



Kyngervi



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Foreword

Basil Arnould Price¹

The Future is Bright!: An Introduction

In her groundbreaking *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), Carolyn Dinshaw concludes: ‘as queer historical projects aim to promote a queer future, the possibility of queerness in the past - of lived lives or fictional texts - becomes crucial’.² Why is the possibility of premodern queerness so crucial to queer futurity? For Dinshaw, reading Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* alongside John/Eleanor Rykener’s deposition documents, the possibility of medieval queerness ‘... makes it seem less likely that queers could ever be completely exterminated in the future.’³ In other words, by gesturing to the place of queers in the past, medieval scholarship secures the place of queers in the future.

Although written over twenty years ago, Dinshaw’s recuperative scholarship reminds us of the urgency of medieval studies when ‘a unified straight white masculinity’ threatens queer lives. In June 2020, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic,⁴ the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under U.S. President Donald Trump finalised a revision to Section 1557 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Simmons-Duffin, Office of the Secretary). The new rule removes nondiscrimination protections in health care and insurance policy for LGBTQ people—queer people may be denied care by doctors or coverage by their insurance. Considering this reversal occurred at the height of the increasingly

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² Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) 140.

³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 140.

⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic began near the end of 2019, and at the time of this essay’s writing, continues.

lethal COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to view the Trump administration's decision as anything other than a threat to queer lives.

Along with the outrage inspired by U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's rumoured revision of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, the reversal of Section 1557 raises a chilling question: is there a future for queers?⁵ Queer theorists respond in myriad ways to this question, as a roundtable at the 2005 MLA Annual Convention demonstrates. On one side of the debate, we have Judith/Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman. The latter's 2004 monograph gives their response to the question in its title: *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). On the other side of the conversation, is José Esteban Muñoz, who argues that '... queerness is primarily about futurity' and in fact, 'queers have nothing *but* a future'.⁶ In formulating his theory of queer futurity, Muñoz (2005) cites Dinshaw's approach to the medieval period as a guiding methodology for attending to the past, critiquing the present, and anticipating a future.⁷ The question of queer futurity is multifaceted and warrants a more detailed consideration of its application to medieval studies than what I allude to here. Nevertheless, I invoke this debate to suggest that *Kyngervi*, consciously or unconsciously, participates in the project of fashioning a queer future by through its presentation of the past.

Dinshaw, Edelman, and Muñoz interrogated queer futurity in response to critical cultural moments, when they were forced to ask: is there a future for someone like me? Briefly examining the context of their work helps illuminate how *Kyngervi* exists within this continuum of crisis and contributes to the ongoing exploration of this question. Beginning with Dinshaw, she wrote *Getting Medieval* in part to respond to the proposed defunding of the American National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) by U.S. Congressman Steven J. Chabot (R-OH) in 1998, as well as the more broadly growing anti-intellectualism in late-

⁵ Ben Hunte, 'Gender Recognition Act: LGBT Political Group Anger at Trans Law "Changes"', BBC News (BBC, June 20, 2020) <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53101071>.

⁶ Robert L. Caserio et al., 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,' *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006) 819-828, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357>, 820, 825.

⁷ Caserio et al., 'The Antisocial Thesis', 826.

90s America.⁸ Edelman's polemic *No Future* also responded to increasing conservatism in the United States, drawing from the debate around same-sex marriages, and the myth of 'reproductive futurity' espoused by a pro-life and homophobic family values crowd.⁹ In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Muñoz takes a similar starting point to Edelman, but moves to the (at the time) 'ongoing attack on cultures of sexual dissidence' enacted by Rudy Giuliani's (1994-2001) so-called 'clean up' of Manhattan during his tenure as New York City mayor, a policy adopted by subsequent mayor (2002-2013) and 2020 presidential-hopeful, Michael Bloomberg.¹⁰ In all three theorists' work, the spectre of AIDS—the ultimate denial of queer futurity—lingers over their analysis.

Kyngervi likewise emerges from a time of crisis. The journal was formed in tangent with the Norse Queer and Gender Studies Network in 2018. As General Editor, Amy Jefford Franks attests, the journal was formed in response to the enduring neglect of gender and queer studies in the field.¹¹ But I would argue *Kyngervi* owes its existence just as much to the U.K. and the U.S.'s increasingly conservative political climate and the increasingly visible appropriation of medieval, and particularly Old Norse, aesthetics by far-right organizations. Shocking myself and many other medievalists was the display of Old Norse symbols by white nationalists at the 2017 'Unite the Right Rally' in Charlottesville, VA as they shouted the Nazi adage: 'blood and soil.'¹² These events were at the forefront of my mind when I agreed to edit *Kyngervi*. To paraphrase Muñoz, my decision emerged from the idea that the present was not

⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 173-179.

⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 28-29.

¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 53.

¹¹ Amy Jefford Franks, 'A Letter from the Editor,' *Kyngervi* 1 (2019) 5-8, https://kyngervi.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/letter_from_editor_jefford_franks-2.pdf, 7.

