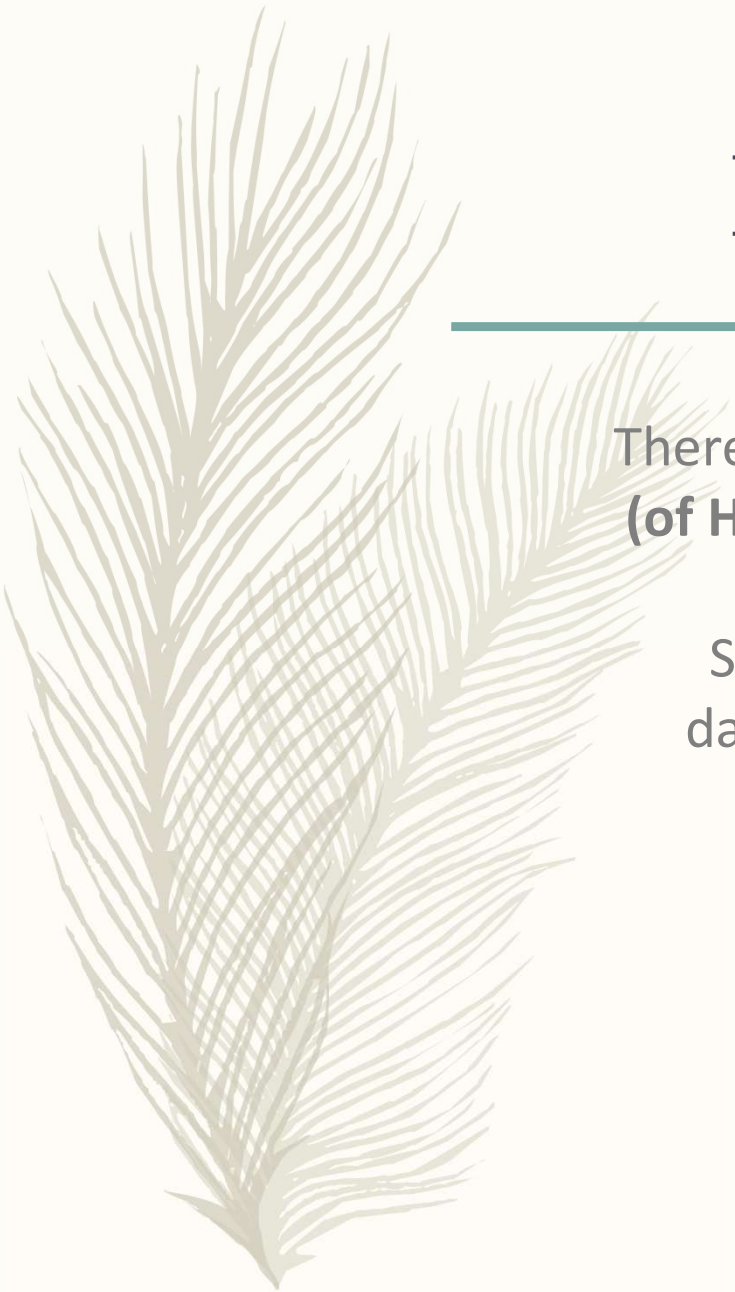
Ibsen and Icelandic Sagas

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Edmund Gosse on Ibsen

There is a great deal of killing and cursing in the **Warriors (of Helgeland)**. To read it after such later books as **Brand** and **Peer Gynt**, is like returning to Marlowe after Shakespeare. ... Many of the strokes are aimed in the dark by a hand strong enough and ardent enough, but not yet fully trained in sword-play.

(review from 1874)



Dramatic Saga Tradition

The Dramatist as a Young Man



Ibsen‘s own doubts

In a letter to the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen (8 February 1858) Ibsen admitted that this drama lacked any actual foundation in history; the characters were invented, structured on literary models from the Icelandic sagas and the **Volsungasaga**. His intention, he declared, had been ‘to give a picture of the life of the saga age in general’

Works in question

Laxdæla saga (The Saga of the People of Laxárdalur, ca. 1240-60)

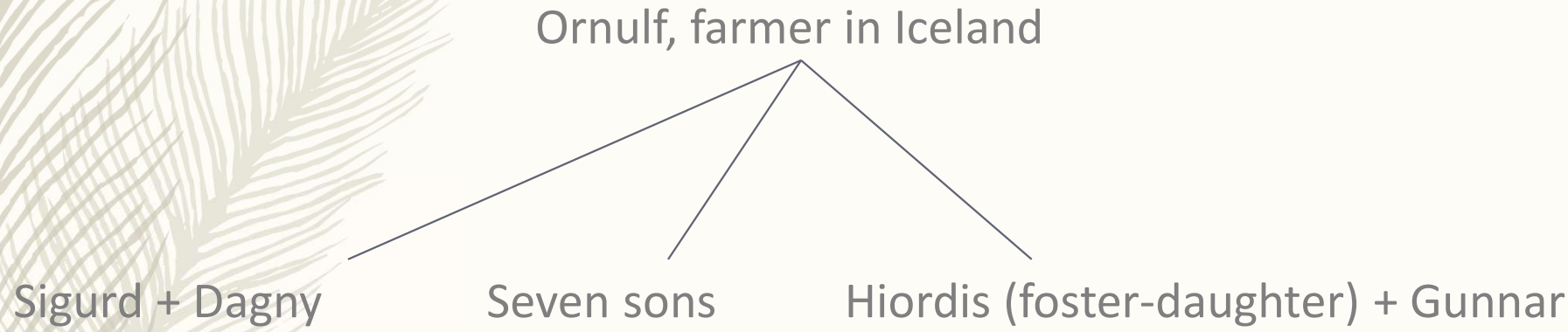
Njáls saga (The Saga of Burnt Njal, ca. 1280-1300)

