

ECHOES OF THE *BOOK OF JOSEPH AND ASENETH*,  
PARTICULARLY IN *YNGVAR'S SAGA VÍÐFÖRLA*

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ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS OF READING the Old Testament lies in that work's proclivity for unanswered questions. A case in point is the question of Aseneth, the wife of Joseph of snazzy coat fame. Aseneth appears three times in the Hebrew Bible. She is introduced in Genesis 41:45: 'And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnathpaaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt.' She appears again fleetingly in Genesis 41:50: 'And unto Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On bare unto him.' Finally, and all too soon given how much we are yet to be told of her, she departs from the story in Genesis 46:20: 'And unto Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On bare unto him.' We are then left with several points of uncertainty. Is Potipherah the same man as the 'Potiphar' of Genesis 37:36, the man whose amorous wife caused Joseph's false imprisonment? If so, Aseneth must have had an embarrassing 'meet the parents' moment. When or how did Aseneth die? The Bible text provides no answers on that point. Most importantly, from the perspective of Christians and Jews alike, how can it be that Joseph, a Patriarch and pious servant of God, married an Egyptian pagan? Surveying only the original scripture, one finds no suggestion that she ever abandoned her native religion.

The pseudepigraphical *Book of Joseph and Aseneth* confronts these issues surrounding Joseph's marriage. It tells the story of Joseph's meeting with Potipherah's daughter, her attraction towards him, her miraculous conversion to Judaism, their marriage, and her escape by chariot from the jealous son of Pharaoh, who wished to have Egypt's greatest beauty for his own. The story is often characterised as a 'Biblical romance' or 'Hellenistic Romance' (Wright 1987, 79; Whitmarsh 2013, 47; Chesnutt 1995, 39–40). This is quite a fitting description, as its blend of heartfelt sighing, martial action and court intrigue will be instantly recognisable to any reader of medieval romance.

The ultimate provenance of the work is uncertain. Suggestions have ranged from 200 BC to 300 AD from North Africa in the west through to Palestine and Syria in the east (Chesnutt 2003, 76–85; Kraemer 1998, 225–85; Burchard 1996, 307–10). My own feeling is that we are best served by locating the very first *Book of Joseph and Aseneth* somewhere in Hellenistic Egypt or perhaps Syria. I would suggest that the author might be found somewhere on the spectrum of Abrahamic religious opinions in the first century AD when Judaism and Christianity were not separate identities but rather two tendencies within the same continuum. The original language of *Aseneth* was most likely Greek (Burchard 1965, 91–99). Versions are also attested in Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Early Modern German, Latin, Middle English, Old French, Romanian, Serbian and Syriac (Brooks 1918, vii–viii; Burchard 1983, 179).

### ***Aseneth* in the West: Clerical and lay receptions**

The entry point upon which most Western vernacular renderings of the text depend is its adaptation by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum Historiale* (c. 1250). But free-standing Latin versions of the complete *Aseneth* existed before this date, having been translated directly from the Greek, and these translations continued to be copied thereafter. For example, the manuscript Cambridge CCC MS 288 contains one *Liber de asenech et quomodo ioseph duxit eam in uxorem*, probably from the middle to late thirteenth century according to the manuscript's association with Nicholas of Sandwich (fl. 1250s). Cambridge CCC MS 424 from the fourteenth or fifteenth century also contains a complete *Liber de Joseph et Aseneth* (in addition to Chaucer's *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*). Following Vincent's compilation, *Aseneth* was often circulated in manuscripts alongside another piece of pseudepigrapha, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which was also inserted into the *Speculum Historiale*. The attribution of *The Testaments* to Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) was then wrongly applied to *Aseneth* too. But despite the claims of many early-modern chapbook versions of *Aseneth* to the contrary, Grosseteste had no hand in the creation of the first Latin *Aseneth*, which was most likely translated from Greek while he was still a child.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The attribution of *The Testaments* to Grosseteste is from Matthew Paris (1877, 232–33, cf. 1880, 284–85). The association became all the stronger in the Early Modern period, when *The Testaments* and *Aseneth* were commonly printed in the same volume.

It is worth noting at the outset that, even though it has not attained the fame of other apocrypha, the story of Aseneth was by no means an arcane peculiarity during the Middle Ages. Western European engagement with *Aseneth* began relatively early, and is attested in both religious and secular literature. Christoph Burchard and M. R. James both suggested that the Latin *Aseneth* was produced as early as the twelfth century (Burchard 1996, 367–69; James 1927, 340–41). The tradition now represented by Cambridge CCC MS 288 was probably translated from the Greek at Canterbury. For a Greek-to-Latin translation, then, *Aseneth* was undertaken comparatively far north of the Mediterranean, and long before the explosions of Greek learning during the High Scholastic period and in the 1400s. Drawing on the relative antiquity of this achievement, Ruth Nisse (2006, 748) has suggested that ‘one implication of this early a date for the Latin *Liber de Aseneth* is that it could have contributed to the subsequent portrayals of conversion in the chansons de geste.’ If so, *Aseneth* would be right at the heart of one of the most popular genres of medieval literature. The best surviving example of the secular reception of *Aseneth* is arguably the Middle English verse *Storie of Asneth* (c.1450s). Taking away and adding no details at all, save for the complicating addition of a narrative frame, the anonymous poet produces an astoundingly competent translation of Vincent’s *Aseneth* into rhyming couplets, for example (*Storie*, 22):

As I on hilly halkes logged me late,  
 Biside ny of a Ladi sone was I war;  
 La Bele desired in Englysh to translate  
 The Latyn of that Lady, Asneth Putifar.  
 I answered, ‘Ma Bele, langage I lakke  
 To parfome youre plesir, for yt ys ful straunge  
 That broken tuskes shold wel harde nuttis crakke  
 And kerve out kernelis, to glade with yowre graunge;

Of particular interest to the Scandinavianist is the Old Swedish *Siälinna Thröst*. The text, originally by St. Catherine of Vadstena (d. 1381), contains an *Aseneth* potted as an *exemplum*, beginning (*OSwSt*, 401–02):

Ther war j landeno then mäktoghe herran Putifar som hafdhe latit ioseph j tornit kasta. Han atte ena mykyt ärlika oc sköna dottir oc engin man matte koma henne swa när at han granlika hona see finge, Hon heeth assenech.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Aseneth’s name commonly fell victim to the confusion between ‘c’ and ‘t’ which afflicts most medieval scripts. ‘Aseneth’ is the proper rendering of how the name is spelt in Greek. The Hebrew spelling would be most precisely transliterated as ‘Ôsonat’ (hence the King James Version’s ‘Asenath’). The medieval and Early Modern spellings are varied, e.g. Senec, Asseness, Asneth.

Its Old Danish counterpart, *Siälinna Thröst*, follows suit (*ODSt*, 44):

Thær var i landit thæn mäktoghe hærran putifar som hafdhe ladit josep i tornit  
casta han hafdhe ena migit skiøna dottir. oc ingin man matte coma hænne swa  
nær at han fik hænne granliga at se. hon heet assenech.

There was in the country that mighty lord, Putifar, who had had Joseph thrown  
into the dungeon. He had a very pretty daughter, and no man could get close  
enough to her to see her clearly. She was called Aseneth.<sup>3</sup>

Aseneth also appears in a Marian verse from AM 76 8vo (1470–1500),  
an Old Danish miscellany (*Klosterbog*, 29):<sup>4</sup>

Putifar han hafdhæ en dotter soo geff,  
han luctæ hynnæ i tornet ynæ,  
han gaff hennæ Josep til hosfru leff,  
Asnech then skiønesteæ quinnæ  
enthæ lygnes hun veth then,  
Som iek dyerres aff at quedhæ,  
hun kan vell løse aff al hannæ vene,  
i hymmerigh hauer hun glæthe.

Potiphar, he had a daughter so stubborn,  
he locked her in a tower,  
he gave her to Joseph as a dear wife  
Aseneth, the most beautiful lady,  
but when even she is compared to the one  
of whom I am honoured to compose [i.e. Mary]  
she might well lose all her beauty,  
in heaven she takes her joy.