¹² Sierra Lomuto provides multiple examples of medieval symbols displayed at Charlottesville. For instance, she identifies the Elder Futhrak Odal/Othala rune on many of the banners of the 'Unite the Right' rally (Lomuto). For more about the strategic medievalism of the 'Unite the Right' rally, see: Sierra Lomuto, 'Public Medievalism and the Rigor of Anti-Racist Critique,' *In the Medieval Middle* (blog), April 4, 2019, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2019/04/public-medievalism-and-rigor-of-anti.html>.

enough. As the events at Charlottesville reiterated, the present was and is ‘impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations.’¹³ In *Kyngervi*, I saw an alternative to the present: a space that fostered a queer scholarly community and produces what Dinshaw calls a *queer history*.

In her introduction to *Kyngervi*’s inaugural issue, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2019) also offers the medieval past as a source for finding an alternative to the present. She remarks that the ‘possibilities of nonbinary and queer readings [are] one of the running themes in this first issue.’¹⁴ What are the possibilities afforded by these nonbinary and queer readings? Do they rectify the present, popular and academic expectation of medieval Scandinavians: as white, cisgender, and heteronormative?¹⁵ Jóhanna suggests that *Kyngervi*’s first collection of articles offers a constellation of possible alternatives to this present view, speaking to the journal’s broader thesis ‘[that] the concept of gender itself does not have one meaning for everyone today, nor did it in the past.’¹⁶ Jóhanna’s reading of the first issue of *Kyngervi* emphasizes that predicating the journal’s insights, is the assumption that queers of the past, present, and future are connected. To borrow Dinshaw’s language, this guiding conceit renders *Kyngervi* a work of queer history. Dinshaw defines ‘queer history’ as an impulse to make connections, no matter how fragmentary, between ‘the lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and ... those left out of sexual categories now.’¹⁷ By drawing these partial, transtemporal connections, Dinshaw posits that queer historical projects provide material for ‘queer subject

¹³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 53.

¹⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Foreword,’ *Kyngervi* 1 (2019) 9-14, https://kyngervi.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/foreword_fridriksdottir-2.pdf, 11.

¹⁵ This is a generalization, but a productive one, perhaps best encapsulated by Judith Jesch in *Women in the Viking Age* (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 1991). For an adjacent perspective, addressing the imagined white “Anglo-Saxon” in Early English studies, see Mary Rambaran-Olm’s recent work, more specifically: ‘Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy.’ Medium, 2018. <https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>.

¹⁶ Jóhanna, ‘Foreword,’ 11.

¹⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 1.

and community formation *now*.¹⁸ Turning again to the first issue of *Kyngervi*, Jefford Franks' opening remarks likewise speak to the queers of the past as contributing to a present queer community's survival. *Kyngervi*, by presenting the possibilities of a queer medieval Scandinavia, cultivates a community comprised of queer people and allies. As Jefford Franks comments: 'we [the editorial team] came together after I sought out colleagues who were willing to support me in this endeavour. I found a group of people who, like me, could see how much the field needed a journal like this...'¹⁹ By invoking a shared interest in—or more appropriately, a connection with—medieval queers, Jefford Franks created a queer medievalist community for the *now*.²⁰

But what about *future*? Whereas Jefford Franks' remarks only invoke futurity with promises of this second issue, Jóhanna reiterates *Kyngervi* is part of the queer academe of the future. Praising the quality of the first issue and its editorial team, Jóhanna remarks that '... the future looks bright!'²¹ As I look back on Jóhanna's introduction in the dark days of 2020, I can't help but wonder where that bright future *is*. As we move into 2021, what will the academic landscape look like? And more relevant to Jóhanna's optimism, how will *Kyngervi* participate in that future?

To speculate on how *Kyngervi* contributes to a queer future, I turn to how Dinshaw's purposed 'queer historical impulse' resonates with Muñoz's postulation that 'queerness is always on the horizon.'²² Like Jóhanna, Muñoz and Dinshaw both believe in a bright future, to be achieved through a queer look at the past. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz offers 'a theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present.'²³ Inspired by Dinshaw (whom he briefly cites),²⁴ Muñoz argues that 'a posterior glance at different moments, objects, and spaces' offers 'an anticipatory illumination of

¹⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 22 - emphasis added.

¹⁹ Jefford Franks, 'A Letter from the Editor,' 7.

²⁰ Jefford Franks, 'A Letter,' 8.

²¹ Jóhanna, 'Foreword,' 13.

²² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

²³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 18.

