

SIF RÍKHARDSDÓTTIR:

Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts.

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In this book, the first in a new series of Studies in Old Norse Literature edited by herself and Carolyn Larrington, Sif Ríkhardsdóttir analyses the portrayal of emotions in four major genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature: the translated and indigenous romances, the family sagas, and eddic poetry. Her aim is to view the sagas, traditionally noted for their lack of emotive expressivity, in the context of the importation to Scandinavia of courtly romance, in which such expressivity is prominent, and to show that eddic poetry and poetry quoted in the sagas give more scope than the prose of the sagas for the open expression of what Sif calls emotionality, a term used by her (p. 12) as a reminder that what are in question here are literary constructs rather than the emotions of real people. In chapter 1 she distinguishes somewhat obscurely (pp. 25-28) between ‘emotive scripts’ and ‘emotive literary identities’: both are genre-related, but neither, apparently, boils down exclusively to genre: reference is made later in the book to ‘the emotive script of courtly behaviour’ (p. 61) and ‘the emotive literary identity of the courtly romance’ (p. 175), which suggests that the latter comes closer to doing so than the former.

The distinction is, however, incidental to her analysis of individual texts. In chapter 1 she shows how the Old Norse translations of Chrétien’s *Yvain* and Thomas’s *Tristan* (*Ívens saga* and *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*) greatly reduce the emphases on demonstrative emotion in the former work and on troubled introspection in the latter. In chapter 2 she illustrates the preference in the prose of *Egils saga* for somatic reflexes (Haraldr hárfagri flushing with anger, Egill swelling with grief), narratorial understatement (Ásgerðr’s reaction to her first husband’s death), *double entendre* (Skalla-Grímr’s decline of Haraldr hárfagri’s offer to make him his vassal) and gestural display (Egill’s refusal at first to drink in the presence of King Athelstan), as opposed to direct expressions of emotion by the characters. In chapter 3 she shows how, in *Egils saga*, Egill’s poem *Sonatorrek*, on

the death of his sons, contrasts with the saga prose in serving as an outlet for internal emotion, and how the eddic elegy *Guðrúnarkviða* 1, in which Guðrún Gjúkadóttir mourns the death of her husband, Sigurðr Völsungr, differs from the more conventionally 'heroic' poems of the Poetic Edda (specifically the *Atli* lays, p. 102) in allowing for the outpouring of personal grief. In chapter 4 she argues that Hallgerðr's laugh and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's smile on hearing of the deaths of their husbands Glúmr and Bolli from those responsible, in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* respectively, serve either to mask emotion or to signal impending doom for the killers, and that the frequent grinning of Njáll's son Skarpheðinn is a hostile staging of male virility masking vulnerability. In chapter 5, finally, she shows how *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, an indigenous maiden-king romance (about a female ruler who refuses all suitors but is eventually overcome by the hero) adopts stylistic features and motifs from other works and genres, including alliteration as a marker of important moments in the prose account (found in the translated romances, not least *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*), the motifs of a lion rescued by the hero and of love induced by magic (found in *Ívens saga* and *Tristrams saga* respectively), and the motifs of somatic reflex and emotive masking, found in *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Njáls saga*.

The impressive bibliography is given admirable descriptive treatment in the footnotes, some of which take up more than half a page. The reader is directed to different studies of, for example, the question of whether *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd* is a parody of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (p. 55, note 76), and the age and authorship of *Egils saga* (p. 59, note 8). I should like to have seen rather more clarity of definition than the first chapter provides, as hinted above, and would offer the correction that in *Laxdæla saga* Bolli Þorleiksson is Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's third husband, not her second, as indicated on p. 127, cf. also p. 125. This book nevertheless more than fulfils its modest aim of offering 'a glimpse at the flickering phantoms of the imagined emotional selves of the medieval past' (p. 24), and marks a fitting beginning to a promising new series.