacy as a partner in the politics of the gift – simply agrees, Livorius negotiates conditions. Hléskjöldur is to receive Ingi's sister Listalín. This exchange of women among men differs from the exchange of a man among women carried out previously: Hléskjöldur is given to Nítíða by Egidía in his capacity as a warrior. Already kin, he does not provide sexual access to a new kin group and, as his threat to leave her lest she agree to Livorius' proposal demonstrates, he is free to leave. Nítíða, Sýjalín, and Listalín have no such freedom. As peace pledges, they are exchanged to provide sexual access to their genealogies, thus linking the men involved in kinship. Reduced to her sex early in the saga when the neighbouring kings refuse to see her as anything but a bride, Nítíða is consequently excluded from partaking in the politics of exchange as an equal in the final scenes. Her character is ultimately informed by essentialism towards sex, reinforcing the notion that her kingship is to remain invisible, without consequence, and to be absorbed in a heteronormative model of marriage assigning men the role of king and women that of queen.

Livorius success thus highlights Nítíða's shortcomings. He is active regarding movement and military aggression where she is reactive and restricted to hall and bower. By implication, his power is hereditary and thus stable, while hers is acquired and thus inferior, relying largely on the power appropriated through Visio's stones. Establishing a link between Nítíða and the liminal space of Visio, the stones and their power are ambiguous. They endow Nítíða with the traits of the liminal figure of the trickster rather than providing her with a sustainable means to establish herself as a king. Ultimately, they function as a plot device escalating the narrative pattern of the bridal suit, as every use of them in her defence triggers a more violent onslaught. On the level of the story, they contribute to the selection of the right suitor, who eventually outsmarts her without using any magic at all. Ambiguously gendered as a maiden king, Nítíða cannot be granted desire, while Livorius' desire is rewarded erotically and, by his marriage to a rich heiress, in terms of wealth and upward social mobility. Finally, he participates in the politics of gift exchange as a partner, while she is reduced to a token of exchange. Despite the lack of physical violence exerted on the maiden king, *Nítíða saga* then by no means concedes her a conscious choice on marriage.

Generally concerned with the proper transmission of kingship, the saga as a whole is informed by liminality. Framed by past and future male kingship embodied by a line of Ríkons, Nítíða is fashioned as a link in a genealogical chain whose rulership is but transitional. Unlike Clover's functional sons, her character does not perform masculinity, but is too ambiguous to be pinned down on one of only two genders. Of explicitly feminine beauty, she performs masculine-encoded actions in the gendered reversal of narrative patterns such as the bridal suit or the

quest. Her ambiguity can be understood in terms of liminality as observed by Victor Turner for transitions accompanied by rites of passage. This may account for her elasticity as well as the transience of her kingship. Nítíða embodies liminal traits – being “neither here nor there” (Turner 1979, 236) on multiple levels: her body is wedged between the human, the mineral and the ethereal, and is by means of the stones linked to a space which further embodies ambiguous qualities. Her ambiguity is part and parcel of her transition to the state of a queen she eventually fulfils. The grotesque abduction scene highlights the unsustainability of a maiden king as opposed to queenship. Her rulership, like her polluting effects, and her relationship with Sýjalín, remain contained within the liminal phase, to be eventually overridden by Livorius’ kingship. Like the stones, her powers vanish from the narrative once she is married. Ultimately, male homosocial bonding prevails: Hléskjöldur returns to Apulia with a bride bestowed to him by Livorius, who also presents his sister Sýjalín to his former rival Ingi. Nítíða is commemorated as ‘the Famous’ and the saga ends with a note on genealogy. Acknowledging her kingship as liminal is central to gaining a nuanced understanding of the inherent contradictions of her character and the intersections of gender and power in *Nítíða saga* and, perhaps, the maiden king figure more generally.

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