²⁴ Muñoz names Dinshaw's notion of 'touching the past'—which I've more broadly called 'the queer historical impulse'—amongst the theories that shapes his approach. See: Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 17.

queerness'.²⁵ In other words, forming transtemporal relationships with the past offers possibilities for what the queer future *could* be. But that future is not here yet. Muños finds these potentialities in the twentieth-century Frankfurt School, whereas Dinshaw argues that the medieval is a source for fashioning a queer future. Near the end of *Getting Medieval*, Dinshaw posits that through these transtemporal relationships—what she calls the 'queer historical impulse'—medievalists will 'build selves and communities now and *into the future*'.²⁶ In Dinshaw, as in Muños, these future queer communities are not yet here—they exist in an unspecified future. Nevertheless, when the queer historical impulse is followed, the medieval past reveals queerness that 'can *for the future* offer a creative, even liberatory potential.'²⁷ A retroactive examination of *Kyngervi* through Dinshaw and Muños reveals a similar underlying theory of queer futurity. By reading the Scandinavian middle ages queerly, *Kyngervi* provides a posterior glance that helps us critique what queerness is *now* and anticipates what queerness *could be* in the future.

Alternatives to the Present: This Issue's Contents

Kyngervi's recuperative scholarship offers medieval Scandinavia as marked by difference and resistance to disciplinary structures and discourses that continue into the modern era. As Jóhanna claims in her introduction, *Kyngervi* offers a different possibility—the possibility of an alternative to the 'fictitious unity' of a hegemonic, heteronormative modernity.²⁸ In this edition of *Kyngervi*, our articles are loosely arranged around the theme of representation, and how non-normative identities manifest themselves in defiance of dominant discourse.

Even more so than in our first issue, this issue of *Kyngervi* demonstrates that lived experiences of gender can only be captured through considering multiple forms of representation. In her article, Julia Willborg examines representations of gender in material culture and ultimately critiques

²⁵ Muños, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.

²⁶ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 206 - emphasis added.

²⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 205 - emphasis added.

²⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Jóhanna 'Foreword,' 11.

scholarship's attempt to classify Viking-age women. Her supposition is that modern archaeologists frequently rely on the hegemonic gender norms of their own culture, rather than what is attested to in the material record (1). Taking the lady with the mead horn—the symbol of *Kyngervi*—as her focus, Wilhborg argues against archaeologists' biological essentialism in their approach to Viking-age figurines and burials (1, 11-12). Gazing at the material artefacts of the Viking Age through queer theory, she argues, affords a view of pre-modern sexuality that resists easy classification into gendered roles. Studies of gender in medieval Scandinavia often rely upon modern scholars constructing gender roles based upon particular actions or attributes that they determine are masculine or feminine.²⁹ Wilhborg's critique also extends beyond medieval Scandinavian studies, as this categorization also occurs in the adjacent field of Early English studies. Taking studies of *Beowulf* as an example, first- and second-wave feminist scholars attempted to foreground women in the poem by fitting them neatly into a series of categories.³⁰ Attempts to categorize gender in this way have proved influential and recuperative for women in both medieval Scandinavian and English studies, but this approach has underlying problems. Wilhborg offers an alternative to this dominant model of present scholarship: an alternative that is notably future-oriented. Her article ends with a passionate plea for archaeologists of the future to resist imposing modern gender stereotypes on Viking age material culture, and instead 'embrace the polysemous abilities of the material (14-15).' Like Dinshaw, Wilhborg urges that a queer approach to Viking Age artefact dismantles reveals gender as a social construct, and exposes 'the

²⁹ There are many examples of this approach in Scandinavian medieval studies. Two influential frameworks are the one-gender model proposed by Carol Clover and the four female archetypes articulated by Jenny Jochens. See: Clover, Carol J. 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (Apr., 1993) 363-387; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

³⁰ Although the categorization of Early English women into the categories of 'hostess, peace-weaver, mourner, goader, and counselor' is less common in scholarship today, it still persists in the field. For a more in-depth historiography of these categories, see: Basil Arnould Price. 'Potentiality and Possibility: An Overview of Beowulf and Queer Theory.' *Neophilologus*, February 22, 2020, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-020-09636-8>.

impossibility of absolute straightness, whiteness, modernity of **essentially** *being* anything.³¹

As Dinshaw and Wilhborg's work demonstrates, the field of medieval studies reveals the impossibility of modern essentialisms. But in the popular consciousness, the medieval signifies when, prior to the advent of modernity, racialized and gendered essentialisms ruled.³² In *Getting Medieval's* coda, Dinshaw approaches the medieval in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). She comes to the conclusion that the film presents the medieval as a violent step on the path to modernity. The modernity that the film imagines only emerges when white masculinity succeeds in eliminating the medieval, and all of its 'sodomy, sadomasochism, Southern-ness, and Blackness.'³³ Dinshaw's Foucauldian reading of *Pulp Fiction* offers the middle ages as a space of plural, unfixed identities prior to a disciplining white masculine modernity. But twenty-first century popular culture envisions the medieval not as a place where abjection and Otherness *exist* in defiance of hegemonic norms, but rather as a time when Otherness *could not exist*. Many recent popular medieval European fantasy films, television series, and video games present worlds that are predominately white and heteronormative. People of colour and queer people are at the margins of the screen, if they are included at all. Fans of this media often defend this decision by arguing that the exclusion of queers and people of colour is 'historically-accurate' to a fictional, medieval-ish world.³⁴ Although scholars such as Helen Young criticize these fantasies of an essentially white medieval period,

³¹ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 189.

³² Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 205.

³³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 185-186.

³⁴ Consider, for instance, fans' reaction to the criticism the acclaimed fantasy roleplaying game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) received for its failure to include a single person of colour in the base game. Many players responded by asserting that, since the game was set in a fictionalized East European medieval world, it was 'historically accurate' to include only white humans, elves, and dwarves. In a similar vein, fans of G.R.R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, defend its predominantly white setting by asserting that only medieval Europe (and by extension, only medieval Europeans) offer anything of interest to the modern reader. After the series was adapted into the popular television show *Game of Thrones*, fans also justified its depiction of misogyny and sexualized violence as historically accurate to its setting. Further examples are noted in; Tauriq Moosa, 'Colorblind: On The Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem,' *Polygon* (June 3, 2015), <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem>; Helen Young, 'Place and Time: Medievalism and Making Race.' *Year's Work in Medievalism* 28 (2013) 1-6.

an ‘insistence on the fundamental and exclusionary whiteness of the Middle Ages’ persists amongst scholars and white supremacists.³⁵

Futurity is at stake in this ongoing conversation about how modern and medieval materials imagine race. Sierra Lomuto argues that medieval studies has an ‘ethical responsibility to ensure that the knowledge we create and disseminate about the medieval past is not weaponized against people of color and marginalized communities in our own contemporary world.’³⁶ When I read Lomuto’s call, I see a parallel to Dinshaw’s argument that centring the possibility of queers in the past leads to the survival of queers in the future. Applying Dinshaw’s framework to race suggests that a medieval studies that foregrounds discussions of the experience and representation of people of colour is a discipline that rejects white supremacy’s attempt to deny a past, and consequently a present and future.³⁷ In this issue of *Kyngervi*, Dan Laurin and Ashley Castelino’s respective articles participate in this anti-racist project by exploring the intersection between ethnicity and gender identity in medieval Scandinavian textual sources’ construction of essentialized Otherness. Although both articles illustrate how the Icelandic sagas represent Scandinavia’s indigenous Sámi population, the authors differ in their conclusions about where these essentialisms originate. Castelino focuses on how modern critics deploy racialised and gendered essentialisms in his readings of *Ynglinga saga*, whereas Laurin’s close reading of *Eiríks saga rauða* reveals that these essentialisms are endemic to Old Norse literary culture.

Considering Castelino’s article first; he argues that although contemporary scholarship often constructs Sámi women as ‘archetypical Others,’ his reading reveals that these women, epitomized by Skjálf, can in fact enforce Scandinavian social mores. This argument runs contrary to Jeremy DeAngelo’s (2010) famous proposition that the sagas imagine Sámi (*finnar*) with

³⁵ Young, ‘Place and Time,’ 6; Andrew B.R. Elliot, ‘Internet medievalism and the White Middle Ages.’ *History Compass* 16, no. 3 (2018) 4.

³⁶ Lomuto, ‘Public Medievalism and the Rigor of Anti-Racist Critique.’

³⁷ David Perry. ‘How to Fight 8chan Medievalism – and Why We Must.’ *Pacific Standard*. June 27, 2019. <https://psmag.com/ideas/how-to-fight-8chan-medievalism-and-why-we-must-notre-dame-christchurch>.

‘oppositional intent’: an inherent hostility to Scandinavian society and culture.³⁸ Castelino submits that there is a more complex and ambivalent relationship between indigeneity, particularly female indigeneity, and the continuation of normative Scandinavian society. One way to unpack this relationship is through the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1984), who proposes that colonial discursive power craves ‘mimics,’ ‘a reformed, recognizable other ... a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.’³⁹ By upholding the cultural values of the dominant, colonial power (in this case Scandinavia), these mimics rise from the social margins into a place of prominence. Could this explain why the saga, as Castelino explicates, is so favourable to its female Sámi characters? If so, would this change how we understand the place of indigeneity in both contemporary and medieval Scandinavian culture?

Dan Laurin’s essay offers another possible framework for approaching the presentation of gender and indigeneity within the Icelandic sagas. Although interest in medieval Scandinavian gender is often recuperative and thus focuses on women,⁴⁰ rethinking masculinity has become an exciting new avenue for research, spearheaded by Gareth Lloyd Evans.⁴¹ Laurin’s subject, *Eiríks saga rauða*’s Rǫgnvaldr, differs from Skjálf not only in his gender identity, but also in his role within normative Scandinavian society. Laurin claims that Rǫgnvaldr is not a potential colonial mimic like Skjálf, but rather a ‘hybrid’: composed of marginalized masculinities and femininities (4). Ethnicity and indigeneity is also a participant in the construction of hybridity, as Dinshaw notes in her description of hybridity in medieval literature. Citing Bhabha, Dinshaw claims that the hybrid subject, generated by ‘uncanny forces of race, sexuality, violence, cultural, and ... climatic differences...’ deconstructs normative and dominant

³⁸ Jeremy DeAngelo, ‘The North and the Depiction of the ‘Finnar’ in the Icelandic Sagas.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 82, no. 3 (2010) 257-286, www.jstor.org/stable/25769033, 258, 271.

