Between Tradition and Transgression

Torfhildur Þ. Hólm and the Emergence of the Female Author in Iceland

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Like many good folktales, our story begins in a graveyard. It is August 25, 2023, and we are in Hólavallagarður, a nineteenth-century cemetery, located in the Reykjavík city centre. The weather is good. Geophysicist Ármann Höskuldsson has just arrived with one of his students and a strange-looking tool. They meet with Heimir B. Janusarson, the manager of Hólavallagarður. They are looking for the burial site of Torfhildur Þ. Hólm, an Icelandic writer who passed away from the Spanish flu in 1918. Torfhildur was laid to rest in the cemetery along with five others on December 4 of that same year. Due to the severity of her illness, medical authorities decided to bury her in a zinc casket. Her grave was marked temporarily; however, a permanent tombstone was never put up, likely due to the challenges of the time and the fact that she did not have any descendants. Now, Hólavallagarður, The Women's History Archives in Iceland and *Reykjavík, City of Literature,* a UNESCO project, are looking for her in order to put up a memorial. The zinc casket and the information available regarding her funeral, make it possible to locate her (DÓJ-2023:1). Torfhildur Þ. Hólm was a pioneer. She wrote historical novels, published journals, collected folk legends and was well known for her writing in her time. Yet today, more than a century after her death, her grave is unmarked, and her

Fig. 1. Torfhildur Hólm (1845 - 1918), Icelandic author. Published in Óðinn, November 1907. Unknown photographer. Public domain.

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memory largely forgotten by the public. The question to keep in mind, if found, how should we remember her?[1] This article considers not only how Torfhildur entered the male-dominated literary world of nineteenth-century Iceland, but also how her life and work resonate with the emergence of the "New Woman." First, however, it is important to provide a brief overview of her life.

Torfhildur's Life

Torfhildur was born in the year 1845 in Skaftafellssýsla in the rural South of Iceland. Her family was upper class; her father was a priest and many of her forefathers were bishops, priests, writers, and scholars. Torfhildur moved from the countryside to the capital, Reykjavík, when she was 17 years old. At the time, girls and women did not have easy access to education (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, 2011: 121-144). Torfhildur wanted to go to the Latin school in Reykjavík but was not allowed to. However, she received private classes in English and handicraft from family friends, since her family was well connected to the upper class in Reykjavík (Björg Einarsdóttir 1984: 106).

In 1866, then 21 years old, Torfhildur moved to Denmark to continue her studies, and among other things, studied painting. It is therefore safe to say that she had had a better education than many Icelandic women at the time (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir 1984: 16; Björg Einarsdóttir 1984: 106-109). When Torfhildur returned to Iceland she went back to the countryside, where she had grown up and worked as a teacher until she met Jakob Hólm, a merchant and the owner of his own store. They got married in 1874. Unfortunately, only a year later, on their wedding anniversary, he passed away. Torfhildur never married again and never had any children (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir 2008: 136).

After her husband's passing, she moved in with her sister and her sister's husband (a writer who would later support Torfhildur in her career) (Finnur Sigmundsson 1962: v-vii). Around this time many Icelanders were moving to the new world, Canada and the United States, including a number of unmarried women looking for new opportunities (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir and Þorgerður Einarsdóttir 2016: 10-34; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 2002: 271-272). When Torfhildur was just over 30 years old, in 1876, she moved to Canada and lived there for 13 years.

While in Canada, Torfhildur started her writing career; she published short stories and poems in a local paper, *Framfari,* under the pen-name T,[2] and collected folk legends among other Icelanders that had moved to Canada.

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[1] It is interesting to note that in 2025, nearly two years after the interview was conducted, Torfhildur has not yet been located, one of the reasons being repeated volcanic eruptions in the south of Iceland that have kept many Icelandic geophysicists busy in the recent years.

[2] This was something that led some to believe the author was male (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir, 1984: 17).

Her folktale collection is unique, as it is the only one from this time in Iceland put together by a woman. It is also the only collection that includes a majority of stories attributed to female storytellers (Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir 2010: 165-167). However, her folktale collection was not published until 1962, some 40 years after her death.