There is a point here which will be important later: *Aseneth* did not operate in a literary vacuum, confined to the esoteric interests of a few exegetes. It was freely adapted into vernacular languages and genres, from bouncing Middle English rhyme to East Norse *exempla*. This is hardly surprising. Upon its reception by the Latin West in the early twelfth century it must have been recognised as ‘romance before romance’—and romance was a genre which exerted a considerable grip upon the medieval imagination. As Nisse (2006, 750–52) has shown, *Aseneth* had a dialectical relationship with chivalric romances. The *Aseneth* story predated and prefigured tropes such as the ‘Saracen princess’ (Kay 1995, 31–39); it may even have inspired that particular trope in part. Yet even after the rise of chivalric romance in the High

<sup>3</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> The lively rhythm of this verse and the repeated musical sections elsewhere in the manuscripts suggest that it may also have been a hymn.

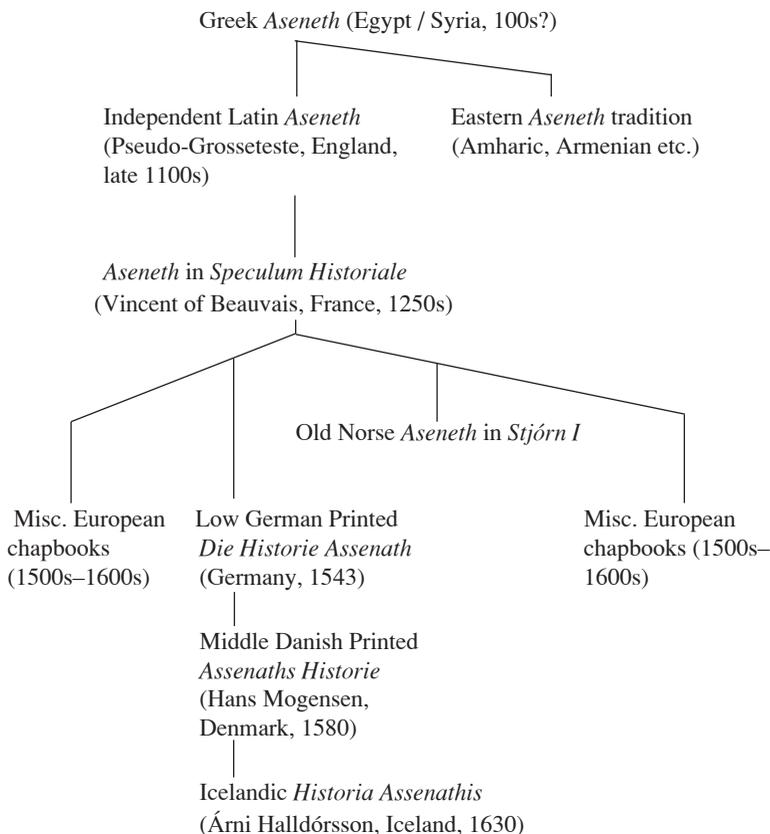
Middle Ages, certain readerships continued to appreciate *Aseneth* as a distinct but analogous artefact.

### The Old Norse *Aseneth* in *Stjórn I*

Germane to the present study is the attestation of an Old Norse *Aseneth*. Vincent's *Speculum* was one of the principal sources of the collection of pentateuchal and exegetical material designated *Stjórn I*. It is therefore in this conglomeration that we find our surviving Old Norse version (*Stjórn I*, 310–19, 339–47). The origins of the tripartite *Stjórn* complex are murky and contested (see Wolf 1990, who provides the most lucid account of the debate). *Stjórn I* is traditionally dated to the reign of Hákon Magnússon V (r. 1299–1319), making the early fourteenth century our *terminus ante quem* for the surviving Norse *Aseneth*. It has been supposed that *Stjórn* may in part be a fourteenth century reworking of older, presumably thirteenth-century materials, but the *terminus post quem* of the surviving Old Norse *Aseneth* stands unchanged by this possibility. As it is based on Vincent's text, the Old Norse *Aseneth* which now survives cannot have assumed its present form any earlier than the 1250s. However, in this study I will argue that an *Aseneth* text was already known in Iceland during the late 1100s, several decades prior to the Vincentian version which we have received today. We cannot say with any certainty that the independent Latin *Aseneth* was ever translated into Old Norse (the scant arguments will be sketched in the conclusion). Moreover, even if it was, the relationship this putative text would have with the one preserved in *Stjórn I*, if any, is unknown. It is for this reason that I will mostly cite the independent Latin *Aseneth* as the model text, and reluctantly set aside the later Norse adaptation. For convenience, the situation can be summarised in the stemma on the following page.

### Introducing *Yngvars saga víðförla*

In what follows, it will be argued that the earlier twelfth-century version of *Aseneth* had already reached Iceland by the time that Vincent's version was translated in *Stjórn I*. The central argument will be that certain elements in the Old Icelandic *Yngvars saga víðförla* are drawn directly from *Aseneth*. The story of Yngvarr will need little introduction to Scandinavianists, but for the general reader it may be helpful to summarise its plot: the saga tells of how the young Yngvarr víðförlri 'the widely travelled' goes on an expedition from Sweden into the East. Along the way he and his men visit exotic cities and face various monstrous and magical foes. He dies during his journey, and so his son, Sveinn, later follows in his footsteps, finishing the missionary work that his late father had begun. A series of runestones



in southeast Sweden appear to indicate that a personage named Yngvarr really did undertake an expedition into *Serkland* ‘Saracen-land’ during the Viking Age, although attempts to argue that *Yngvars saga víðförla* is a ciphered historical account generally require a great deal more inventiveness than studies which begin by accepting the saga’s obviously literary character and its free borrowing from a variety of narrative traditions (e.g. Phelpstead 2009, esp. 334–37, Lönnroth 2014, Mitchell 1991, 81).

It will also be suggested that two further Old Norse works, *Kormaks saga* and *Gylfaginning*, each have an episode where *Aseneth* can be proposed as a viable source, although these latter examples are far less certainly inspired by *Aseneth* than the case of *Yngvars saga víðförla*. In the present study they are presented as afterthoughts considered worthy

of mention, while *Yngvars saga* is considered to be a concrete example of influence from *Aseneth*. There can be virtually no doubt that *Gylfaginning* dates from the thirteenth century, even amongst those who would reject Snorri's authorship, and therefore it postdates the early Latin *Aseneth* and antedates *Stjórn I*. The dating of *Yngvars saga víðförla* has historically been somewhat less secure. The epilogue from the saga itself gives an unambiguous account of how it came to be written (*Ysv*, 48–49):

Enn þessa sögu hofum uer heyrð ok ritat epter forsögn þeirar bækr, at Oddur munkur hinn frodi hafði giora latit at forsögn frodra manna, þeira er hann seger sialfur j brefi sinu, þui er hann sendi Joni Lofzssyni ok Gizuri Hallssyni. Enn þeir er uita þiciazt innuirduligar, auki uid, þar sem nu þiker a skorta. Þessa sögu segizt Oddr munkur heyrð hafa segia þann prest, er Isleifur hiet, ok annann Glum Þorgeirsson, ok hinn þridi hefer Porer heitit. Af þeira frasaugn hafði hann þat, er honum þotti merkiligazt. En Isleifur sagdizt heyrð hafa Ynguars sögu af einum kaup[manni], enn sa kuezta hafa numit hana j hird Suiakongs. Glumur hafði numit af fodur sinum. Enn Porer hafði numit af Klaukku Samsyni, en Klacka hafði heyrð segia hina fyrri frændur sina.

And we have heard and written this saga according to the testimony of those books which Oddr the Wise Monk had made according to the testimony of learned men,<sup>5</sup> those whom he mentions himself in his letter which he sent to Jón Loftsson and Gizurr Hallsson. And those who think they know [the story] better should supplement it where it seems to come up short. Oddr the Monk is said to have heard this saga told by that priest who was called Ísleifr, and [by] a second, Glúmr Þorgeirsson [*alt.* Þorgilsson], and the third was called Þórir. He took from their testimony that which he thought most remarkable. And Ísleifr was said to have heard the saga of Yngvarr from a merchant, and he was said to have learnt it in the court of the king of the Swedes. Glúmr had learnt it from his father. And Þórir had learnt it from Klakka Sámsson, and Klakka had heard it told before by his kinsmen.

