

# Old French *lais* and Icelandic *sagnakvæði*

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*Strengleikar* is a collection of romantic tales that were translated from one or more collections of French narrative tales, the so-called *lais* (singular *lai*), at the behest of Hákon the Old, who ruled over Norway from 1217 to 1263. The *Strengleikar* consist of twenty one *lais* and a prologue, and are now preserved in the Norwegian manuscript de la Gardie 4–7 at the University of Uppsala library alongside four leaves of the same manuscript, which are today found at the Arnamagnaeian Institute in Copenhagen under the signum AM 666 b 4to. The manuscript is considered to be from about 1270 and as such is one of the oldest and most important compendiums of Old Norse translations of courtly literature.<sup>1</sup>

The *lais* – as with other courtly literature – were compiled for the entertainment of the King and his court. They were composed in poetic form, and were on average 3–400 stanzas in length. They were sung or read with instrumental accompaniment, most likely stringed instruments, as the name *Strengleikar* would indicate. Their performance was therefore a combination of two art forms, the spoken and the musical, each supporting the other. It can thus be assumed that reading the tales does not have the same effect on listeners today as it did in the courts of the Middle Ages. Despite this, the content of the *lais*, which bears witness to the world of the audience who experienced them, is none the less entertaining.

The *lais* tell tales of knights and ladies, the tests of their love and their fate. As in other forms of chivalric literature the male heroes are of noble birth; they are courteous, handsome and young, and they have the freedom

1 The manuscript was edited diplomatically in *Strengleikar. An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais* (1979). The *Strengleikar* are also preserved in younger copies, and one of the tales, *Gvímars saga* (*Guiamars ljóð*), is preserved in an Icelandic manuscript from 1737 (cf. Kalinke 1979 and *Strengleikar* 2006: 25–27).

of travel and independence of the armed hero. The women live at the opposite end of this world, kept within walled halls and castles. Should they be unmarried they are virtually imprisoned by their fathers, and those women who do marry are likely to live in a tyrannic and loveless relationship. The tales usually follow one specific hero, which is why most of them are associated with their main hero and bear titles such as *Eskju ljóð* (*Fresne*), *Bisklarets ljóð* (*Lai de Bisclavret*), etc.

In many ways the *lais* contain a taste of the fairytale's narrative mood. Here it is worthwhile to mention the well known threefold aspect of the fairytale, specifically in the stories of *Janval* (*Le Lai de Lanval*) and *Grelenet* (*Graelent*), where three maidens come to the court three times, where the arrivals escalate, with each maiden more beautiful than the last. In the tale of *Jónet* (*Yonect*), which is especially rich in fairytale motifs, a maiden swoons three times and then finds three knights sleeping in three beds on three floors, the third of these knights being her fiancé. The tales' content thus bears an important flavor of the fairytale, where nothing is impossible and the two worlds – the natural and supernatural – blend together: An unmanned ship sets sail when the tale's hero steps aboard; men change form, being men at times and animals at others, such as the heroes of *Bisklarets ljóð* (*Lai de Bisclavret*) and *Jónet* (*Yonect*) who transform into a wolf and a hawk, and in *Desiré strengleikr* (*Desiré*) it seems likely that the hero's son has taken the form of a hart. This leads one to believe that the content of these tales has travelled orally, doubtless for a rather long time, before the written *lais*.

It is commonly believed that the subject matter of at least some of the *lais* comes from Breton storytelling tradition, and this influence is widely apparent, for instance in those tales where men either travel to or are led by mysterious forces to a supernatural world, or the world of the noble fairies. The division between this world and the world of men is often unclear, which can be seen from the fact that the hidden worlds of the tales are set in the close neighborhood of the places where men live, and from the ease with which inhabitants of both worlds can fall in love with each other.

## *Sagnakvæði*

The French *lais* were composed in poetic metre, but their lyrical form had no parallel in the literary traditions that existed in the north. The traditional Northern forms, *dróttkvæði* and *eddukvæði* (Eddaic poems), simply did not suit these long narrative poems. Because of this the *lais* were translated into prose. *Strengleikar* and most other Old Norse translations from the 13<sup>th</sup> century thus distinguish themselves from other European translations, for example English and German, where French poems were translated into verse (Cook & Tveitane 1979: xxxi). The Eddaic poems are epic poems and tell stories, much as the *lais* do. However, their poetic metres *fornyrðislag*, *málaháttur*, *ljóðaháttur* and *kviðuháttur*, have shorter lines and their form diverge significantly from that of the *lais*, which are characterized by eight syllable end-rhyming lines. The presentation of these two poetic genres was also dissimilar, in that the Eddaic poetry travelled orally whereas the *lais* were originally composed as written literature, even if they were based on oral tales, as already noted.

Eddaic poetry was, as is well known, written down in the *Codex Regius* (Gks 2365 4to) in c. 1270,<sup>2</sup> some time after people had presumably stopped composing new poems. However, the *fornyrðislag*, one of the two primary forms of Eddaic poetry, did not disappear. On the contrary, the poets continued to use it for a long time, and the historic course of the metre seems to be uninterrupted in the later centuries (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2010: 300–308). One might perhaps call this later poetry “Eddaic imitations” but it would probably be more precise to call it the evolution or offspring of the Eddaic poetic style. Some of these poems will be discussed here, the so called *sagnakvæði* or *sögukvæði* ‘poetic or metrical tales’, which can range in length from 36 to 97 stanzas, according

2 It is generally believed that *Codex Regius* does not preserve the original text of the Eddaic poems, which were probably written down somewhat earlier, or in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Gustaf Lindblad considers *Codex Regius* to be copied from an exemplar that would not have been written later than 1240 and not earlier than in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He believes that many were involved in collecting the poems, as the orthography varies from one poem to another (Lindblad 1954: 274–276).

to the copies published by Ólafur Davíðsson in *Íslenzkar þulur og þjóðkvæði* in the year 1898.