³⁹ Homi Bhabha. ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.’ *October* 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (1984): 125-33. doi:10.2307/778467, 126.

⁴⁰ Some examples of this recuperative scholarship include: Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex’; Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*; and more recently, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. Springer, 2013.

⁴¹ See, for example: Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock, eds. *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature* (Boydell & Brewer, 2020).

cultures.⁴² Laurin wisely cautions against seeing Røgnvaldr as ‘a martyr of queer victimhood’ and, like Willborg, asks us to instead reconsider unconscious classifications of medieval figures into modern gender stereotypes (18). But reading Laurin’s article through Dinshaw moreover affords reading Røgnvaldr as a figure of resistance. Medieval literature presents hybrid identities ambivalently, and Dinshaw suggests that ‘resistance is in fact enabled by this ambivalence.’⁴³ Just as Willborg revealed in her essay, Laurin and Castelino’s approaches to indigeneity and gender rethink dominant classifications and resists essentializing a multifaceted Scandinavian medieval past.

Kyngervi provides a platform for asking what medieval Scandinavia offers a tumultuous present and uncertain future. But the questions posed by these articles extend beyond the journal. Through our book reviews, this issue facilitates a discussion with recent scholarship that provides new relations, new identifications, and new communities, with which we are, as Dinshaw states, ‘connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality.’⁴⁴ Our book review editor, Lee Colwill, solicited reviews for new approaches to Scandinavian medieval studies that centre that which has been overlooked,⁴⁵ and/or exhibit a broad range of theoretical borrowings, including gender studies,⁴⁶ queer theory,⁴⁷ and ecocriticism.⁴⁸ Under normal circumstances, *Kyngervi* would include conference reports in addition to these book reviews. Conferences form a tangible expression of medieval studies’ plural communities, and the multitude of answers posed to the question: *but what about the future?* Given the cancellation of many of these conferences due to the ongoing pandemic, *Kyngervi*’s coverage of these communities will be limited.

⁴² Homi Bhabha, ‘Postcolonial criticism,’ In *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles B. Gunn. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992): 441-445, qtd. in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 16.

⁴³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 16.

⁴⁴ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 39.

⁴⁵ Particularly relevant to this issue is Neil Price’s discussion of Sámi and Norse interactions in *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), reviewed in this volume.

⁴⁶ Anne Marie Rasmussen (ed.), *Rivalrous Masculinities. New Directions in Medieval Gender Studies*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

⁴⁷ Evans, *Men and Masculinities*.

⁴⁸ Christopher Abrams, *Evergreen Ash*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

But it would be erroneous to say these circumstances stalled medievalists' efforts to build future communities by interpreting contemporary events through the medieval past. On the contrary, the parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Death engendered much productive conversation about how medieval studies could contribute to 'the new normal.' One example is the Medieval Academy of America (MAA)'s special webinar, 'The Mother of All Pandemics: The State of Black Death Research in the Era of Covid-19.' MAA launched the seminar to consider how medieval notions of and responses to epidemic can help inform a 'recovery from COVID-19.'⁴⁹ Implicit in the webinar's description is the promise of a future without COVID-19, although in MAA's home country, the United States, climbing infection and death rates suggest otherwise.⁵⁰

Although COVID-19 is an overwhelming shadow over 2020, medievalists have also responded to recent and ongoing racially-motivated violence, sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police. Medievalist gatherings in wake of these events are worth noting here, given *Kyngervi*'s effort to build transtemporal communities 'connected by virtue of shared marginality.' MAA launched 'Race, Racism, and Teaching the Middle Ages,' a webinar that uses the medieval past to respond to contemporary racism—particularly within the classroom. But the webinar also promises a future: suggesting that the participant will come away with ideas, texts, and resources for teaching students in Fall.⁵¹ In a similar vein, the RaceB4Race (RB4R) community's virtual roundtable 'To Protect and Serve' responds to Floyd's murder, and contemporary police brutality more broadly, by examining

⁴⁹ 'The Mother of All Pandemics: The State of Black Death Research in the Era of Covid-19.' MAA Webinars. The Medieval Academy of America, May 15, 2020. <https://www.medievalacademy.org/page/webinars>.

⁵⁰ The US Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports as of July 21, 2020 (12:15PM) that there are 3,761,362 cases in the United States, and that there have been 140,630 deaths. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s 182th situation update (July 20, 2020), the Americas claim over half (7,584,675) of the global number of cases (14,348,858). See: 'Cases in the U.S.,' Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 21, 2020) <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>.