The epilogue makes it apparent that the surviving text is not Oddr's original work. Rather, it is a retelling or representation thereof. Oddr's hypothetical lost autograph has been supposed to have been in Latin, being dubbed the *\*Vita Yngvari* by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1989, 2–7, cf. Phelpstead 2009, 338–40). It is therefore conceivable that our Norse version is a great deal later than the missing work which it claims to re-create. Nonetheless, the identifiable names here present a coherent image

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1989, 68) translate *Enn þessa sögu hofum uer heyrð ok ritat epter forsögn þeirar bækr* as 'We have heard this story told, but in writing it down we have followed a book . . .' This may or may not communicate the sense that the author intended, but I have chosen to retain the plural of *bækr* and the lack of opposition between *heyrð* and *ritat*.

of a late twelfth-century context: Jón Loptsson (d. 1197), Gizurr Hallsson (d. 1206), Oddr munkr (*fl.* late 1100s). The first editor of the saga, Emil Olson (1912, xcvi–ci), was not convinced and dismissed the saga’s self-professed dating out of hand. A reappraisal came with the intervention of Dietrich Hofmann, who used mostly onomastic and contextual arguments to argue that the attribution to Oddr was in fact credible (Hofmann 1981, 1984a, 1984b, summarised by Phelpstead 2009, 338). Haki Antonsson has complemented this theory with thematic arguments (2012), showing that *Yngvars saga víðförla* discusses the subject of salvation in a manner that would have been relevant and accessible in Oddr’s intellectual milieu. In the following analysis I will offer some further typological observations, in addition to one onomastic argument concerning the name ‘Heliopolis’, to suggest that certain details from the saga are best understood as echoes of the late twelfth-century *Aseneth*.

### The City of the Sun

In Genesis, the city in which Putiphar and therefore Aseneth are resident is known by its Hebrew appellation, Ἡλίουπόλις. *Aseneth* uses the Hellenistic name, Greek Ἡλιουπόλις, in Latin: Heliopolis, ‘the city of the sun’. This is also the name of the city ruled by the eastern potentate King Júlfr in *Yngvars saga víðförla*.<sup>6</sup> An adjacent city is called Citopolis, and is ruled over by Queen Silkisif, to whom we shall return later. In her commendable study of the potential origin of Heliopolis in *Yngvars saga víðförla*, Galina Glazyrina presents a number of theories. Two tendencies emerge as most likely: 1) That Heliopolis, like Siggeum later in the saga, is derived from St Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, or 2) That Heliopolis is drawn from certain *vitae* of St Barbara.<sup>7</sup> *Barbare saga* (1300s–1400s) closes with a vignette that records that after St Barbara’s death

nökkurr heilagr maðr kom leyniliga ok tók á braut líkam innar helgustu meyjar Barbare ok gróf í þeim stað er kallaðr er Sólarstaðr. (Wolf 2000, 154)

a certain holy man came stealthily and took away the body of that most holy maiden Barbara, and buried it in that city which is called *Sólarstaðr* ‘The City of the Sun’.

<sup>6</sup> It has been suggested that Citopolis refers to Kutaisi in Georgia. This proposition is phonetically unsound, and also ignores *Yngvars saga*’s generally literary rather than historical character. See Larsson (1986–89, 104–05) and Shepard (1984–85, 278).

<sup>7</sup> On the reception of the name Heliopolis elsewhere in medieval Scandinavian letters, see Wolf (2000, 10–11, 58–59).

Militating against the St Barbara theory is the fact that, as Kirsten Wolf points out, ‘there is little evidence of the veneration of Saint Barbara in Scandinavia before the mid-fourteenth century’ (2000, 45), well after the date when Oddr supposedly composed *Yngvars saga víðförla*.

Whether the *Etymologiae* really inspired the name of King Jólfr’s city will never be known for certain, but we can bring into further relief the appropriateness of the name ‘Heliopolis’ to the central meaning or spirit of *Yngvars saga víðförla*. That is to say, one can outline what intertextual shading the choice of the name Heliopolis might have brought to the saga’s core themes. Glazyrina has already attempted this to some extent, and not unfruitfully (Glazyrina 2003, 177):

the semantics of the place-name [Heliopolis] could have been easily interpreted by any person with even a very limited knowledge of Greek as ‘The City of the Sun’. This is an additional feature of the place-name that might have led the author of YS to choose the name *Heliopolis*. Icelandic religious skaldic poetry preserved kennings depicting Christ or God with solar components as part of their structure. The first instances of such compositions are known as early as in the tenth or eleventh century, and the tradition lasted for centuries. Thus the local poetic tradition known to the audience assisted it in interpreting the *Heliopolis* of *Yngvars saga* as ‘The City of the Sun’ and facilitated an understanding of the saga as a story about Christian missionaries who led the way to the Holy Land and fought for the Christian faith against pagans.

In the article alluded to above, Haki Antonsson enriches the missionary theme in *Yngvars saga víðförla*, which Glazyrina finds to be intrinsic to the name Heliopolis (see above). For Haki, the driving mechanism of the saga is not restricted to mission, rather it encompasses the entire process of salvation. Haki identifies a late twelfth-century division in the Icelandic élite, with one demographic tending more towards secular power struggles and another increasingly identifying with the Church: ‘From both sides of the divide the idea that redemption was a particular preserve of ecclesiastics must have gained ground and been a source of mounting concern’ (2012, 73). Hofmann read *Yngvars saga víðförla* as a relatively straightforward allegory (e.g. 1981, 217–20), wherein Yngvarr stood as a proxy for King Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995–1000), and the whole effort was to prove the certain salvation of the latter, despite his identity as a secular authority. In Haki’s eyes, the story is more complex than a simple *roman à clef*. The pervading sense of *Yngvars saga víðförla* is really one of doubt. A rich collage of typological associations is assembled to articulate the argument that although there are things one can do to make sure one definitely does *not* get into heaven, such as to be a pagan like Sóti or a secular ruler who disregards holy authority, such as the fictional

King Haraldr of Sweden, the question whether anybody is really saved is unknowable (Haki Antonsson 2012, esp. 90–91). Even the missionary warrior Yngvarr must rely on God’s inscrutable grace. If, as Haki suggests, Oddr’s enterprise was intended as a profoundly eclectic meditation on the journey towards salvation, then evoking the *Aseneth* story with a nod to Heliopolis would have been a sensible authorial strategy. Humility in seeking God’s grace is integral to Aseneth’s conversion (Gerber 2009, 204–07; Burchard 1983, 192–93). The overarching moral in *Aseneth* is that it is possible for anybody to attain perfect salvation regardless of how godless, ignorant or proud they have been in the past.

### The Rejected Kiss

Aseneth’s conversion takes place across three degrees. At first, she is pagan. Second, she sees and falls in love with Joseph. This causes her to reject her native faith, but she has not yet accepted the faith of her love. Rather, the Archangel Michael effects her conversion by allowing her to eat from the honeycomb of the bees of Paradise. This ritual also gives her eternal youth. Silkisif, the queen of Citopolis, has a similar three-stage conversion where, just as in the case of Aseneth, the character who introduces her to the faith will not be the character who formally inducts her.

#### *The conversion of Aseneth to Judaism*

STAGE 1: Pagan

STAGE 2: Meets *Joseph* → wishes to reject paganism but not yet considered converted

STAGE 3: Fully converted by *Archangel Michael*

#### *The conversion of Silkisif to Christianity*

STAGE 1: Pagan (?)

STAGE 2: Meets *Yngvarr* → wishes to reject paganism but not yet considered converted

STAGE 3: Fully converted by *Sveinn*

Pivotal in the trajectories of both these female pagan converts are very similar episodes where they attempt to kiss a hero and are rejected. The Latin *Aseneth* describes the scene where Joseph refuses her eager kiss thus (*Liber*, 96, my emphasis):

[8:4] Et dixit Putifar filie sue: ‘Adveni et osculare fratrem tuum’. [8:5] Et cum advenisset Aseneth osculari Ioseph, extendit Ioseph manum suam dexteram, et apposuit ad pectus eius medio duarum mamillarum, et mamille eius prominebant foras, et ait: ‘*Non decet viro colenti Deum benedicere in ore*

suo deum viventum, et manducare panem benedictum vite, et bibere calicem benedictum incorruptionis, *osculari mulierem alienigenam* que benedicit ore suo idola surda et mortua, et manducat a mensa eorum panes anchonis, et bibit de spondis eorum calicem anedras, calicem occultum, et unguitur oleo inscrutabili. [8:6] Sed vir colens deum osculatur matrem suam, et sororem de tribu et de cognatione sua, et uxorem qua cubat cum eo, quales benedicunt in ore suo deum viventum. [8:7] Similiter vero mulieri colenti deum non est fas osculari virum alienigenum, quia abominatio est hoc in conspectu domini dei.’