As with the *lais*, the material of the *sagnakvæði* is descended from oral traditions and many of them resemble later folk- and fairytales, while others bear an obvious similarity to the saga-writing of the Middle Ages, specifically the *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (the legendary sagas of the north).<sup>3</sup> However, the poems have neither examples nor contemporaries among other cultures and have thus been considered to be entirely Icelandic.<sup>4</sup> Böðvar Guðmundsson, who wrote about *sagnakvæði* in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* II, claimed that they were “oft falleg og tilfinningarík og efnismeðferðin stingur mjög í stúf við rímur”<sup>5</sup> (1993: 484–485). With these words Böðvar Guðmundsson understandably compares the *sagnakvæði* with the Icelandic *rímur*, which were the most common form of Icelandic epic poetry for many centuries, or from the 14<sup>th</sup> all the way to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to the *rímur* the *sagnakvæði* are the minority in epic poetry, yet it is certain that they existed alongside the *rímur* for a long time.

Usually, the following poems are counted as *sagnakvæði*: *Bryngerðarljóð*, *Gullkársljóð*, *Hyndluljóð* (the new), *Kringilnefjukvæði*, *Köt-ludraumur*, *Snjáskvæði* (*Snækonungskvæði*, *Snjásljóð*), *Vambarljóð* and

- 3 Stanzas 71 and 72 of *Hyndluljóð* resemble a story from *Ragnars saga loðbrók* about Kráka, and stanza 34 of *Bryngerðarljóð* recalls *Völsunga saga*, which tells of Grimhildur’s memory-erasing drink. *Hyndluljóð*, which tells of Ásmundur, King of the Geats (among others), is reminiscent of the legendary sagas in many other ways and the material of *Bryngerðarljóð* is in many ways more like the medieval literature than the fairy tales of later times. Finally, *Snjáskvæði* stanza 50 is reminiscent of stanzas 6 through 8 of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* (*Eddadigte* III: 10).
- 4 Also composed in the tradition of *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* and heroic-mythical material were poems in *fornyrðislag*, which stand out, at least as far as content is concerned, from the *sagnakvæði*. Materials of this type include *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, which Haukur Þorgeirsson has recently dated to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (2010: 315); the text was edited by Annette Lassen (2011). Other poems are for example *Valagaldur Kráku* (Lbs. 1689 4<sup>o</sup>) and *Gunnarsslagur*, which is considered to have been composed by Gunnar Pálsson (1714–1791). *Valagaldur Kráku* has only been published electronically, see <<http://www.hi.is/~haukurth/utgafa/valagaldur.php>>.
- 5 “often beautiful and very emotional and the treatment of the material is inconsistent with that of the Icelandic *rímur*”.

*Þóruhljóð*.<sup>6</sup> All these *sagnakvæði* are printed in Ólafur Davíðsson (1898).<sup>7</sup> Scholars do not completely agree on the age of these poems, as it has not been greatly researched; most of the poems are preserved in manuscripts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onward. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Þorkelsson, who wrote an overview of the *sagnakvæði* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered the poems to be from the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 202–210) and Vésteinn Ólason, who touched briefly on one of the above poems, *Kötludraumur*, considered it to have been composed no later than the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1982: 132). But what kind of indications are there regarding the age to the *sagnakvæði*?

It is certain that Jón Guðmundsson *lærði* (1574–1658) was familiar with *Gullkársljóð*, *Srjáskvæði* and others of that type, considering them to be composed by the *gömlu skáldunum* ‘old poets’ (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 202), and *Kötludraumur*, which he called *Lioð eitt gamallt* ‘An old poem’. He claimed the poem was so well known throughout the country that it seemed unnecessary to write it down (Gísli Sigurðsson 1995: 205; Einar G. Pétursson 1998: 100, 383–384). He considered the poem’s characters,

- 6 One might perhaps count *Huldufólks gömlu mál*, which Jón *lærði* mentions and writes out one stanza in *ljóðaháttur*, as a *sagnakvæði*; otherwise the poem has been lost (Einar G. Pétursson 1998: 361–362, 384). Other poetic fragments indicate that even more *sagnakvæði* might have been in transit, as is the case with *Mársljóð*, which corresponds to *Sagan af Finnu forvitru* and may possibly be counted as a *sagnakvæði*, as well as one stanza that corresponds to *Mærþallarsaga* (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 209–210). Here it is also possible to mention *Ljúflingsljóð* or *-dilla* as being a supernatural being’s lullaby to his half human son (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 254–258). The poem is composed in *fornyrðislag*, as are the *sagnakvæði*, many of which also relate stories of relationships between fairies and humans; due to this the poetic metre of these poems has sometimes been called *ljúflingslag*, to distinguish it from the old Eddaic metre. Two further poems, *Grettisfærsla* and *Völsaþáttur* (*Völsafersla*), have also been categorized as *sagnakvæði*, but have been believed to be much older and no younger than the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 201–202). These poems are very different from other *sagnakvæði*. Ólafur Halldórsson has shown that *Grettisfærsla* should not be categorized as *sagnakvæði* (1990: 25), and it appears that the same can be said regarding *Völsaþáttur*.
- 7 Individual *sagnakvæði* or fractions of those poems which Ólafur Davíðsson printed in 1898 have either been re-released or reprinted from other manuscripts in other collections, for example *Kötludraumur*, which was reprinted from various manuscripts in the collections of Jón Árnason (1954–1959: VI, 19–28) and Sigfús Sigfússon (*Íslenskar þjóðsögur*: 504–528).