Torfhildur published several books that were intended for children. She also wrote and published historical novels, and was the first Icelander, regardless of gender, to do so. Her first historical novel was *Brynjólfur Biskup* [*Brynjólfur bishop*], published in 1882. She herself notes that her homesickness while living in Canada sparked her interest in writing about Icelandic history (Torfhildur Þ. Hólm, 1903: 4). She continued to write about Iceland after she returned in 1889, publishing *Elding* [*Lightning*] in 1889. After her books, she turned to the publication of journals, *Draupnir* (1891-1908), *Tíbrá* (1892-1893) and *Dvöl* (1901-1917). She was the first Icelandic woman to ever publish her own journal. In the journal *Draupnir* she published two more novels on bishops, *Jón biskup Vídalín* and *Jón biskup Arason*. The journal *Tíbrá* was aimed towards children, the first of its kind in Iceland; however it was only published twice. In the last journal, *Dvöl*, she published various short stories as well as information on handicraft, painting and sewing (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir 2008: 138-139).

As noted earlier, Torfhildur passed away in 1918. She was well known in her time for her writings and her books, but the reception of her works was mixed. What follows is not a close reading of her texts, but rather a discussion on how she was able to enter this gendered tradition and how her books and she herself were perceived by others.

Entering a Gendered Tradition

There is no doubt that the literary tradition in Iceland was essentially male and Iceland was a patriarchal society at heart (see, for example, Helga Kress 1978: 375; Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 37-61). The subjects of literature and storytelling were also often quite androcentric (Helga Kress 1993: 15; Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir 2019: 65). Torfhildur's books are no exception to this as her novels all revolve around important men of the past, most commonly bishops. They also focus a great deal on Christianity and a major emphasis in her books is the mediation of Christian values. The fact that her father was a priest and so many of her forefathers as well must also have influenced her choice of material. Here the theories of the anthropologist Edwin Ardener about the conflict of cultures, which notes that when one culture becomes dominant, the other finds itself repressed, are useful. According to this theory, the repressed group is forced to adapt to what is dominant if it wishes to be heard, meaning that the work of the repressed finds itself rooted in both its own culture and that of those who dominate. If it fails to do this, it is in danger of being ignored (Ardener 1975: 22-25; Kress 1993: 13-14). Although,

as mentioned earlier, Torfhildur was the first Icelander to write historical fiction, her topics were often traditional.

As other scholars have noted, many of the messages found in Torfhildur's writings are often in accordance with dominant ideology of her time. Her works do not directly challenge the social order or traditional roles based, for example, on gender and class (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir, 1984: 18). The same can be seen in her folktale collection, where many of the stories, though told by women and collected by Torfhildur, are not particularly favourable toward women. While the legends in her collection often emphasize different themes than those collected by men, for example including more legends that address gender-based violence, these stories frequently portray such violence as an effective means to make ill-behaved and stubborn women more manageable (see Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2020: 17-43 on legends on gender-based violence in Icelandic Folk Legends). As scholars have pointed out, women who are raised in patriarchal communities commonly internalize and reproduce the values and views of the society around them (Carter 1990: xiii; see also Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2012: 7, on why women participate in their own subordination).

It is possible that the fact that Torfhildur's books to a certain extent reflect dominant ideas made them appeal to people, and Torfhildur's books were quite popular and well received by the public. However, critics were often very harsh. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, however, it was possible for anyone to send letters and reviews to Icelandic newspapers and have them published and many reviews were written about Torfhildur's historical novels. There, emphasis is often put on her gender, both by those who were impressed by her books and those who were not (Valtýr Guðmundsson 1982: 74-76; Skuld 1882: 92). An example of this emphasis on gender can be seen clearly in the first review written by Jónas Jónasson from Hrafnagil, a priest, teacher and folklore collector, about Torfhildur's book about Brynjólfur bishop:

> It is rather new for us Icelanders for women in this country to become writers; they have traditionally refrained from such things, and there is even a prevailing opinion here that it is indecent for women to write, and that writing does not belong to their field of work. […]. Although I have found a lot wrong with this story, and have torn down many things in it, it does show that women in Iceland can also be part of literature, if they try and have the education. However, they have to be better than those who have already tried. (Jónas Jónasson 1882: 64)[3]