And Putifar said to his daughter: ‘Go and kiss your brother.’ And when Aseneth went to Joseph so as to kiss him, Joseph reached out with his hand and placed it on her chest, in between her two breasts, and her breasts pouted forth, and he said: ‘*It is not right for a man who worships God, who blesses with his mouth the Living God, and eats the blessed bread of life, and drinks the blessed chalice of incorruptibility, to kiss a foreign woman, who blesses with her mouth deaf and dead idols, and who eats at the table of the bread of the gallows [?], and who drinks upon the couch from the chalice of wickedness [?], a secret chalice, and anoints herself with mysterious oil. But the man who worships God kisses his mother and his sister in the tribe and of blood, and the woman with whom he sleeps, as they bless with their mouths Living God. In the same way, it will not do for a woman who worships God to kiss a foreign man, for it is an abomination before the Lord God.*’

Understandably embarrassed by this rejection, Aseneth retreats to her tower. It is there that the Archangel Michael finds her and completes her journey into the faith of the Abrahamic God. In *Yngvars saga víðforla*, it is the missionary warrior Yngvarr who introduces Queen Silkisif to Christianity. She is well disposed to the faith, and seems to accept the Christian God. However, she is not baptised or in any way officially received into the faith (*Ysv* 16):

Þann uetur var Ynguar þar j godu yferlæti, þuiat drottning sat huern dag a tâli uid hann ok hennar spekingar, ok sagdi huort þeira audru morg tidindi. Jafnan sagdi Ynguar henni af almætti guds, ok fiell henni uel j skap su trua. So unni hun micit Ynguari, at hun baud honum at eignazt allt rikit ok kongs nafn, ok sialfa sic gaf hun at lyktum j hans valld, ef hann uilldi þar stadfestazt.

That winter Yngvarr was there [Citopolis] in good favour, because the Queen sat every day in conversation with him and her philosophers, and they told each other many stories. Yngvarr always told her about Almighty God; this faith was well suited to her temperament. She loved Yngvarr so much that she invited him to take possession of the whole kingdom, and the name of a king, and in the end she even gave herself into his power, if he wanted to stay there.

Rather, her conversion will not be complete until Yngvarr’s son, Sveinn, follows in his father’s eastward footsteps and arrives in Citopolis (*Ysv*, 43, my emphasis):

Þá biöst Sveinn þadan hvatlega, ok fer, vnns hann kemur j rijke Silkesifar drottingar. Hun geingur j möte þeim med micille sæmd. Enn þegar þeir Sveinn ganga af skipum, þá geingur Ketill þeira firstur j möt drotningu, enn hon gaf eckj ad honum gaum ok snere ad Sveine ok villde kissa hann; enn hann hratt henne fra sier ok qvadst *eij vilia kissa hana heidna konu*. 'Eður firer hvij villtu mic kissa?' Hun svarar: 'þvitat þu einu hefur augu Yngvars, ad þvi er mier sijnest.'

Then Sveinn quickly makes ready to get away from there, and travels until he arrives at the kingdom of Queen Silkisif. She goes to meet them with great honour. But when Sveinn and his men disembark the ships, Ketill goes up to the queen first, but she paid him no attention and turns to Sveinn and wished to kiss him, but he pushed her away and said that *he did not want to kiss her, a heathen woman*. 'Why do you want to kiss me anyway?' She replies: 'Because I can see that you alone have Yngvarr's eyes.'

At this point, the notion that Oddr knew of *Aseneth* and borrowed details therefrom seems extremely likely. Our first clue is his use of the place-name Heliopolis. Our second is the arresting typological affinity between *Aseneth* and Silkisif. The resemblance between Joseph and Sveinn's words when they reject the kiss speaks for itself. Indeed, there is also a hint that *Aseneth* is not just the model for Silkisif, but perhaps in some way Silkisif *is* *Aseneth* herself. As will be discussed below, a particularly fantastic element in the *Aseneth* story is the detail that *Aseneth* has been given eternal life by the Archangel Michael, like a positive mirror-image of the Wandering Jew. No medieval account exists of *Aseneth* dying. This does not necessarily indicate a universal acceptance of *Aseneth*'s immortality by medieval authors. It is surely in part due to the broadly anti-female trend that increases the focus of the story on Joseph at the expense of *Aseneth*, to the point where eventually what becomes of *Aseneth* is outside the scope of the narrative. Nonetheless, it does mean that those medieval commentators who were inclined to accept the literal reading of *Aseneth*'s eternal youth were never challenged by written arguments to the contrary. We never see the death of Silkisif either. Moreover, she first has a relationship with Yngvarr, then Yngvarr's son, Sveinn, is raised to maturity, and when he finally arrives in her city as a young man she is apparently still of marriageable age. Given the allusions to the city of Heliopolis and the rejected kiss, did Oddr intend his audience to wonder whether the queen was in fact *Aseneth* in person, still living since the days of Joseph, still young and beautiful and waiting for her second conversion, this time to Christianity? We cannot know, but if that was Oddr's intention he surely only intended to suggest the most teasing of hints—not least because despite all their affinities, *Aseneth* is of the Israelite faith while Silkisif is *heidin*.

### The Beauty behind her Idols

One of the key themes in *Aseneth* is the rejection of idolatry. The matter would have been particularly important in the Classical era when *Aseneth* was most likely composed. Chesnutt situates the Greek text in a Jewish missionary context, where conversion from polytheism would have been a frequently arising issue (Chesnutt 1995, 129–31, 171–72, 183–84; cf. Gager 1983, 30–97). By the High Middle Ages, when the Latin text entered the domain of Western Christians, there were no idol-worshipping heathens left to convert in Western Europe. What remained from the original concerns about idolatry were vestigial but aesthetically pleasing descriptions of Aseneth's idols and the building which houses them. In *Aseneth* the eponymous heroine is secluded in a tower, surrounded by effigies of the Egyptian gods which she worships devotedly (but from a Christian perspective, erroneously) (*Liber*, 90):

[2:1–3] Et erat Aseneth despiciens omnem virum, elata et superba ad omnem hominem, et nullus vir intuitus est eam aliquando. Siquidem turris erat Putifarum coniuncta domui eius magna et excelsa valde, et desursum turris illius erat cenaculum habens decem thalamos. Eratque primus thalamus magnus et decorus, lapidibus porfiriticis constatus, et parietes eius lapidibus preciosis polimitis induti, et laquearia thalami illius aurea, et erant intus thalami illius infixi in parietibus dii Egyptiorum multi aurei et argentei, et omnes illos colebat Aseneth et timebat, et sacrificium eis cotidie offerebat.

[2:1–3] And Aseneth was despising all men, and was gloating and arrogant towards all men, and no man had ever seen her. This was because there was a grand and very tall tower which Putifar had on the side of his house, and at the top of this tower was a loft, having ten chambers. The first chamber there was great and splendid, bedecked with stones of porphyry, and its walls were covered with a variety of precious stones, and it was in this chamber that the many gods of the Egyptians were affixed to the walls, made of gold and silver, and Aseneth worshipped them all and feared them, and she offered them sacrifices every day.