Katla, Már and their son Ari to be historical figures who lived at Reykjahólar, and others that have studied the poem agree; according to sources, Már Atlason, Þórkatla and Ari Másson were alive in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and according to these sources the poem is based upon ancient historical materials (Einar G. Pétursson 1998: 383, cf. Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 205 and Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 16).

*Kötludraumur* has been the most popular of the *sagnakvæði*, if one considers the large number of preserved copies; roughly 80 manuscripts are registered (Gísli Sigurðsson 1995: 189–192). The oldest of the poem's manuscripts is from 1665 and others from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. One of these, AM 154 8vo, was copied by Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) from vellum pages that were bound together with the manuscript AM 622 4to, which was written before 1549. These pages were most likely somewhat younger than the manuscript itself (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 204; Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 15–16). Árni Magnússon knew of other *sagnakvæði*, *Snjáskvæði* at the least, which he had written down after hearing it from a *óskýrri kerlingu* 'vague old woman' who had learned it from her mother, and *Hyndluljóð*, which he is known to have had at hand (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 207; Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 38, 76). Otherwise the oldest manuscripts of *Snjáskvæði*, *Kringilnefjukvæði* and *Þóruhljóð* date from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, much as the manuscript of *Kötludraumur*; *Hyndluljóð* is preserved in a manuscript from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the oldest manuscript of *Bryngerðarljóð* is from c. 1700. Fractions of two stanzas from *Gullkársljóð* were written down in 1644, but the poem in its entirety was preserved in a manuscript from 1660; it is likely that this had been in Jón Gissurarson's book of poetry at Staðarbakki, who was alive around the year 1600. Further, two older versions of *Vambarljóð* must have been considerably older than the youngest version (*Vambarljóð* III) that is preserved in a manuscript from roughly 1700 (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 38, 44, 64, 76, 84, 91 and 94). Finally, it is worth mentioning that *Snjáskvæði* was translated into Latin around 1700 (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 38). From this brief overview it is obvious that the majority of the manuscripts containing *sagnakvæði* cannot be traced back earlier than the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Some of the scribes who recorded the poems during this time considered them to be old and degenerated, cf. *Eitt fornkvæði gamalt* 'An ancient old Icelandic poem', *vond útgáfa* 'a poor version', *marrangt og þar*

*til illa útlagt* ‘completely wrong and poorly translated’ (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 38, 29) and *uppdiktaður, aflagaður, órytt kvæði* (*Kötludraumur*) ‘a made up, distorted, and useless poem (*Kötludraumur*)’ (Jón Þorkelsson 1888: 206–7). The second and third stanzas of *Vambarljóð* III bear the mark of the material’s great age, and are as follows (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 56):

Í úngdæmi  
eg sá mínu  
margt til fróðleiks  
á fornum bókum [...]

Fann eg í einni  
fornri syrpu  
eitt æfintýr  
allmjög gamalt;

But why have so many of the *sagnakvæði* been so badly preserved and degenerated, as they prove to be? It would be convenient to assume that the poems had been distorted in their oral form – Jón Helgason contended that the *sagnakvæði* had in fact travelled orally before they were recorded in a book – and that the tradition of these poems had likely been formed before the Reformation (Jón Helgason 1953: 167). It is certain that the great variation among manuscripts of these poems supports this position, in addition to the fact that common folktale motifs set their own mark on the poems. An example of this is the well known motif of a relationship between a woman and a supernatural being, regarding which Gísli Sigurðsson considers it impossible to speak of the age of the story content itself (1995: 209). Concerning the speculation of age one might perhaps refer to the old poetic metre *fornyrðislag*. Examination of one poem, *Kötludraumur*, has led to the conclusion that the poem was perhaps *gamalt og ort fyrir hljóðdvalabreytingu og á tíma s-stuðlunar* ‘old and composed before quantity-shift and at the time of the s-alliteration’ (Sigriður Þorvaldsdóttir 2004: 14) and recent studies on other poems, *Gullkársljóð* and *Þóruljóð*, proved the same, that the poems could probably be composed as early as the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> For comparison one might also consider the *sagnadansar* (Icelandic folk ballads), which have,

like the *sagnakvæði*, been passed down orally and are preserved in copies from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, but are never the less considered to be from the Middle Ages and have long been called *fornkvæði*.