[3] Ice: "*Það er heldur nýtt fyrir oss Íslendinga, að konur hér á landi gjörist rithöfundar; þær hafa jafnan haldið sér frá slíku, og er hér jafnvel drottnandi sú skoðun, að það sé konum ósæmilegt að fást við ritstörf, og heyri ei til þeirra verksviðs [...]. Þó ég sé nú búinn að finna mikið að sögu þessari, og rífa margt niður í henni, sýnir hún þó að kvenfólkið á Íslandi getur líka verið með í bókmenntum, ef það reynir og hefir mentun til, enn hún þarf að vera betri enn þessar hafa til að bera, er reynt hafa.*"

It is a common theme in the reviews that, while emphasis is placed on Torfhildur's gender, the male reviewers often state that women are welcome to take part in the literary tradition, though their tone is rarely encouraging.

In the reviews, one can find recurring ideas that reflect contemporary beliefs about the nature of women, for example the notion that women should serve as the carriers of tradition but are themselves unoriginal and lacking in creativity. Many reviewers also imply that the female author is not intellectually capable. Some claiming that the writing of historical novels is unfortunately too ambitious a task for her, others remark that she lacks a sense of humour (Jónas Jónasson 1882: 64; Skuld, 1882: 92; Einar Hjörleifsson 1890: 4; see also Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir 2001: 21; and Valdimar Hafstein 2014: 12; 25 on women as inactive tradition bearers).

Emphasis is also placed on Torfhildur's status. Although she was upper class, she was a widow. She had cultural and social capital but not as much financial. Gestur Pálsson, an Icelandic writer who also went to Canada, praised her work but also found various aspects he was unhappy with. He wrote that it is "no easy task for a destitute, orphaned and self-educated woman to handle [the work] and put forth her own original thoughts in such a way that is in line with the poetic genius and aesthetics of this century" (Gestur Pálsson 1890: 2).[4] Björn Jónsson, who was an editor and the husband of Torfhildur's friend, also diminishes her work though disguised as pity and wrote: "a respectable deed, and that of a woman, and a respectable ingenuity of a poor, penniless woman, to publish an equally costly publication" (Björn Jónsson 1890: 9).[5]

We do not often see Torfhildur react to these writings, and she rarely did so publicly. However, a great deal of her private documents, letters and diaries, are preserved at the National Library in Iceland. There, one can also find various cuttings of newspaper reviews, both positive and negative, which makes it clear that she read and collected them. In her diary, it is possible to see her response to the writings of Björn Jónsson. On January 8th 1890 she wrote: "Spent the evening at editor Björn's wife and saw his review for Elding, and my mood slipped a bit."[6] Two days later, the latter half of his review appears and on January 11th she writes: "Rain and rubbish weather as usual—I was a bit uneasy, the second part of Björn Jónsson's review of 'Elding' came out and it was even worse than the first one, I gave it no heed".[7] The day after she writes: "Good

[4] Ice: "[…] *enginn hægðarleikur fyrir blásnauða, munaðarlausa og sjálfmenntaða konu að ráða við [verkið] og hefja sínar eigin frumhugsanir á það stig og búa þær þeim gervum, er samboðið yrði kallað skáldsnilli og fagurfræði þessarar aldar.*"

[5] Ice: "[…] *virðingarvert hjáverk, og það af konu, og virðingarvert áræði er það af fátækum, umkomulausum kvenmanni, að koma jafn-kostnaðarsömu riti á prent.*"

[6] Ice: "[*V*]*ar í kvöld hjá konu Björns ritstjóra og sá þar ritdóm Eldingar og rann í skap dálítið.*"

[7] Ice: "*Regn og ruslu veður eins og vant er, var ég hálf óróleg útaf allskonar ástandi kom síðari hlutinn af ritdómi Björns Jónss yfir Eldingu og hann verri en hinn fyrri kærði mig hvergi.*"