Aseneth has never been seen by male eyes because of her self-imposed seclusion in her tower. This does not mean she has never seen a man. The tower has plenty of vantage points from which the maiden in the tower can survey the world outside. According to *Aseneth* 2:7: *Et erant fenestre magno thalamo Aseneth ubi virginitas illius nutriebatur* ‘And there were windows in the great chamber where Aseneth's virginity was preserved’. There are four such portals, one facing each compass point, *et tertia prospiciens ad aquilonem in plateam deambulantium* (*Liber*, 91) ‘and the third faced north onto a plaza where people milled about’. It is from this perch,

her pagan idols around her, that she will spy the face of her suitor-to-be, Joseph. She will then utterly lose her heart to him. Presumably Aseneth has spied upon previous visitors to her father's house, but Joseph appears to be the first to feel her eyes upon him, and he shocks her by asking '*Que est mulier illa que erat in cenacula ad fenestram?*' (*Liber*, 95) 'Who is that woman who was in the chamber, by the window?' Vincent of Beauvais subtitled this episode *De sublimatione eiusdem & arrogantia Asseneth* (*Speculum*, 42) 'On the Promotion of the Aforementioned [Joseph] and the Arrogance of Aseneth'. The suggestion that Aseneth is exhibiting undue haughtiness simply by rejecting suitors is rather suspect by modern standards, but let us bear in mind that both Vincent and the original text are keen to emphasise this notion.

The premise sketched out above, the proud beauty amidst heathen idolatry who goes to spy on her suitor-to-be but is herself discovered, is not unparalleled in Old Norse literature. A similar scene is found in *Kormaks saga*.<sup>8</sup> In the following excerpt, the titular hero and his fellow shepherd, Tósti, stop for the night in Gnúpadalr. It is there that he will meet the great love of his life, Steingerðr. The episode is presented thus, somewhat abridged for the present purpose (*Kormaks saga*, 207–10):

Um kveldit gekk Steingerðr frá dyngju sinni ok ambátt með henni. Þær heyrðu inn í skálann til ókunnra manna. Ámbattin mælti: 'Steingerðr mín, sjám vit gestina.' Hon kvað þess enga þörf ok gekk þó at hurðunni ok sté upp á þreskjöldinn ok sá fyrir ofan hlaðann; rúm var milli hleðans ok þreskjaldarins; þar kómu fram fœtr hennar. Kormákr sá þat ok kvað vísu . . . Nú finnr Steingerðr, at hon er sén; snýr nú í skotit ok sér undir skegg Hagbarði. Nú berr ljós í andlit henni. Þá mælti Tósti: 'Kormákr, sér þú augun útar hjá Hagbarðs-höfðinu?' Kormákr kvað vísu:

Brunnu beggja kinna  
 björt ljós á mik drósar,  
 oss hlægir þat eigi,  
 eldhúss of við felldan;  
 enn til ökkla svanna  
 ítrvaxins gatk líta,  
 þrjú muna oss of ævi  
 eldask, hjá þreskeldi.

. . . Tósti mælti: 'Starsýn gerisk hon á þik.' Kormákr kvað:

Hófat lind, né ek leynda,  
 líðs, hyrjar því stríði,

<sup>8</sup> Traditionally *Kormákr* has been spelt with a long *á*, i.e. 'Kormákr', though as Einar Ól. Sveinsson pointed out (1966), 'Kormakr' is more correct.

bands mank beiða Rindi,  
 baugsœm af mér augu,  
 þás húnknarrar hjarra  
 happþægi-Bil krapta  
 helsisœm á halsi  
 Hagbarðs á mik starði.

In the evening Steingerðr left her bower and took her serving girl with her. They heard unknown men out in the parlour. The serving girl said: ‘My dear Steingerðr, we should look at the guests!’ She [Steingerðr] said there was no need for that, but she did still approach the door and climbed up onto the threshold and peered over the woodpile. There was a gap between the woodpile and the threshold. There, her feet stuck out. Kormakr saw that and recited a verse . . . Now Steingerðr realises that she has been seen. Now she turns into a corner and looks out from under Hagbarðr’s beard. Now the light falls on her face. Then Tósti said: ‘Kormakr, do you see eyes out there by Hagbarðr’s head?’ Kormakr recited a verse:

Her face, shining my way.  
 No cause for hope,  
 there in the doorway.  
 By the flames I snatched a glance  
 of that swan’s tail.  
 It will be burnt into my mind  
 as long as I live.

. . . Tósti said: ‘It looks as if she’s staring at you.’ Kormakr recited:

I could not control  
 my burning desire, nor could I conceal it.  
 I remember the woman,  
 adorned with her rings, she couldn’t keep her eyes off me.  
 Standing there in the doorway,  
 after beating me at every board game.  
 Looking out from the neck of Hagbarðr,  
 she gazed my way.<sup>9</sup>

I contend that had an Icelandic author wished to adapt, plagiarise or create a scene inspired by *Aseneth* but set in Iceland, he would have come up with something very like this. The mighty tower becomes a humble *dyngja*, a ‘bower’. The effigies of Egyptian deities are replaced by a simple carving of Hagbarðr. The reference to Hagbarðr, found in both the verse and the prose portions of *Kormaks saga*, was probably originally intended

<sup>9</sup> My translation. As it is the details of the scene that are important for our purposes, rather than the details of the poetry, I have levelled the kennings to their base referents.

as a shade of sympathetic backgrounding (Huth 2000). In the version of the Hagbarðr and Signý story provided by Saxo Grammaticus, Signý and Hagbarðr are doomed lovers, kept apart by Signý's father, who has Hagbarðr sentenced to death (on the wider tradition, see Landolt 1999). In *Kormaks saga*, Steingerðr's family are similarly ill-disposed towards Kormakr, although there are further reasons why the relationship can never be, not least the self-destructive behaviour of Kormakr himself. But the Christian author of the prose in *Kormaks saga* may further be implying that there is something effigy-like about the statue: The carving of Hagbarðr is evidently of such stature that Steingerðr can hide behind its apparently sizeable beard, and for a medieval Christian imagination it would be no leap from the idea of pagans fashioning large statues of their heroes to the implication that those statues were being idolatrously worshipped (e.g. the likeness of Óðinn in the euhemerist accounts of the *Gesta Danorum* and the *Danske Rimkrønike*, which begins as an aesthetic adornment before becoming an object of worship, see also Lassen 2009; Wellendorf 2013, esp. 164–66). Thus both Aseneth and Steingerðr first lay eyes on their future lovers whilst hiding behind or in the vicinity of statues liable to be understood as pagan idols.

There is also no doubt that Steingerðr, like Aseneth, has a rather likeable *arrogantia* about her. She blithely assesses Kormakr's appearance to his face, in badinage with her serving-girl (*Kormaks saga*, 210):

Ambáttin kvað Kormákr vera svartan ok ljótan. Steingerðr kvað hann vænan ok at öllu sem bezt—'þat eitt er lýtit á, hárit er sveipt í enninu.'

The serving-girl said that Kormakr was dark and ugly. Steingerðr said he was handsome and in every way best—'the only thing that's a bit off is that his hair is wavy upon his brow.'

Or later, with a gentle but noticeable derision (*Kormaks saga*, 212):

Ambáttin mælti til Steingerðar: 'Hér ferr nú inn væni maðr, Steingerðr.' Hon segir: 'Víst er hann vaskligr maðr.'

The serving girl said to Steingerðr: 'Here comes that handsome man now, Steingerðr.' She says: 'He's certainly a noble man.'

Both Aseneth and Steingerðr have serving girls, though there are some differences: Aseneth has seven to Steingerðr's one, and we see Steingerðr engage in playful banter with her handmaid, while Aseneth's female companions remain silent throughout the story (*Liber*, 90):

Et reliquos septem thalamos septem virgines habebant, erantque septem virgines iste ministrantes Aseneth, unius etatis universe et in una nocte cum Aseneth genite.

And there were also seven chambers where seven virgins lived, who were the seven virgins who attended to Aseneth, all of the same age and born on the same night as Aseneth.