Whatever the actual age of the *sagnakvæði* or their historical material, it is clear that the poems had been in considerable circulation in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is evident not only from the preservation of materials in the manuscripts but also from *rímur* that were composed from the poems, as well as oral tales of the same materials. Steinunn Finnsdóttir from Höfn in Borgarfjörður (c. 1641–1710) composed four *rímur* from *Snjáskvæði*, that is *Snækóngs rímur*, and still more *rímur* from *Hyndluljóð* (Steinunn Finnsdóttir 1950), and Guðrún Jónsdóttir from Stapadalur composed *Snjárímur* (Páll Eggert Ólason 1918–1937: II, 701, III, 577b). It has also been considered that Sigmundur Helgason of Köldukinn in Húnavatnssýsla had composed *rímur* from *Vambarljóð* around 1700 (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 38, 64 and 76). Oral tales, which were all recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and printed in the collection of Jón Árnason, preserve the content of *Kötludraumur* (Jón Árnason 1954–1959: I, 59–64, cf. Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 29 and Gíslur Sigurðsson 1995: 189–190) and *Vambarljóð* (*Sagan af Signýju vömb, Hildur góða stjúpa og veltandi vömb, Gorvömb og Sagan af Birni Bragðastakk*: Jón Árnason 1954–1959: I, 360–363, 392–396, and IV, 495–497, 590–594), and it has been pointed out that *Snjáskvæði* is not unlike the tales of *Snotra, Una álfkona* and *Úlfhildur álfkona* (Jón Árnason 1954–1959: I, 101–105, 109–111) and that there is a similarity with *Kringilnefjukvæði* and *Sagan af Fertram og Ísól björtu* (Jón Árnason 1954–1959: II, 308–312).

## *Sagnakvæði* and *Strengleikar*

At first glance the comparison of Norwegian translations of *lais* from the 13<sup>th</sup> century – not to mention the original French *lais* from the 12<sup>th</sup>

8 See Haukur Þorgeirsson (2010: 315–321; 2011: 220). Haukur believes that the author of *Gullkársljóð* knew and made use of *Völundarkviða*. He has also shown that there are verbal similarities between *Gullkársljóð* and other medieval poems, such as *Gripisspá, Hervararkviða* and *Örvar-Odds kviða*.

century – with Icelandic poetic tales from the previous centuries might be considered a bit of a stretch, since it has not actually been proven that the *Strengleikar* collection had come to Iceland in its complete form, even if it has been considered likely (cf. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 2004, and *Strengleikar* 2006: 28–32). The first thing that draws attention to the similarities between these two forms of the poetic tale is the fact that six of the eight *sagnakvæði* have similar titles to some of the *Strengleikar*, combining the name of a character and the word *ljóð* ‘poem’: *Bryngerðarljóð*, *Gullkársljóð*, *Hyndluljóð*, *Snjásljóð*, *Vambarljóð* and *Þóru ljóð* (compared to the *Strengleikar*: *Ekvítans ljóð*, *Eskju ljóð*, *Gvíamars ljóð*, *Laustiks ljóð*, *Leikara ljóð* and *Tveggja elskanda ljóð*). Whether or not this is mere chance will not be discussed here, as from this point on we will attempt to cast a light on whether or not there is a relationship between the *Strengleikar* and the Icelandic *sagnakvæði*. This brings us to a review of the materials.

Although the *lais* were originally composed for the courts of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and translated for a similar audience in the 13<sup>th</sup>, they revolve around the same issues that people of all social stations have wrestled with for ages. They concern love and hate, marriage, infidelity, infertility, tyranny and violence. These are the small and personal problems which are seldom considered important to ways of the world and yet, when it comes right down to it are an integral part of how the world works. It may well be presumed that these tales of relationships between the sexes have long appealed to people – and still do.

Several motifs are common to both the *Strengleikar* and the Icelandic *sagnakvæði*. *Snjáskvæði* tells of a king of unknown descent who rules over a town [...] *hjá/breiðu vatni/með glæstan múr/og glóir á turna* (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 31). One evening the king travels out into a lake, at the bottom of which he finds a green and forested land. The people there greet the king, who turns out to be a fairy queen. This is reminiscent of the *Lai Tídoel*, where a supernatural being, and later his son, ride their horses into the water, and *Grelents saga*, in which the hero makes an attempt to follow a supernatural woman to her home in the water. The motif of a supernatural being who loves a mortal woman is international and recorded as F301 according to the international motif-indexes,<sup>9</sup> and

the idea of a land of fairies either in or on the other side of the water (F212) has many instances in Icelandic folktales and early Irish literature (Cross 1952: 244).

A good example of an Icelandic *sagnakvæði* that resembles the *Strengleikar* is *Kötludraumur*. Some of the motifs in this folktale are quite similar to elements found in for example *Tídorel*, *Grelents strengleikr*, *Dún* and *Míluns strengleikr*. A short summary of the poem is as follows: The protagonist Katla is led (var. taken by a boat) over a stream to the world of fairies, and eventually to a beautiful dwelling. There she is taken to a chamber, where a bath and a beautiful bed *kerlaug búin og rekkja vel tjölduð*, await her. She is offered wine, and when she has rested, she is given a cloak sewn with gold, and other fine clothing. Then she is given a mantle made of the finest cloth, gold-embroidered and lined with gray skin *og grátt skinn undir, búin brenndu gulli*, as well as head ornaments and other jewellery. The room is magnificently furnished with tables bearing silver bowls and gold drinking horns, and a rich bed belonging to a fairy named Kári, who loves Katla. Katla stays with Kári for a time, but when she wants to return to the human world, Kári says that she will have a son and that she must turn over to him some of his gifts, among other things a ring. At the end he promises her much wealth (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 4–29). Several of these motifs should be recognized by readers of the *Strengleikar*.