[weather] before noon, I went to church—and the intended to go out to Mrs. Katrín, but she was then invited out, so I decided to go to old Mrs. Melsteð. There was Elísabet, Björn Jónsson's [the editor] wife and we talked about the review, I pretended not to mind" (Lbs 3985 4to).[8] While she often notes in her diary that she was uneasy or even unhappy, it is interesting that she repeatedly notes pretending not to be affected by the reviews. It is well known that women that venture into male-dominated fields often feel they cannot show signs of vulnerability. Nevertheless, it is clear that Torfhildur was aware of her position within this gendered tradition. In a letter sent around 1900, she wrote: "I was the first whom nature condemned to reap the bitter fruits of old, ingrained judgments against literary ladies" (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir 1984: 17).[9]

It is important to stress, however, that not all the reviews were negative. As noted above, her books were quite popular with the Icelandic public, she was well known in her time, and some also stepped up to defend her against what they considered unfair criticism.

In 1891, Torfhildur applied to the Icelandic parliament for a writer's salary of 500 ISK per year. The request was debated and eventually approved. This marked the first time the Icelandic parliament granted a writer's salary, and it was awarded to both Torfhildur and Matthías Jochumsson, who wrote the poem that later became Iceland's national anthem. However, only two years later, parliament decided to reduce Torfhildur's salary to 200 ISK and reclassify it as a widow's grant rather than a writer's salary. During the discussions in parliament, those who supported Torfhildur emphasized the importance of the moral messages conveyed in her stories. Others argued that all women should serve as defenders of moral codes, with or without payment (Finnur Sigmundsson 1962: xx; Sigríður Thorlacius 1963: 362; for discussions at parliament see, for example, Alþingi, 1891: 1052;1085;1106; 1651-2). This is quite striking, yet in line with hegemonic ideas of femininity at the time, when women were generally seen as inherently good and morally pure, and it was considered their natural role to raise children, although, as mentioned earlier, Torfhildur never had children but was in a way still being seen as "raising" them through her writing (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir 2002: 38; Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2022: 321-326).

These discussions about the salary, of course, also caused many to take up their pens and write to the newspapers to voice their opinions on the matter. One of those was Matthías Jochumsson, who was granted salary by the

[8] Ice: "*Gott f.h. fór ég í kirkju—og ætlaði svo til frú Katrínar en hún var þá boðin út, svo ég sló í að fara til frú gömlu Melsteð þar var Elísabet kona B.J. og ræddum við um ritdóminn. Ég lét mjér vel líka.*"

[9] *Ice: "Ég var sú fyrsta, sem náttúran dæmdi til þess að uppskera hina beisku ávexti gamalla, rótgróinna hleypidóma gegn litterærum dömum.*"

parliament at the same time as Torfhildur. His, however, was not reduced. In 1892, he wrote:

> I blush and cringe when I again read in the newspapers how various self-made critics of our literature and keepers of finances judge Mrs. T. Hólm and her support from national funds. People not only question her right to the 500 ISK that the parliament gave her, but they are mocking her personally - just as if she and her publications were a national shame - just as if people wanted to shout at her for the fact that she was not so lucky to be a man, but a woman, an Icelandic woman of no means, a widow, friendless and—more importantly—a writer, the first woman to write Icelandic novels! (Matthías Jochumsson 1892: 98)[10]

At the time, Matthías also published his own paper, and after his note on Torfhildur he wrote that he would not accept any more articles about her. However, it is worth noting that he, too, also emphasizes her gender and social status in this reply.

The "New Woman"

It is safe to say that Torfhildur lived an untraditional life for women of her time and broke many glass ceilings. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was significant public debate about the nature and status of women. Around this time, women were also gaining more rights and opportunities. The first official lecture given by a woman in Iceland, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir (1856-1940), was delivered in 1887 and published a year later. In it, she challenges prevailing ideas surrounding femininity. Bríet notes that some feared that if women were given opportunities to study or work outside the home, they would abandon their original calling as mothers and housewives and become pariahs (Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir 1888:20; 29). Nevertheless, women in Iceland, gradually gained more rights, for example obtaining the right to vote for parliament in 1915 (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir and Guðrún Dís Jónatansdóttir 1998: 144; Gunnar Karlsson 2000: 274; and Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 37-61).[11] It was also around this period that the image of the "New Woman," began to emerge.