Ultimately, the serving girl of *Kormaks saga* has more in common with the handmaidens of female love-interests in chivalric literature than she does with the seven virgins of *Aseneth*, but this does not detract from the fundamental resonance between the meeting of Steingerðr and Kormakr and Aseneth and Joseph: the trope of the spying woman, who is caught peeping by her newly-arrived suitor. We have already seen how this sequence is depicted in *Kormaks saga*. In *Aseneth*, it appears thus:

[6:1] Et vidit Aseneth Ioseph et compuncta est fortiter, et defecit anima eius et remissa sunt genua eius, et contremuit toto corpore suo, et dixit in corde suo: . . . [6:4] Misserima ego, quoniam locuta sum patri meo verba pessima. [6:5] Et nunc pergam et abscondam me a facie eius et non videat me Ioseph filius dei, propter quod pessima dixi de eo, [6:6] et iste omne occultum videt et nihil occultorum latet eum propter lumen magnum quod est in eo. [6:7] Et nunc propicius esto mihi, domine deus Ioseph, propter quod locuta sum verba in ignorancia. [6:8] Et nunc det me pater meus Ioseph in ancillam magis et in servam, et servam ei in eternum seculi . . . [7:2] Et ait Ioseph Putifari et omni cognationi eius: 'Que est mulier illa que erat in cenaculo ad fenestram? Abeat nunc de domo ista.' (*Liber*, 94–95)

And Aseneth sees Joseph and is strongly remorseful, and her soul shrinks and she goes weak at the knees, and all her body trembles, and she says in her heart: . . . 'Woe is me, for those wicked words which I spoke to my father [about Joseph]. And now I will go and hide my face so that Joseph, son of God, will not see me, because of the wicked words which I said before, and everything that is hidden is seen by him, and nothing that is hidden escapes his notice, because of the great light that is in him. And now be good to me, Lord God Joseph, for I said those words in ignorance. And now may my father give me to Joseph, more as a slave than a servant, and a servant for an everlasting age.' . . . And Joseph said to Putiphar and all his kinsmen: 'Who is that woman who was in the chamber, by the window? Now let her come out of that building.'

The 'great light' in Joseph, which allows him to see 'everything that is hidden' is rather striking in its similarity to Kormakr's first vision of Steingerðr, herself 'a thing hidden' behind Hagbarðr. Just as Aseneth is caught out by Joseph's divine luminescence, a mysterious source of light reveals Steingerðr: *Nú berr ljós í andlit henni* 'Now the light falls on her face'. Given the previous parallels of premise between *Aseneth* and chapter 3 of *Kormaks saga*, I cannot help but wonder if the Old Norse *ljós* here was in some way inspired by the Latin *lumen magnum*. A saga author inspired by the *Aseneth* scene could not copy the detail that the

light which revealed the hidden admirer had some sort of divine source; Kormakr is a pagan, and a poor candidate for the archetype of the ‘noble heathen’. This potentially explains why the source of the *ljós* is not given (e.g. torchlight, moonlight). The resulting ambiguity allows the audience to locate another allusion to *Aseneth*.

Obviously, there are some important differences between the two settings: Steingerðr is no bashful, recalcitrant Aseneth. Kormakr is very far indeed from the pious Joseph. It would thus be overly imaginative to propose that the episode at Gnúpadalr was intended as a precise rehearsal of *Aseneth*. The Latin *Aseneth* must postdate the basic frame of the Kormakr–Steingerðr romance, if one accepts the view that *Kormaks saga* was constructed around verses which existed in the oral record long before the saga was committed to vellum—verses as old as the 900s if one accepts the historicity of Kormakr Ögmundarson (on the scholarly debate around this problem, see O’Donoghue 1991, 7–16). But if the verses are products of the tenth century, it is worth noting that it is the prose narrative that provides the details which, presented in concord, do the most to evoke *Aseneth*: the flight from the suitor’s gaze, the light which finds the one who hides, the lady’s feistiness.

I would suggest that the author of the prose, which is described by Theodor Möbius via Heather O’Donoghue (1991, 16) as ‘a useful preserving fluid’ for the verses, recognised the inherent affinity of *Kormaks saga* with *Aseneth* and subtly allowed his work to amplify that affinity accordingly. A logical following question, then, is to what extent *Kormaks saga* is of an age where engagement with *Aseneth* is plausible? We will return to the implications of dating in the conclusion, but it may be noted that *Kormaks saga* has been posited as one of the very earliest *Íslendingasögur*, written perhaps as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century (Bjarni Einarsson 1964, 142–44). An early date for *Kormaks saga* would explain the sparsity of its prose and the profusion of its verses, suggesting that the prose was composed at a time when vernacular literary culture was still in its infancy, but when the culture of orally recorded poetry was still strong. The putative influence from *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* on *Kormaks saga* might be thought to indicate a *terminus post quem* of 1226, although Bjarni Einarsson pushed the window of dating back still earlier, arguing that it need not have been the surviving Old Norse *Tristan* produced by Brother Robert which provided the saga author’s inspiration (1961, 162–63).<sup>10</sup> This would locate *Kormaks saga* in the period when *Aseneth*

<sup>10</sup> Bjarni Einarsson’s dating of *Kormaks saga* is complicated by the fact that he rejected the otherwise generally accepted pre-existence of the verses before the

was in vogue. If the man who supplied the prose for *Kormaks saga* had a clerical background, as most scribes presumably did, he could well be expected to know the story. However, it is more plausible to identify the appropriation of imagery from *Aseneth* in *Kormaks saga* as the work of a layman. This would explain why the images which the two works share are not religious or didactic, but purely aesthetic. As previously seen, Nisse has shown that *Aseneth* did enjoy a degree of secular appeal, and the tale continued to circulate alongside the romantic literature it had helped to inspire. If the author of *Kormaks saga* knew of Tristan and Isolde, then why not also Joseph and Aseneth?

### The Bees from the Great Hereafter

The ritual by which Aseneth is officially converted to Judaism provides the most vivid and fantastical element in the *Aseneth* story. As we have seen, seized with passion for Joseph she attempts unsuccessfully to kiss him. Wounded by the rejection, Aseneth renounces her own pagan religion without knowing how to begin adopting Joseph's. She throws her idols out of the window and dons mourning dress. That night, she notices the morning star increasing in brightness which heralds the appearance of the Archangel Michael, descending in a beam of light. Michael has taken the form of Joseph, although with the important differentiating features that his face radiates like lightning, his eyes shine like the sun and his hair is as bright as fire (*verumptamen vultus eius ut fulgur, et oculi eius ut radius solis, et capilli capitis eius ut flamma ignis. Liber, 102*): He wishes to share a meal with her and instructs her to bring him some honeycomb. She regrets that she has none in her pantry, but he insists that if she looks she will find some. When the miraculous honeycomb is brought out and the pair are sitting on Aseneth's bed in order to eat it, a curious ritual is performed. Michael breaks off a piece of the honeycomb and feeds it to Aseneth. Taking what remains of the honeycomb, he draws a cross in its wax, which then bleeds (a detail not found in the Jewish Greek). The honeycomb has still more wonders to display (*Liber, 105–06*):

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prose. In his view (esp. 1976) one author composed both the poetry and the prose frame. The reading presented here is somewhat to the contrary, given that only the prose is found to contain possible *Aseneth* allusions, the verses seemingly having been composed prior to the discovery of *Aseneth* in the West. However, Bjarni's theory on this point need not concern us, as much of his dating was predicated on arguments drawn directly from the approach taken in the prose, which would stand independently even if one were to disregard his conclusions concerning the verses.

Et ait angelus: 'Beata es tu quoniam dimisisti vana idola et credidisti in vivo deo. Et beati advenientes domino deo in penitencia, quoniam comedent de hoc favo quem fecerunt apes paradisi dei de rore rosarum in paradiso. Et ex hoc comedunt angeli dei, et omnis manducat ex isto non morietur in secula seculorum.' Et extendit manum suam dexteram, et confregit de melle partem minimam, et comedit ipse ex eo, et reliquum posuit manu sua in os Aseneth, dixitque ei: 'Ecce comedisti panem vite, et uncta es crismate sancto, et ab hodierno die carnes tue renovabuntur, et ossa tua sanabuntur, et virtus tua erit indeficiens, et iuventus tua senectutem non videbit, et pulcritudo tua in eternum non deficiet. Eris sicut metropolis edificata omnium confugientium ad nomen domini dei regis seculorum.' . . . Et ait angelus: 'Inspice favum.' Et exierunt apes de favo multe valde candide sicut nix, et ale earum purpuree ut iacinctus, et circumdederunt omnes Aseneth, et operabantur in manibus eius favum mellis, et manducaverunt ex eo. Et ait angelus apibus: 'Ite in locum vestrum.' Et abierunt univere versus orientem in paradisum.