### *Gullkársljóð*

Another *sagnakvæði*, *Gullkársljóð*, has striking similarities to one of the *Strengleikar*, the story of Yonec (*Jónet*) by Marie de France. A summary

- 9 According to Ingrid Boberg's *Motif-index of Early Icelandic literature* the motif F301 appears only in one Icelandic source in the Middle Ages, and this variant is entirely unlike that which is discussed here. The motif of the love between a supernatural woman and a mortal man (F302) appears in one source as well (1966: 105). Icelandic oral tales from later centuries are printed in Jón Árnason's collection I and III, under the category *Huldufólk leitir lags við mennskar manneskjur* 'Supernatural beings seek companionship with mortal beings' (see also volume VI, *Álfarit Ólafs í Purkey*). Both motifs are more common in medieval Irish literature (Cross 1913: 29–39 and 1952: 255–256).

of *Gullkársljóð* is as follows: A king's daughter named Æsa (var. Ása) stands out among all the royal children, save for the fact that she does not know how to knit, sew or any such task. Her mother places great stock in her learning this trade and locks her away, so that she may concentrate on her needlework. As she has been prevented from meeting another soul, she sits alone in her chamber with a troubled mind. From her window she sees a richly dressed man. This man turns out to be Gullkár, a fairy who loves her, and they begin to spend time together. Gullkár teaches Æsa handiwork<sup>10</sup> and becomes her lover. Æsa, the wise (or *horsk*) daughter of the king (*hilmir*), changes her moods, becoming noticeably cheerful and glad; they are together for six days. On the seventh day Gullkár becomes worried and sees the end of their relationship approaching, suspicious that a deceitful woman will betray them. He asks Æsa to be wary of this woman. The woman comes to Æsa in her room, where she places a piece of wood in Æsa's clothing against her will, so that when she embraces her lover, the stick becomes a knife that cuts him close to the heart. Gullkár runs away and Æsa, scantily clad, follows the bloody trail all the way to an unfamiliar, prosperous village. Eventually, Æsa finds Gullkár in one of the buildings there, lying wounded in his bed. A woman in the settlement is crying, and says that if Gullkár dies, then all his people will die with him, unless Æsa comes to the land of the fairies (Ólafur Davíðsson 1898: 76–84; cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003: 87–88).

The following is a comparison of the contents of *Gullkársljóð* and the *lai* about Jónet, which is – markedly – both longer and richer in text, and with more precise descriptions and a bit more complicated plot. The tale tells of a young woman who is imprisoned in a tower by her old, jealous husband. A young supernatural man, who seems to take the form of a hawk at will starts visiting her regularly, flying in through the tower window. They become lovers, but with the help of his sister the cuckolded husband delivers her lover a fatal wound. The supernatural man flees wounded from the woman's tower, leaving behind a trail of blood that she follows. She

10 To this point the plot bears a strong likeness to the folktale type ATU 500 (*The Name of the Supernatural Helper*; Uther 2004: I, 285–286).

finally comes to a town and in a dwelling there she finds her lover fatally wounded. The tale is one of the most enjoyable of the *Strengleikar* collection and is rich in suspense, mystery and romance. The Old Norse translation of the *lai* (cf. *Strengleikar* 2006) will now be compared to *Gullkársljóð*<sup>11</sup> and examples of where the two tales overlap will be shown.

The maiden is introduced (stanzas 2 and 3):

hun var fegre  
enn flíod önnur [...]

Svo bar hun af ødrum  
ødlinga börnum  
sem blodraudt gull  
af blie og jarne [...]

Mær sú [...] var ríkra manna og ágætrar ættar, hyggín og hævesk og hin fríðasta. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 159)

2. The maiden is imprisoned (stanzas 5 and 6):

Hun var einsamann  
hírd í huse [...]

Var hun einsømul  
hírd í huse  
so eingenn það  
íta visse [...]

Hann [...] læsti hana jafnan í turni sínum [...]  
(*Strengleikar* 2006: 159)

11 References are made to the unpublished edition of Haukur Þorgeirsson, *Málkerfi og bragkerfi*, a forthcoming doctoral thesis from the University of Iceland. The edition is available from the author upon request.

3. The Maiden grows lonely (stanza 6):

[...] þar kom hvorke  
 madur ne mǫgur  
 ox audarbil  
 angur af sliku.

Þá vaknaði hin ríka frú og tók að gráta [...] Kærði hún mjög líf sitt og það er henni þótti að vera, andvarpaði mjög og grátandi ein saman mæltist viður: “Vesöl em eg, [...]” “ [...] hvað óttast hann er hér heldur mig í svo þröngri hertöku, að eg fæ ei frelsi til kirkju að ganga, né helgar tíðir heyra?” (*Strengleikar* 2006: 159)

4. The supernatural man appears at the window (stanza 7):

Þa sa hun gløgglega  
 fyrer glugga koma  
 svein þann er hafde  
 silke skirtu [...]

[...] þá sá hún inn berast að sér sem skuggi væri eins mikils fugls um einn lítinn glugg [...] flaug um glugginn einn hinn fríðasti gáshaukur [...] (*Strengleikar* 2006: 160)

5. The supernatural man offers his love to the maiden and seeks her love in return (stanzas 13, 14 and 18):

[...] mier skalltu unna  
 til alldur tila [...]

Eidar skulu fylgia  
 ockrum ordum [...]

[...] ma eg ei leingur af þier  
 laukreidur sia.

Ger mig unnasta þinn [...] Aldrei unna eg konu fyrr en þér [...] En nú má eg að vísu vera unnasti þinn. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 160)

6. The maiden finds happiness (stanzas 22, 23 and 27):

[...] þa var ynde mikid  
a jøfurs dotter

Þa hlo en hoska  
hilmirs dotter [...]