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[10] Ice: "*Eg stokkroðna og allt mitt bezta umhverfist þegar eg aptur les í blöðunum hvernig ýmsir sjálfgerðir vandlætarar bókmennta vorra og fjármála dæma um frú T. Hólm og styrk hennar af landsfé. Menn láta sér ekki nægja að vefengja rétt hennar til þessara 500 króna, sem þingið veitti henni, heldur spotta menn hana persónulega—rétt eins og hún og hennar rit væri þjóðarskömm,—rétt eins og vildu menn hrópa hana fyrir það, að hún var ekki svo gæfusöm að vera karlmaður, heldur er kona, íslenzk umkomulaus kona, ekkja, vinum horfin og—það sem yfirtekur—rithöfundur, fyrsta konan, sem ritar íslenzkar skáldsögur!*"

[11] Initially, women had to be 40 years old to vote, compared to 25 for men, they obtained equal voting rights in 1920.

Abroad the idea of the "New Woman" emerged as a consequence of the First World War when a gap developed between the discourse of women's social roles and lived reality. The boundaries between the private and public sphere were also becoming more blurred (Abrams 2002: 322-323). The "New Woman" broke with hegemonic ideas about femininity and challenged traditional female roles (on hegemonic femininity see Schippers 2007: 94; see also Connell 1987: 183-188 on gender hierarchies). In the Western world, these women, for example, cut their hair short, wore short skirts or trousers, drank, danced, played sports, drove cars, and were more open about their sexuality. They were also for example, artists, educated women and single mothers (Sigurbjörg Elín Hólmarsdóttir 2013: 84-95). As a result, New Women were often seen as a threat to traditional family values and established gender roles. Some of those women even took part in public and political discussions, and as a result, many were said to be unfeminine and even unnatural, pariahs, as Bríet noted in her lecture.

One of the most prominent images of the New Woman was that of the unmarried, educated woman, something that fits Torfhildur very well. Torfhildur was more educated than many women at the time, although many of her critics dismissed her education and repeatedly refer to her as uneducated (Einar Hjörleifsson 1890: 4; Gestur Pálsson 1890: 2). Torfhildur was also only married for one year before becoming a widow. It is interesting to note that unmarried women often seem to have more space to break hegemonic ideas about gender without being turned into pariahs, perhaps as they were not seen as stepping on their husbands in some way, something that might have applied in the case of Torfhildur.[12]

One also wonders what effect her moving to Canada had. However, it is also important to keep in mind that there she lived in a society of other Icelanders who had also emigrated. Still, as Gerður Steinþórsdóttir has pointed out it is safe to assume that her time abroad widened her horizons. There she came to know the writings of women and the publication of journals both for housewives and for children (Gerður Steinþórsdóttir 2008: 138-139).

Historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has argued that during the time of Iceland's fight for independence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men became a symbol for modernity while women, or femininity, came to symbolize the nostalgic past and the nation itself. Among women's roles was therefore to protect Icelandic traditions and raise "good Icelanders." Sigríður believes that the idea of the New Woman implies two types of femininity:

[12] Here it is interesting to note that in 1882, wealthy women over twenty-five who ran their own farms and were unmarried or widows, were the first to get the right to vote in municipal elections, see for example, Auður Styrkársdóttir and Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir 2005: 22-23; see also Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2021: 290-312, on this.

> On the one hand, the modern fashion-conscious woman who cut her hair, wore short skirts and trousers, smoked cigarettes and sat in cafés. On the other hand, the women's rights activist who argued that women had roles to play other than being mothers and housewives, and who demanded public power in society. Both shared the goal of reconciling femininity with modern values, enabling women to claim their place within the diverse ways of life of the modern era. (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir 2004: 256-257)[13]

In this context, it is interesting that while Torfhildur herself aligns well with the latter type described by Sigríður, these values are not necessarily reflected in her writings or the legends she collected, something that might appear contradictory. As noted above, her choice of topics, themes and the moral messages of her stories also reflected her situation, in which it was difficult for women to publish or receive recognition for their work. The literary scholar Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir has noted that although Torfhildur was a pioneer, her work was not motivated by rebellion against ruling ideology or gender roles. Rather, she seems have wanted to improve the morals and beliefs of the people (Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir 1987: 6).