And the angel said: 'You are blessed, because you have cast away vain idols and believed in the living God. And blessed are those who come to the Lord God in penitence, because they eat from this honeycomb which is made by the bees of God's Paradise from the nectar of the roses in Paradise. And from this God's angels eat, and all who partake of this will never die forever and ever.' And he extends his right hand, and breaks off a small part of the comb, and he eats of it, and the rest he put with his hand into Aseneth's mouth, saying this: 'Behold, you have eaten the bread of life, and you are anointed with the holy chrism, and from today your flesh will be renewed, and your bones will be purified, and your strength will never fail, and your youth will not see old age, and your beauty will not diminish for eternity. You have been made a fortress city of all who take refuge in the name of the Lord God, king of eternity.' . . . And the angel said: 'Look at the honeycomb.' And bees came out of the comb in great numbers, white as snow, and their wings were of purple and hyacinth, and they circled all around Aseneth, and they made a honeycomb in her hands, and they ate of it. And the angel said to the bees: 'Go to your place.' And they all disappeared eastwards to Paradise.

Much in this scene attracts attention: the overtly Christian symbols of the chrism and the bleeding cross, the apparent sexual undertones to Aseneth inviting Michael to sit on her bed and then being fed from his fingers, or indeed the fact that Aseneth seems not to have been made figuratively immortal—a common Christian turn of phrase—but actually literally immortal, and gifted with eternal youth. We will return to some of these peculiarities, but at present we will turn to the image of the bees of Paradise. Such bees are not unique to *Aseneth*. Indeed, the notion occurs in several genealogically unrelated folkloric traditions that bees are able to travel

between this life and the next, and that they have their origin and proper home in the great hereafter, being only visitors amongst us. Hilda Ransome (2004 [1937], 72, 155, 196–97) catalogues the tradition in orally collected nineteenth-century folklore from Lech in Bavaria, in Islamic legend and in Welsh,<sup>11</sup> most explicitly in the law-code *Dull Gwent* (earliest manuscript 1285, though allegedly tenth-century; Roberts 2011, 102–03):

Bonedd gwenyn o baradwys pan ynt, ac o achos pechod Adda, ac yna y doyhant oddyno ac y rrodde Duw rad arnaddvnt, ac wrth hynny ni cheffir yfferennav heb gwyr.

The origin of bees, they were in Paradise and are here because of the sin of Adam, and then they came from there and God gave them his grace, and because of that there is no mass without wax.

Importantly for our purposes, the image is also found in *Snorra Edda*, where Snorri grafts his bees from the otherworld onto stanza 19 of *Völuspá* (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 16, p. 19):

Ask veit ek ausinn,  
heitir Yggdrasill,  
hár baðmr, heilagr,  
hvíta auri.  
Þaðan koma döggar  
er í dali falla.  
Stendr hann æ yfir grœnn  
Urðar brunni.

Sú dagg er þaðan af fellr á jörðina, þat kalla menn hunangfall, ok þar af fœðask býflugur.

I know an ash,  
called Yggdrasill,  
a tall and holy tree,  
drenched with white clay.  
From there come the dews  
which fall in the dales.  
It stands forever, green over  
the Well of Urð.

The dew which falls therefrom upon the earth, people call ‘honeyfall’, and from there bees are born [*alt.* ‘are fed’ (Clunies Ross 1985, 200; Faulkes 1988, 98)].

This brief etiology is typically ‘Snorrionic’: an eclectic combination of native, pre-Christian Eddic verse, perhaps some folklore with the

<sup>11</sup> Caution is advised on the Islamic attribution, as it largely relies on the deduction that bees accompany the rivers of honey in the Quran, Surah 47:15.

allusion to *hunangfall*, and then an element that commentators have connected to continental learning: *ok þar af fæðask býflugur* (cf. Clunies Ross 1985, 185–86). On the origin of the dew itself, rather than the bees, Anne Holtsmark (1964, 46–47) and Margaret Clunies Ross (1985, 188–92) have both drawn parallels with Honorius's *De Imagine Mundi* (c.1150–75). Clunies Ross refers to the discussion of beekeeping in Virgil's *Georgics* (218–225 [Lib. 4: 1–115]), notes that the bees in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* eat a honeydew caused by natural heat condensation (450–51 [Lib. 12, cap. 12: 30–31]) and ultimately concludes that

Snorri seems to be alluding here to an ancient belief, found in classical authors, that honey fell as dew from heaven because bees could be observed feeding on the sweet, sticky substance found on some leaves (Clunies Ross 1985, 192).

These comparisons are sensible, but it should be noted that neither Honorius, Virgil nor Pliny supplies the idea that bees belong to any plane of existence beyond our own.

If the bees are essentially born of Yggdrasill, there is a parallel to be drawn with the bees of *Aseneth*: in Snorri's imaginative subcreation, Yggdrasill does not seem to have been situated in ordinary space. There are no tales of mortals walking up and embracing its trunk. Rather, it is part of the space only accessible to the gods and their enemies. The same is mostly true of Paradise in the Christian imagination (the exception of Christian vision literature notwithstanding). In both *Snorra Edda* and *Aseneth*, then, bees are said to come from the other world. The comparison with *Aseneth* is also worth making if we accept the translation of *fæðask af* as 'are fed from'. Just as in *Snorra Edda* the bees eat the *hunangfall* 'honey fall' which comes from Yggdrasill, in *Aseneth* the bees eat *de rore rosarum* 'of the nectar of roses' which comes from Paradise (again, not a detail to be found in either Virgil or Pliny). Admittedly, the resemblance between the two episodes is not so great as to be conclusive, but it should be remembered that the proposal that Snorri was open to influence from the apocrypha is not novel, as witness Christopher Abram's theory that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* provided a model for Snorri's account of Hermóðr's *helreið* (2006, 22–31).

### **Conclusion: The late twelfth-century context, and beyond**

It will be observed that all the texts principally examined in this study (the independent Latin *Aseneth*, *Kormaks saga*, *Snorra Edda* and *Yngvars saga víðförla*) were probably composed within three decades of one another (c.1190–c.1220). The examples of inspiration from *Aseneth* in *Yngvars*

*saga víðforla* are integral to the key themes of the saga, repentance and salvation. In contrast, the examples of potential *Aseneth* influence in *Kormaks saga* and *Snorra Edda* appear to be chosen more for their aesthetic appeal than their typological appropriateness. Both types of borrowing chime with Burchard's general assessment of the medieval reception of *Aseneth*: '[the book] was read as a source of inspiration and moral strength, at times for historical information, and indubitably often just for fun' (1983, 196–97).

But if Snorri and the anonymous prose-writer of *Kormaks saga* were not taking *Aseneth* too seriously, they may well have heard the story from people who did. As previously suggested, the late twelfth century was a period of concern about the role of the clergy in securing salvation for the laity, and indeed the extent to which people 'of the world' could be saved at all. Symptomatic of this concern was an increased interest in penitential culture. Robert Swanson describes the changes in spiritual culture of the period thus (Swanson 1999, 138):

Ultimately, this [increased interest] amounted to a shift in the awareness of the possibility of salvation. Hitherto, only monks had been assured of salvation; for others damnation seemed more likely. Over the twelfth century, the net spread more widely: even the laity might be saved; indeed, even the married laity might be saved. Laypeople (or, to be more precise, non-noble laypeople) might even become saints. In 1199 Pope Innocent III formally canonised the first merchant saint, Homobono of Cremona.

Against this intellectual backdrop, *Aseneth* provided a colourful, stylistically well-executed depiction of divine favour being bestowed on someone severely lacking in terms of spiritual advantages, being a heathen, a woman and a layperson. Originating in a milieu of missionising Judaism, the story grafted surprisingly well on to the contours of High Medieval Christianity. *Aseneth*'s heartfelt rejection of idolatry and her subsequent prayer for forgiveness were interpreted as examples of penitence. The similarity between *Aseneth*'s plea and contemporary penitential culture was not lost on Vincent of Beauvais, who entitled the section of his *Aseneth* containing her prayer: *De pœnitentia Asseneth & consolatione Angelica (Speculum, 43)* 'Of the penitence of *Aseneth* and the angelic consolation'. Certain learned Icelanders would have been well placed both to observe the late twelfth-century salvation controversy and to become familiar with the independent Latin *Aseneth*. Two bishops of Skálholt in the 1100s are said to have studied in England, where *Aseneth* was first translated into Latin. First came Bishop Þorlákr (r. 1178–93), who had also studied in Paris where he would

almost certainly have encountered the latest thinking on salvation (Arnold 2014, 12; *Bps*, 52):

Þaðan fór hann til Englands ok var í Lincolni ok nam þar enn mikit nám ok þarfsælligt, bæði sér ok öðrum, ok hafði þá enn mikit gott þat af sér at miðla í kenningum sínum er hann var áðr trautt jafn vel við búinn sem nú.