Svo villdeg alla  
æfe mina  
døglingur vita sem i  
dag hefur verid [...]

[...] unnasta hans eftir dvaldist með miklum fagnaði og mikilli gleði.  
[...] og var blíð og glöð alla þá viku. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 161)

7. The maiden's change of appearance draws attention (stanza 24):

[...] undrudust aller  
þeir er a sau  
og þotte ung hafa  
alls kins læte.

Þá fann herra hennar, smásmugall, og íhugaði hann þá að allir hagir hennar og hamnar hennar og meðferðir voru með öðrum hætti en verið höfðu [...] (*Strengleikar* 2006: 161)

8. The supernatural man predicts the betrayal of a certain woman and the end of the love affair. He begs the maiden to be on her guard against the betrayal (stanzas 33 and 46):

[...] þess muntu verða  
vis að stundu  
enn eg tel okkru  
ynda brugdid.

Koma mun um aptan  
til konungs hallar  
flarad kona í  
fötum godum  
sía skyllde flíod  
skíott við flagde  
su mun við fírða  
fagurmal vera.

En þú gæt vandlega að við verðim ei svikin. Þessi kerling mun svíkja okkur [...] (*Strengleikar* 2006: 161)

9. A sharp weapon is positioned in a way that it will kill the supernatural man (stanzas 56 and 57):

[...] þó gef eg þíer Æsa  
eina spítu [...]

Giøf þessa ei vill  
Æsa þíggia  
þó feste hun hana  
í fate hennar [...]

[...] lét hann skyndilega gera gadda af jární og stæla oddana alla og lét hvetja svo hvassa sem hinn hvassasta hárníf og lét setja fyrir glugginn þar sem hann vandist inn að fljúga. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 162)

10. The supernatural being walks into the trap (stanza 59):

Það var einn dag  
efst manadar  
er for døglingur  
dros að hitta  
varð að saxe  
snotar spita  
og nam under hende  
ødlings sonar.

[...] og kom fljúgandi í glugginn. En gaddarnir stóðu fyrir glugginum og laust einn í gegnum líkam hans, svo að blóðið gaus úr sárinu með mikilli rás. Sem hann kenndi sig særðan til ólífis [...] (*Strengleikar* 2006: 163)

11. The supernatural man abandons the maiden who, scantily clad, follows the blood trail he leaves (stanzas 60 and 63):

Geck ungur mögur  
ut ur skemmu  
enn að litlu  
Æsa sidar  
red að skunda  
a skog þadann  
varð fyrer brude  
blodmerkt gata.

[...] hef eg ei flíod síed  
fatsnaudara.

Þá fór hann brott með miklum harm [...] Hún var í engum klæðum nema serk einum og fylgdi hún þá blóðrásinni er var forvegur hennar [...] (*Strengleikar* 2006: 163)

12. The maiden comes to a brightly lit settlement (stanzas 61 and 62):

[...] uns at lida nam  
 lios af skogie  
 sa vif þadann  
 vænar bygder.

Vard fyrer henne  
 hus [...]

Því næst leit hún fyrir sér mjög mikla borg og var borgveggjuð öll umhverfis. Í þeirri borg voru hús og hallir og turnar svo skínandi sem silfurklæði væri. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 163)<sup>12</sup>

13. The maiden finds her fiancé lying wounded in his bed (stanza 69):

Þa leidde hun hana  
 ut til skemmu  
 þar er visse Sikling  
 siuakann liggja [...]

[...] og gekk hún fram í þriðja loft og fann hún þá rekkju unnasta síns. [...] Hann tók vel við henni er yfir hvetvetna unni henni og kærði dauða sinn. (*Strengleikar* 2006: 164)

14. The townspeople grieve over the wounded supernatural man, who is in fact their king. The people cry over his wound/death (stanzas 65 and 66):

[...] eg sie þig i qvell  
 einatt grata [...]

- 12 In the French text, *Yonec*, the town is not actually described as illuminated; it says instead that no building stood which was not made of silver. *Gullkársljóð*'s text is doubtful, and could possibly indicate that day had passed and the daylight disappeared.

[...] þvi ef fostre vor  
 fer af heime  
 þa skulum andast  
 øll med honum.

Ef þú verður hér funnin þá munu þeir pína þig og drepa þig með spjótum, því að allir vitu mínir menn að eg em dauður sakar þín. [...] þá heyrði hún [...] óp og hörmuleg læti þeirra er í kastalanum voru [...] Hinir, sem þeir heyrðu, tóku þegar að gráta og grátandi mæltu: ”Þessi var hinn vaskasti og hinn vildasti, hinn fríðasti [...] Hann var konungur yfir þessu ríki [...]” (*Strengleikar* 2006: 164 og 166).

## Possible connections

The comparison above of *Gullkársljóð* with *Jónet* does not show any significant verbal similarity, and the intention is not to indicate a written connection between the two tales; on the other hand the contents of the tales are strikingly similar. The next step would then be to see how widespread the tales’ contents are.