William Shakespeare, **Macbeth** (1606)

Henrik Ibsen. **Hærmændene paa Helgeland** (The Vikings/Warriors of Helgeland, 1857)

Gordon Bottomleys, **The Riding to Lithend** (1909)

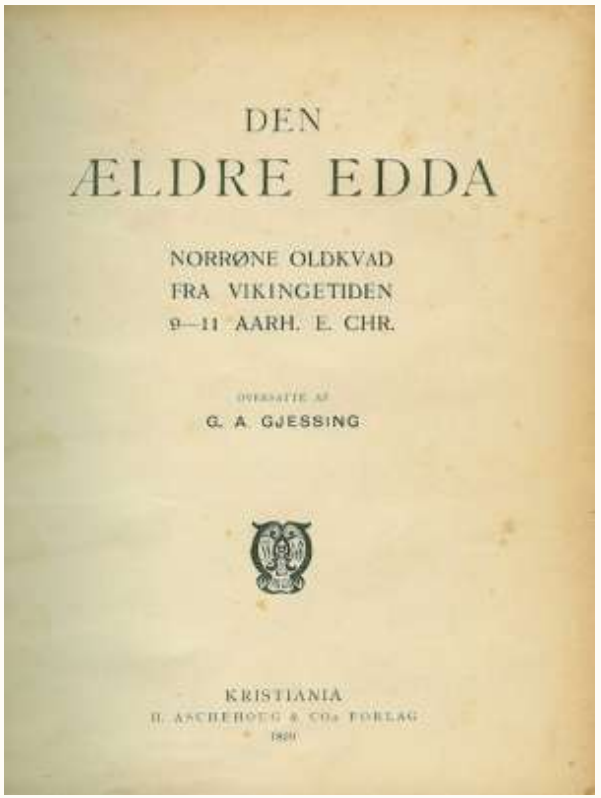
Main characters in Ibsen‘s play



Hiordis of Hærmændede



Ibsen‘s primary sources





Hallgerd of Njáls saga



Hallgerd vs. Gunnar

‘Give me two locks of your hair, and you and my mother twist them into bowstring for me.’ ‘Does anything depend on it?’ she said.

‘My life depends on it,’ he said, ‘for they’ll never be able to get me as long as I can use my bow.’

‘Then I’ll remind you,’ she said, ‘of the slap on my face, and I don’t care whether you hold out for a long or a short time.’

Hiordis vs. Gunnar

HIORDIS (without looking up). I am weaving a bow-string; canst thou not see?

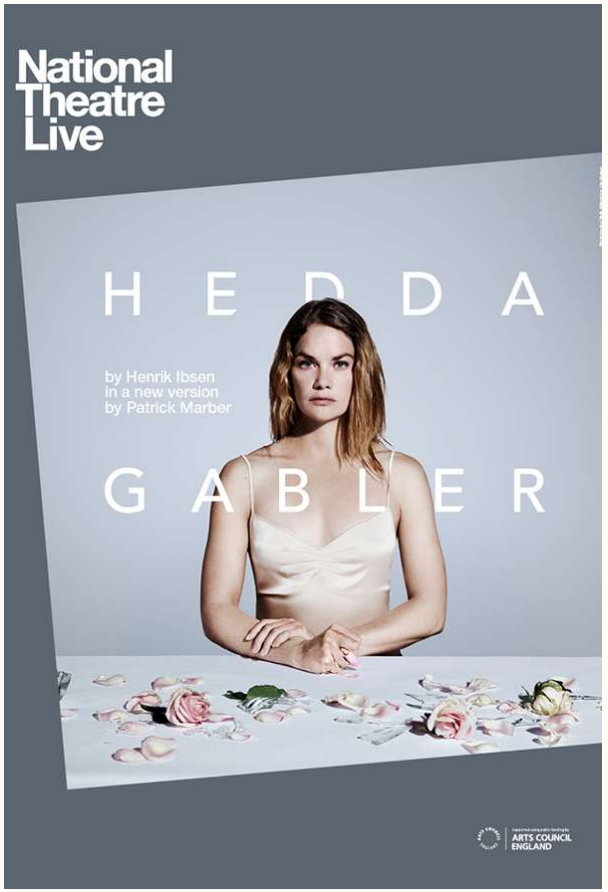
GUNNAR. A bow-string — of thine own hair?

HIORDIS (smiling). Great deeds are born with every hour in these times; yesterday thou didst slay my foster-brother, and I have woven this since day-break.

Hiordis vs. Sigurd

All Gunnar's men have fallen; only he and I are left; they set light to the roof from without:—'A bow-shot,' cries Gunnar, 'one bow-shot may save us' — then the bow-string breaks — 'Hiordis, cut a tress of thy hair and make a bow-string of it — our life is at stake.' But then I laugh — 'Let it burn, let it burn — to me, life is not worth a handful of hair!

Hiordis and Hedda



Hiordis and Nora

DAGNY. Nay, Hiordis, I cannot understand thee. Thou hast shown me all the house; I know not what thing thou lackest, and all thou hast is fair and goodly; — then why bemoan thy lot?

HIORDIS. Cage an eagle and it will bite at the wires, be they of iron or of gold

Hiordis vs. Sigurd

HIORDIS: Ay, Sigurd, so must it be here on this earth is no happiness for me. The White God is coming northward; him will I not meet; the old gods are strong no longer; — they sleep, they sit half shadow-high; — with them will we strive! Out of this life, Sigurd; I will enthrone thee king in heaven, and I will sit at thy side.

SIGURD: ‘The White God is mine; King Aethelstan taught me to know him; it is to him I go.