From there [Paris] he went to England and was in Lincoln, and acquired there yet more learning, useful both to himself and others, and he enjoyed sharing his knowledge as much as he had been unwilling to do so before.

His nephew Bishop Páll Jónsson (r. 1195–1211) followed (*Bps*, 297–98):

En síðan fór hann suðr til Englands ok var þar í skóla ok nam þar svá mikit nám at trautt váru dæmi til at neinn maðr hafði jafn mikit nám numit né þvilíkt á jafn langri stundu. Ok þá er hann kom út til Íslands þá var hann fyrir öllum mönnum öðrum í kurteisí lærðóms síns, versagørð ok bókalestri.

And then he went south to England, and was in school there, and there acquired so much learning that it would be hard to name a man who had acquired as much of such learning in a time of equal length. And then when he returned to Iceland he was above all others in the gentlemanliness of his knowledge, poetry and the art of letters.

That neither a Latin nor an Old Norse *Aseneth* manuscript survives from twelfth-century Iceland is not surprising, even though the international connections and personnel existed to procure and translate them. The independent *Aseneth* tradition became a victim of its own success. Its incorporation and abridgement in Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* in the 1250s appears to have made the independent *Aseneth* redundant in the eyes of most scribes. Just nine Latin manuscripts of the non-Vincentian tradition survive to date, all of them from Britain (Burchard 1996, 367). As has been seen, there is an extant Old Norse *Aseneth* of the Vincentian tradition preserved in *Stjórn I*, but it is more than a century younger than *Yngvars saga víðfjrla*, *Kormaks saga* and *Snorra Edda*, and so has largely been excluded from the present discussion. We might fruitfully compare this situation with that of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which did not become part of an immensely popular compilation, and so independent manuscripts thereof remained quite widespread, as Odd Einar Haugen (1992, 38; 1985, 426–28) has shown to be particularly true in the case of its Old Norse version, *Niðrstigningar saga*. Whether *Aseneth*, like *Nicodemus*, was also translated into Old Norse around the year 1200 is impossible to say. It would not have needed to be rendered into the vernacular in order to influence Oddr Snorrason, who could read and write in Latin. Snorri would probably have been unable to read *Aseneth* in Latin for himself, but some if not

all of his teachers at Oddi would have been Latinate, to say nothing of the learned environment he encountered at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–63). On the whole, the *Aseneth* in *Stjórn I* is a close rendering of Vincent's Latin. The only noteworthy divergence comes in the translator's lexical choice when describing the rejected kiss (*Stjórn I*, 312, my emphasis):

putifhar bað þa dottur sína minnaz við ioseph ok kýssa hann. ok sua sem hun etlaði þat at giöra ok gekk at honum. þa retti hann framm handina takandi henní ímot hennar briostí ok bringu sua segiandi. Meðr engu motí stendr þat at sá maðr sem lifanda guð dýrkar ok lifs brauð etr ok heilsamleghan drykk drekkir kýssi þa konu af heidinni þjóð komna sem hun dýrkar ok kýsser dauf ok dumba skurðguð. . .

Then Putifar told his daughter to greet Joseph and kiss him, and when she intended to do that and went up to him, then he extended his hand, placing it upon her breast and bosom, saying: 'In no way can it pass that the man who worships the Living God and eats the Bread of Life and drinks the wholesome drink *may kiss a woman who comes from a heathen nation*, who worships and kisses deaf and dumb idols. . .'

In the *Speculum Historiale* (*Speculum*, 43), Joseph refuses the kiss with the words:

non decet virum colentum Deum viventum, & manducantem panem vitae, & calicem incorruptionis bibentum, osculari mulierem alienigenam osculantem ore suo idole surda & muta.

The Old Norse *Aseneth* translates *alienigena mulier* as *kona af heidinni þjóð* 'a woman from a heathen nation'. It is a very fitting translation, as elsewhere in Old Norse *heidin þjóð* is often used to signify 'the gentile nations' as opposed to the Israelites. However, Latin *alienigenus* really just means 'foreign', not specifically 'pagan' as signified by Old Norse *heidinn*. Indeed, the term usually used for 'gentile' in the Vulgate is simply *gentes*. Vulgate *alienigenus* is used to denote 'foreign' more broadly, e.g. Ezra 10:44: *Omnes hii acceperunt uxores alienigenas et fuerunt ex eis mulieres quae pepererant filios* 'All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children'. Thus the fourteenth-century Old Norse *Aseneth* here provides a very informed translation, but not a literal or particularly close one. Remarkably, the fourteenth-century *Aseneth* appears to be anachronistically echoed in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century *Yngvars saga* where we saw Sveinn decline Silkisif's kiss because he *qvadst eij vilia kissa hana heidna konu* 'said he did not wish to kiss her, a pagan woman'. However, this cannot be taken as proof that the *Stjórn I* translator was informed by an

earlier Old Norse *Aseneth* as used by Oddr—especially as I see no other discrepancies between Vincent’s Latin and *Stjórn I*. It is just as likely that the *Stjórn I* translator was replicating a turn of phrase directly from *Yngvars saga víðförla*.<sup>12</sup>

The history of *Aseneth* in Iceland falls silent for several centuries after the *Stjórn I* translation. It seems as though *Aseneth* spoke most to the concerns of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, but that authors of subsequent generations did not find sufficient inspiration in its pages to allude to it in their own writing. A curious footnote to the Icelandic reception of *Aseneth* is its retranslation into Icelandic from Danish in the seventeenth century. The Danish churchman Hans Mogensen (d. 1595) translated a Low German chapbook version of the legend into his native language in 1580. The Danish *Aseneth* chapbook was subsequently translated into Icelandic by Árni Halldórsson í Hruni in 1630.<sup>13</sup> It is mostly a fairly straightforward translation of Mogensen’s Danish, but for one important detail. Árni Halldórsson added an account, apparently of his own devising, of *Aseneth*’s death from grief after Joseph’s passing. As far as I know it is the only account of *Aseneth* dying in any source (*Icelandic Aseneth*, 190–91):

En Assen[at] þa hun <sa Joseph ordenn siúkan kom hun>, og var hiä honum, og griet särlega [og hann] bleðaðe Assenat og hennar tuo sonu, og efter þ[ad] mintest han þrátt vid Assenat, og sagde þau yrde <ad skilia> fyrst litla stúnd, svo mundi þau med gleda aftur finnast. Og sem hiin var sig sorgande bad hann hana ein stund burtú ad ganga frá sier, og [sem] hun þad gjorde, andadest hann. Enn fäm dógum efter andadest lyka Assenat, mest af sorg, þui [ad] engin madur matte til hennar koma, ür þui Josep var daúdur.

And *Aseneth*, when she saw that Joseph had become sick, came and was next to him, and wept grievously, and he blessed *Aseneth* and her two sons, and after that he kissed her resolutely,<sup>14</sup> and said that they had to part first for a little while, then they would find each other again with joy. And as she was grieving he asked her to go away from him for a moment, and when she did that he died. And a few days later *Aseneth* died too, mostly from grief, because no man could approach her because Joseph was dead.

By Árni’s time belief in *Aseneth*’s immortality had presumably faded away entirely. Even if any Icelanders did recall the tradition, Árni was

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Joseph Harris for this observation.

<sup>13</sup> On the Danish and Icelandic chapbooks in question, see Overgaard (1991, 203–99).

<sup>14</sup> This is an archaic use of the verb form *minntist við*, particularly indicating a kiss of welcome or parting.

writing in the age of Lutheranism, where such details would readily have been dismissed as Catholic superstition. I doubt he intended to make any profound statement by his addition. Rather, I suspect he wished only to fill a lacuna that he found puzzling. Nonetheless, the result was that an obscure Old Testament woman, made a heroine in Jewish antiquity, found her final resting place in Iceland.

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