The beginning of the *Jónet lai* corresponds to the international folktale-type ATU 432: *The Prince as Bird*, which shows that its content is known world wide. The beginning presents the narrative of a girl who wishes for the presence of a man, who then comes to her – in the form of a bird – through the window. A jealous woman (or women) discovers the truth of the secret lover and places a blade or shard of glass around the window. The lover is wounded by the trap and leaves his lady, who searches for him.<sup>13</sup> *Gullkársljóð* differs from this type in that Gullkár is not said to take the form of a bird and the pointed weapon is therefore

13 See Uther (2004: 258–259), cf. furthermore Warnke (*Lais der Marie de France*: cxlviii–ix). A few Scandinavian variants were picked at random and read, and turned out to be quite dissimilar to *Gullkársljóð*. The same can be said of the tale *l’Oiseau Bleu* which may be found in the collection of Mme. d’Aulnoy, and has been mentioned in this connection, as it is obviously distantly related to *Yonec*. Karl Warnke (*Lais der Marie de France*), who published the *lais* of Marie de France and

not placed around the window, but rather in Æsa's garments. Tales of the type ATU 432 are otherwise not preserved in Iceland, although it is worth mentioning the interesting, if equally loose, connection between *Jónet* and *Gullkársljóð* and *Völsunga saga* from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This saga describes Brynhildur sitting in her tower-room and sewing the wonder deeds of Sigurður on a ribbon. Meanwhile, Sigurður is outside, and when one of his hawks flies towards the tower and sits down in its window Sigurður follows it, and seeing Brynhildur is firmly resolved to win her love. The next day he returns to her room and professes his love to Brynhildur, and the two swear each other to secrecy (*Völsunga saga* 1985: 55–57). The key-elements in this comparison are the sewing maiden, the tower, the hawk in the tower window, followed by a man who visits the maiden more than once, and declares his love to her, and finally, that they become lovers.<sup>14</sup>

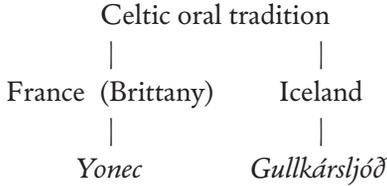
It is unlikely that *Völsunga saga* has anything to do with the connection between *Jónet* and *Gullkársljóð*, and more probable that it took its material from a common European tale tradition, since elements, other than ATU 432, can be found in a variety of sources.<sup>15</sup> But what kinship might there be between the two tales?

One might naturally think that the tales are derived from a common ancestor, meaning Celtic oral tales. Breton storytelling tradition has its

wrote comments on them, mentions that variants of these tales exist, in which the lover does not take the form of a bird, but that they are rather removed from *Yonec*. Finally, search for the motif D641.1 (*Lover as bird visits mistress*), showed no similarities of interest.

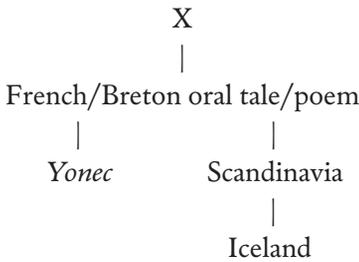
- 14 The tale of the young maiden in the tower further reflects the fairytale *Gardabrúða*, or Rapunzel, which falls under the tale-type ATU 310 (*The Maiden in the Tower*). An international motif in this story is R41.2 (*Captivity in tower*). The ATU 310 type is not preserved in Iceland as far as is known, and no variant of the motif R41.2 is recorded in Ingrid Boberg's motif-index (1966).
- 15 Scholars who have studied *Yonec* commonly believe that Marie de France echoes a wide number of texts and traditions (see for example Johnston 1905: 338), and among them *Vie de saint Alexis* (Murray 2006: 25–26). The above mentioned elements are nevertheless especially known from early Celtic literature, such as the Dinnsenchus poems. However, none of the early Celtic texts resembles *Gullkársljóð*, except in one case in the story *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, where a girl is locked inside a house where she must learn handiwork (Cross 1913: 38–45 and 50–52).

roots in the Celtic tradition, and type ATU 432 is actually preserved in Irish folktales.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the essence of *Yonec* comes from this origin, and a similar tale could have migrated orally to Iceland with the Celts, who either settled in Iceland – willingly or unwillingly – or lived as neighbours to Norsemen in the British Isles.



Here it should be kept in mind that ATU 432 covers only the beginning of *Yonec* and is different from *Gullkársljóð*, as mentioned earlier. In addition the type is known world wide, and in truth the argument supporting this theory is rather weak.

Another possibility for a common source for *Yonec* and *Gullkársljóð* is an oral tale or a poem with the core of the tale as mentioned earlier, that would have travelled throughout the French speaking areas in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps to Scandinavia and then to Iceland, where the tale content was still being transmitted throughout the Middle Ages and up until the Reformation.



16 See Súilleabháin & Christiansen (1963: 92), along with some further elements from early Celtic literature in Cross (1913: 29–39).

With this connection it might for example be noted that several scholars have shown a relationship between the subject matter of several Scandinavian ballads and French and Breton ones, or even *lais*, which they count as original (cf. for example Ek 1931: 32–35). The Danish ballad scholar and editor Svend Grundtvig was of the opinion that the origin of the European ballad was in Northwestern France, from where it spread orally to the neighbouring countries (1966–1976: IV, 873–874, see also Jonsson 1992: 68–73). Northern France is usually believed to be the birthplace of the main cultural currents in the Middle Ages. In this lies the premise that Scandinavian ballad tradition, just as the Scandinavian oral tradition in general, has received materials from French and Breton oral tradition, linguistic differences notwithstanding.

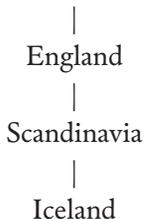
Others have considered it unlikely that the inhabitants of the Nordic lands understood the Breton language and if we wish to find traces in the verses of the Scandinavian ballads from the *lais*, it is much more likely that such influence had come with translations like the *Strengleikar* (Colbert 1989: 150).