As has been noted by other scholars, women who can be categorized as New Women may have had varied motivations, ideas, and agendas for breaking with those hegemonic ideas of femininity. In Torfhildur's case the most apparent one is simply her longing to write. However, some of Torfhildur's short stories explore topics such as equality within a marriage and the education of women (Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir 1987: 7-8). As literary scholar Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir has also pointed out, it is important to remember that Torfhildur made a living by selling her books. She could not afford to offend people or provoke them to the point that they would not buy her books (Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2003: 257). Perhaps, this also protected Torfhildur from turning into a pariah since, as noted before, her writing itself did not threaten the social order.

It is clear, however, that some Icelandic women felt it was their role to support Torfhildur, and that she was to them an important figure in the fight for gender equality.

The Women's Associations

It is interesting that Icelandic women lifted Torfhildur up as part of their fight for gender equality. Around the 1900s, Icelandic Women's associations (Ice. "*Kvenfélög*") were being established across the country, allowing women

[13] Ice: "*Annars vegar hina nútímalegu tískukonu sem klippti hár sitt, gekk á stuttum pilsum og síðbuxum, reykti vindlinga og sat á kaffihúsum. Hins vegar kvenréttindakonuna sem hélt því fram að konur hefðu öðrum hlutverkum að gegna en að vera mæður og húsmæður og krafðist opinberra valda í þjóðfélaginu. Báðar áttu það sameiginlegt að vilja samræma kvenleikann nútímalegum gildum, að gera konum kleift að öðlast sinn skerf í fjölbreytilegum lifnaðarháttum nútímans.*"

to move more into the public sphere, and women's newspapers were becoming more prominent (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir 2020: 67-89). Women's roles in history were often overlooked and as the Icelandic historian Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir has pointed out, the history of Icelandic women and female pioneers was often first written by these newspapers. She also notes that the role of women's biographies has been to recover their lost history, to save notable women from oblivion, and to shape an idea of women's historical agency. These stories could then become a model for other women in how they might live their lives (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir 2019: 74).

This fits the aims of the methodology of women's history which developed around 1980 and was at the time seen as a radical idea, not least because, as noted, women have tended to be largely absent from written history. One of the main objectives of this method was to highlight the role of women in history, something that in the past had been deemed insignificant. This is clear in the case of Torfhildur and her story, which was being told in these women's newspapers. In the late 1990s, however, a new method of *gender history* began to emerge and quickly became more dominant. While women's history focused on women's role in history, gender history focused more on how gender and gender roles have evolved over time, and how gender inequality came into being (Scott 2002: 32-34; Bennett 2006: 18). It is not enough to insert women into history; the focus must also shift away from the dominant male perspective.

In the case of Torfhildur Hólm, various women's newspapers published articles on her life and accomplishments, both during her lifetime and after her death. One such article, written by an anonymous author in 1905, underlines the shortage of women in history and notes:

> When talking about the achievements of nations and the individuals who have made them famous, women are rarely mentioned […] Iceland has had few such women—far fewer, perhaps, than is fair. (*Freyja* 1905: 101-105)[14]

In the article it is suggested that this is both due to the lack of equal opportunities as well as the narrow focus of what counts as history. After Torfhildur's writer's salary was turned into a widow's grant many women voiced their thoughts in the papers. A woman writing under the pen name "Sigríður sveitakona" [Sigríður, country woman] writes:

> This is obviously just a cover, in order to achieve something else, to try to kill our progress-attempts as women—this man is obviously of the old school who wants women to make porridge and have children—and then feels as if he has succeeded if no more women will take part in writing and other spiritual

[14] Ice: "*Þegar talað er um afrek þjóðanna og einstaklinga þeirra sem hafa gjört þær frægar er konunnar sjaldan getið* […] *Fáar slíkar konur hefir Ísland átt—miklu færri eft il vill en sanngjarnt er.*"