⁵¹ 'Race, Racism, and Teaching the Middle Ages,' MAA Webinars, The Medieval Academy of America, July 20, 2020. <https://www.medievalacademy.org/page/TeachingTheMiddleAgesWebinar>.

the historical precedents for the motto of the Los Angeles police department. By reconsidering this phrase in a premodern context, the roundtable asks: ‘What does it mean to protect and to serve?’⁵² RB4R promises a future where social change is realized: that punishing, disciplinary forces can be combated, resisted, and removed. The ‘partial connections’ between medieval and modern drawn by both of these virtual communities, the MAA and RB4R, offer an alternative vision to a virulent and violent present: one that is ‘impoverished and toxic’ to those outside white, cisgender heteronormativity.⁵³ Despite our failure to cover these gatherings in depth, *Kyngervi* nevertheless shares these projects’ aims: to respond to the moment, offer alternatives to presents, and build a better future by understanding the past.

Utopian Medieval Futures: A Conclusion

Early in this essay, I asked: how will *Kyngervi* participate in constructing the future of the academy? My reading of this volume, as well as my brief discussion of developments in the field, suggests that the academy’s future is one where medievalists not only consider their participation in the present, but also what they offer for a future. Once again, I cannot help but ask: when is the bright future Jóhanna promised? By way of conclusion, I answer this question by once again turning to Dinshaw and Muñoz, and the promise of queer utopia.

Utopia is central to Dinshaw’s framework of ‘partial connections’ between medieval, modern, and future queer communities. Throughout *Getting Medieval*, Dinshaw stresses that the modern queer will find queer possibilities in the medieval past that help them construct communities for the future. This does not mean that the medieval past was ‘a lost and golden age’ of queerness.⁵⁴ In fact, Dinshaw criticizes this mythologizing of the middle ages. Nevertheless, she refuses ‘to discard utopianism altogether.’⁵⁵ Dinshaw proposes that queer

⁵² ‘To Protect and to Serve: A RaceB4Race Roundtable,’ RaceB4Race (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, July 23, 2020) <https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race>.

⁵³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27.

⁵⁴ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 200.

⁵⁵ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*.

utopian views of medieval ethics and aesthetics enable fashioning a *future politics*.⁵⁶ In other words, examining medieval studies through a queer lens affords alternative ways of thinking, acting, and/or being that engender a *future* utopia. For Dinshaw, utopia forms out from defying linear time and forming connections that are transtemporal. Consequently, the utopia itself is temporally paradoxical: it is simultaneously a product of the past and future. But crucially, it is *not here yet*.

As Muñoz explains in *Cruising Utopia*, utopia's destabilizing influence on linear time means that utopia is an inherently queer concept. Like utopia, queerness dwells outside positivist notions of time, and normative conceptions of history. Of course, queers exist in the past and present, but as Muñoz claims: 'we are not quite queer yet, that queerness, *what we will really know as queerness, does not yet exist*.'⁵⁷ In Muñoz' formulation, queer futurity exists as a desire for a utopian future that is not here yet.⁵⁸ To synthesise Dinshaw and Muñoz, both queerness and utopia are interrelated and reinforcing concepts that are perpetually on the horizon.⁵⁹ Although queerness and utopia might be perpetually out of reach, Foucault provides a way to move towards that horizon. In an interview in 1981, Foucault posited: '[w]e have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing what we are.'⁶⁰ Making a 'partial connection' between this statement, Dinshaw, and Muñoz, I propose that queer scholarship is an ongoing, unending effort towards a utopia that is [always?] on the horizon.

Kyngervi is one such effort. In the coming year, we will continue our project of promoting the possibility of queerness in the past for the purposes of realizing a queer future. Our next issue will be our first foray into a special issue. Although the forthcoming call for papers explains the theme in greater detail, I will briefly summarize here. We are asking for papers themed around medieval Scandinavian studies and *politics*. This topic is intimately connected to Dinshaw's

⁵⁶ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*.

⁵⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.

⁵⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 30.

⁵⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32.

⁶⁰ Qtd. in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 209.

question of queer futurity. In contrast to the bright future Jóhanna predicts, Dinshaw prophecies that should medievalists abandon any sense of social responsibility, the future is surely dark.⁶¹ *Kyngervi* offers a space for students of medieval Scandinavia to realize their voice and responsibility as we advance towards a bright future that is not here, not yet.

Basil Arnould Price⁶²

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⁶¹ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 37.

⁶² Thank you to my co-editors for their insightful feedback on this piece.