It is possible that such tale materials had been transmitted by other routes, such as from France to England, and from there to Scandinavia, especially Norway, and so on to Iceland; at the least it is considered that French literature has more often than not had an influence on Nordic oral and literary tradition through this channel. Should this be the case, it is not unlikely to assume that the content of Scandinavian ballads, especially the so-called ballads of chivalry and ballads of the supernatural, had travelled this route as well (cf. Jonsson 1991: 151–152; 1992: 78). Examples of French *lais* that were translated into English are *Le Lai de*

*Lanval* (Janval) and *Fresne* (Eskja), which became *Sir Landevale* and *Lay le Freine* (14<sup>th</sup> century) in the English language (Goodwin 1990).<sup>17</sup>

French oral tradition and literature



The Swedish scholar Bengt R. Jonsson, who studied this route specifically, is of the conviction that the Scandinavian ballad genre has its roots in Norwegian translations. French courtly literature, such as indeed the *lais narratifs*, came via Anglo-Norman England to Norway in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, where it was translated. He believes that the ballad poets had listened to courtly literature, such as *chansons d'histoire*, *chansons de geste* and the *lais*, and then composed oral ballads on these models. By this he maintains that Norwegian translations changed from around 1300, as the translators now translated the courtly romances from verse into verse. From then on the tales followed the dancing, from where they spread out easily (Jonsson 1992: 78–79, 87).

Last but not least, there is good reason to assume the possibility that the *lai* about Jónet in the Old Norse translation of the *Strengleikar* is the predecessor of *Gullkársljóð*, and if so, one must assume oral transmission between the *lai* and the *sagnakvæði*. It is natural to assume the existence of this oral tradition in Iceland, because there is nothing to indicate

17 There is a material connection between *Jónet* and ballad no. 270 (*The Earl of Mar's Daughter*) in the collection of F. J. Child (*The English and Scottish popular Ballads*: V, 38–42). The material is once again “distantly related” to the Nordic ballad *Ridderen i fugleham* (A 44), especially to the B-type of the Danish variation, which tells of a man who appears to his fiancée as a bird (Grundtvig et al. 1966–1976: IV, 226–236); other variants are also to be found in Sweden and the Faroe Islands. This plot is different than that of *Jónet*, and even more different than *Gullkársljóð*. Information on various tales that tell of lovers in bird form are traced by Child (*The English and Scottish popular Ballads*: 39–40).

comparable variants elsewhere in the North. The fact that scholars have proven or indicated a direct or indirect connection between other *lais* of the *Strengleikar* and medieval Icelandic literature might support this hypothesis. I discussed this connection at a symposium on *riddarasögur* in Basel in the spring of 2004, where I came to the conclusion that there are various indications that people in Iceland read and knew the *Strengleikar* and used motifs or episodes from them in creating sagas and tales of their own (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2004).



The different ending of the two tales supports the idea that *Gullkársljóð* has travelled orally as it has the happy ending of the folktale; in *Yonec*, the maiden's fiancé dies, while he survives in *Gullkársljóð*.

It is perhaps not easy to decide between these possibilities – and there could be more – because it is likely that the oral poetry is carried forward in literature, just as literature is carried on in oral poetry. The Icelandic scholar Vésteinn Ólason has remarked that the connection between ballads and literature is often indirect. He states that:

Although the stories told in ballads of the supernatural and ballads of chivalry in Scandinavia seldom are based directly on written sources, they refer to the world of knights and ladies delineated in chivalric romances and the Breton *lais*, in German and English literary works derived from or closely related to this poetry, as well as in the Norse translations of such literature. Studies in the origin of the Scandinavian ballad usually end up finding the most likely models for the first Scandinavian ballads among French songs preserved as parts of courtly romances. (Vésteinn Ólason 1991: 135)

As mentioned earlier, the preservation of Icelandic ballads and *sagnakvæði* is similar, but of course it will not be maintained that theories on the origin and circulation of ballads are the same as those on the origin and circulation of the *sagnakvæði*, which are “specifically Icelandic” and as such have been researched to a lesser extent. But as Bengt R. Jonsson has pointed out, ballad research may sometimes illuminate literary history (1992: 90). When possible explanations of the kinship of *Jónet* and *Gullkársljóð* are evaluated, it must weigh heavily that there is being discussed here a rather unusual plot that seems not to be preserved in other examples, and thus there are no indications of an intermediary. Another point, which is also very important, is that the *sagnakvæði* as a whole bear similarities to the *Strengleikar*, and that in a way they take their materials from *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, meaning the literature of the Middle Ages. These two points indicate that the Old Norse translation of the *lai* had been sustained in Icelandic oral tradition and eventually found a new and fixed representation in *Gullkársljóð*.

The *Strengleikar* preserve various folktale motifs that are also known from medieval Icelandic literature and oral tales. Many of these motifs are present in other chivalric literature as well and as such cannot bear witness to the influence that the *Strengleikar* may have had on Icelandic story tradition. Other motifs are less common and deserve further attention, as in the case of *Gullkársljóð*, where the whole plot must be considered. A small step forward has been taken in this study on the similarity in characteristic features of *Strengleikar* and Icelandic *sagnakvæði*, but hopefully, the discussion concerning the possible circulation of *Strengleikar* in Iceland will go on.<sup>18</sup>

18 English translation by David Nickel.