> accomplishments that should only belong to men. (Sigríður sveitarkona 1892: 46)[15]

In an article published in the women's paper *Framsókn*, her life and achievements are presented. The article concludes by noting that women should determine the amount for Torfhildur's salary as: "they would not let it be so arbitrarily reduced."[16] (Without Author, 1901: 17-18). Women also wrote in newspapers to encourage other women to buy Torfhildur's books and support her work (see, for example, *Nokkrar konur í Reykjavík* [A Couple of Women in Reykjavík] 1908: 200). When Torfhildur turned 70 in the year 1915, six women in Reykjavík organized a celebration in her honour. After the celebration, it was written in the papers:

> The sign of the times is becoming obvious in this country, that the women are starting to come along. They obviously believe that they have the right to the same recognition as men, and they also show it in their work, by demanding that the merits of women are given attention and recognition. (Without Author, 1915: 11-12)[17]

Here Torfhildur is situated within the context of women's fight for equality and shown as an important figure in women's history, something that is, of course, true.

Remembering Torfhildur

As has been noted, Torfhildur broke many glass ceilings in her life. It is clear that she encountered significant difficulties: she faced resistance and criticism, although her books were also appreciated by the public. Reviews of her work often echoed broader assumptions about women's limitations, such as the idea that they lacked intelligence and creativity.

Torfhildur embodied many characteristics of the New Woman, she was unmarried for the most part of her life, independent, educated, and worked outside the home. It is clear that her social status had a significant effect on her life, allowing her to move into the male dominated sphere of writing. Many of the topics of Torfhildur's books reflect the ruling ideas of literature of the time,

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[15] Ice: "*Þetta er auðsjáanlega yfirvarp eitt, til þess að koma öðru að, nefnilega að reyna til að drepa niður framfara-tilraunum okkar kvennanna—maðurinn er auðséð af þeim gamla skóla, sem vill láta kvennfólkið gjöra graut og geta börn—og þykist svo sem vinna fullan sigur og fleiri konur muni eigi fara að fást við ritstörf og önnur þau andans afreksverk, er karlmönnunum heyri til að sýsla við.*"

[16] Ice: "*mundu þær hann ekki skera hann svona við neglur sér.*"

[17] Ice: "*Það tákn tímanna er að verða augljóst hér á landi, að konurnar eru farnar að koma með. Þær telja sig auðsjáanlega hafa rétt til sömu viðurkenningar og karlmennirnir og sýna það líka sjálfar í verkinu, með því að gangast fyrir að verðleikum kvenna sé veitt athygli og viðurkenning.*"

where men were typically at the center, and the moral messages conveyed are largely in accordance with ruling ideology of the time. It is possible that this might have protected her from being cast as a pariah. Although she broke with hegemonic ideas of femininity in her personal life, her writings often reinforced the dominant values of the time, portraying her as a defender of moral values, as noted, for example, in discussions in parliament. Although she did not have children of her own, some of her works were aimed at them, allowing her to be cast, in part, in the traditional feminine role of the moral educator rather than a subversive figure.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the search in the cemetery Hólavallagarður. Hopefully, there will soon be news on whether the search team has managed to locate Torfhildur's grave. As noted in the beginning, the aim is to put up a memorial there. I wonder though, if a memorial in the cemetery is enough. The question, however, must also be what purpose such a memorial could serve. Would it serve as a reminder of the life of Torfhildur Hólm, as it is important to remember the pioneers and those who paved the way. It could also serve as a reminder of the inequality of the past, the little access women had to education, and the importance of recognizing the biases that have shaped the production of knowledge and literature. It is my belief that the memorial is important, the events of the search itself are likely to put her and her achievements into the spotlight once again, and it should raise questions and spark discussions. Her life reveals the complexity of being a female writer in 19th century Iceland. Her memorial, if erected, could not only honour her legacy but also remind us of the conditions under which women's contributions have been recognized, or forgotten. As the poet and feminist Adrienne Rich wrote:

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (Rich 1979: 35)

It is crucial that we know where we have come from, in order to know where to go next.

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