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Essays



Last Ride of the Valkyries: To (re)interpret Viking Age Female Figurines according to Gender and Queer Theory

Julia Wihlborg¹

Abstract

This article concerns the symbol of *Kyngervi*—the lady with a drinking horn. This motif, and other motifs like it, are well known from a selection of small Viking Age figurines that predominantly are interpreted as representing *valkyrjur*—the shieldmaidens of the god Óðinn. This interpretation is a simplification of the figurines' otherwise polysemous qualities and needs to be challenged. Based on the 'Hårby figurine' as a case study, this article identifies how the *valkyrjur*-interpretation came to be and why it is questionable, as well as suggests different interpretations based on gender and queer theory. The results indicate that the *valkyrjur*-interpretation originates from modern gender stereotypes and questionable comparative studies between different figurines and between the figurines and medieval sagas. The conclusion being that by investigating Viking Age figurines with other methods than strictly comparative, new knowledge can be gained. The medieval written sagas should, therefore, only be used as a reference material and not as the singular basis for interpretations.

Keywords: Viking Age, Valkyrie figurines, Hårby figurine, gender theory, queer theory

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Introduction

The scope of the following article concerns the very symbol of the *Kyngervi* journal. The image of a woman holding a drinking horn (or mead cup) is for everyone interested in Viking Age archaeology a symbol for Viking Age women. The motif is best known from Gotlandic picture stones, gold foil figures (in Swedish ‘guldgubbar’), the Danish Gallehus Horn and, most importantly, from a small group of figurines which constitute the scope of this article. These figurines are most commonly known as ‘*valkyrjur* pendants’ or ‘*valkyrjur* amulets’ and depict not just women with drinking horns, but also women with weapons and other attributes as well as different poses. No matter their attribute or pose, they are almost exclusively interpreted as representing *valkyrjur*, shieldmaidens of the god Óðinn. It is my opinion, as well as that of other researchers,² that kind of interpretation is a simplification of an otherwise polysemous and rich material. The female figurines could, if approached differently, offer further information about women’s social roles and the creation of gender during the Viking Age. My intention with the following article is to elaborate on how the *valkyrjur*-interpretation of the figurines came to be, why this interpretation is questionable, and finally to present some alternative methods of analysing the figurines. However, before I start, I wish to highlight why this matter matters.

Why it matters

It is my belief that the way contemporary scientists interpret prehistoric people reflects the dominant views of people in the present. It is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to be entirely objective in one’s interpretations. With this perspective in mind, the way Viking Age women are presented today offers some interesting reflections.

First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that the view of Viking Age women still today is influenced by the heteronormative and nationalistic bias of

² Neil Price, ‘What’s in a name?’ in *Old Nordic Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, 179-183. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006; Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, ‘Liten lurifax från Lejre,’ *Arkeologisk Forum* 22 (2010) 30-33.

the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century.³ Especially Richard Wagner and the way he presented the *valkyrjur* in his operas ‘The Ring Cycle,’ have had a great impact on the current idea of Viking femininity. Wagner’s *valkyrjur* were portrayed by curvy, feminine-looking women, and were all about deep emotion and assisting the male protagonist. Even though contemporary museums do not support the nationalist agenda of Wagner, Viking Age women still seem to play a supporting role in the story of the Viking Age, as exhibitions tend to focus on raids, sea voyages, and warfare. This is typically men’s work, while Viking Age women are consigned to the part of the exhibitions describing life at the farm and the Vikings great skill at creating fine jewellery.⁴ One example of this is ‘The Viking Museum’ in Stockholm, Sweden, whose main attraction ‘Ragnfrids saga’ (a storytelling attraction presented to visitors through audio, visuals and models) is named after one of the women in the story, even though the real main character is her husband, going on a typical Viking journey.⁵ In popular culture, on the other hand, Viking women are presented as either fierce *skjaldmar*, as in the popular HBO series ‘Vikings,’ or as *valkyrjur* who, if Google image searched, are depicted with large breasts and wearing small amounts of ‘armour.’ In other words—highly sexualized women and not far from the ladies in Wagner’s operas.

What this illustrates is that Viking women flourish in our contemporary society in two separate forms—as caring housewives and as sexualized warriors and *valkyrjur*. This is a dichotomic view that in many ways fit within what Sigmund Freud⁶ identified as the Madonna-Whore complex. That is, that women must be either sexual and free—a whore—or caring and restricted—a

³ Amy Jefford Franks, ‘Valföðr, völr, and valkyrjur: Óðinn as a Queer Deity Mediating the Warrior Halls of Viking Age Scandinavia,’ *SCANDLA: Journal of Medieval Norse Studies* 2 (2019) 44-51.

⁴ For instance; Campbell Grade, ‘Meet Some Gender Stereotypes at the National Museum in Copenhagen: A Review of the Meet the Vikings Exhibition,’ *Kyngervi* 1 (2019) 108-113; Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, ‘Vikings: Life and Legend, British Museum, London,’ Review in *Financial Times*, March 4, 2019; Felix Vestergaard, ‘Museum and Exhibit Review: VIKING. The National Museum of Denmark,’ *The Public Historian* 36, no. 2 (May 2014) 153-159.

⁵ Personal visit September 2017.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘On sexuality: three essays on the theory of sexuality: and other works,’ Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.

Madonna. That a woman could be both a mother and a sexual being, or both take care of her family and be an active member of society has for a great part of Western history been considered impossible. This idea is so ingrained in Western culture that today's women still struggle in its aftermath.⁷ When all female images from the Viking Age are interpreted as *valkyrjur*, fuel is added to the flame. If these figurines were instead interpreted in a more diverse way, which pays tribute to their polysemous qualities, it could make a difference in the present, as well as create a less biased view of Viking Age women. A good starting point is an investigation of where the current *valkyrjur*-interpretation comes from.

How things came to be: The Hårby figurine as an example

The Hårby figurine was found in December 2012 when amateur archaeologist Morten Skovsby searched through a field in Hårby, Denmark with a metal detector. The figurine turned out to be the first discovered example of a three-dimensional Viking Age figurine wearing a female dress and hairstyle as well as holding a sword and a shield. Shortly after this discovery, Odense Bys Museer published an article on their website declaring that:

Hårby-figuren forestiller utvivlsomt en valkyrie, en af Odins kvindelige hjælpere, hvis opgave det var at bringe faldne krigere til Valhal og opvarte dem dér. Valkyrie-figurer kender vi fra en lille serie eksklusive kvindesmykker fra tidlig vikingetid (800-tallet), og flere af detaljerne på Hårby-figuren genkendes fra disse, så den må også være fra denne tid.⁸

[The Hårby figure undoubtedly depicts a *valkyrjur*, one of Odin's female helpers, whose task it was to bring fallen warriors to Valhalla and to take care of them once arrived. We recognize the *valkyrjur* motif from a small series of exclusive women's jewellery from the early Viking era (9th-century), and several of the details on the Hårby figure are similar to these, so it must also be from the same time period.]⁹

⁷ Mark Landau et al., 'The siren's call: Terror management and the threat of men's sexual attraction to women,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 1 (2006) 129-146.

⁸ Odense Bys Museer, 'Valkyrien fra Hårby,' Posted February 28, 2013 at Odense Bys Museers Webpage. <http://museum.odense.dk/nyheder/2013/valkyrien-fra-haarby>.

⁹ Writer's translation.

The first thing that needs to be said about this statement, is that the dating of the female figurines to primarily the ninth century is not valid. According to the inquiries I made for the catalogue section of my MA-thesis¹⁰ the majority of the Viking Age female figurines have not been dated to any particular century, only to the Viking Age in general, and some might even originate from the Vendel period (550-800 AD). Those that have a more precise dating occur from all centuries during the Viking Age and not only the ninth century.

The second questionable claim which needs to be addressed from the quoted statement is the *valkyrjur*-interpretation itself. The argument for this interpretation is the same as for the dating, namely through comparisons to other similar figurines. The points of comparison are the attributes of the figurines which in the case of the Hårby figurine are the dress and hairstyle, as well as the sword and shield. If we then take a look at the other female figurines referred to on the Odense Bys Museer website, we will soon notice that even though similar at first glance, they are actually quite different from the Hårby figurine. It may be that most of them wear the same clothes and hairstyle, but when it comes to other signifying attributes they are crucially different. Some of them are carrying weapons or armour similar to the Hårby example, but others carry drinking horns or drinking cups. Others have their hands placed on their chest. Some are pulling their hair and some do not appear to have any additional attributes at all. These five main motifs have been found in several similar copies and apart from these, there exist unique figurines whose motifs are only known from singular specimens. Among them are the often referenced Aska pendant found in Östergötland, Sweden.¹¹ In total, I have found 53 individual figurines, which I present in my MA-thesis.¹² Because of the wide range of motifs, it is unlikely that all of them were created to represent the same concept. To base an

¹⁰ Julia Wihlborg, 'More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines,' MA-thesis., Uppsala University, 2019.

¹¹ Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, 'Aska och Rök: om minnen och materiell kultur i nordisk vikingatid,' in *Arkeologi och identitet*, edited by Bodil Petersson & Peter Skoglund, Lund: Lund University, 2008, 169-195.

¹² Wihlborg, 'More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.'

argument on a broad comparison and claim it is ‘undoubtable,’ as Odense Bys Museer¹³ has done, is therefore questionable. However, others argue more strongly for the *valkyrjur*-interpretation. Judith Jesch, for example, states in a blog post on the British Museum website that:

The medieval Icelanders understood the function of valkyries [...] as handmaidens of the war-god Odin. He would send them to battle to choose those warriors who were worthy of dying and going to Valhalla, the hall of the slain [...]. There, the valkyries acted as hostesses, welcoming the dead warriors and serving them drink.¹⁴

What Jesch highlights in this quote are that the *valkyrjur* had two major functions, one as judges on the battlefield and one as hostesses in the hall of Óðinn. These are two very different functions that she suggests co-exist in the Hårby figurine through the combination of dress, sword, and shield.¹⁵ In other words, the reason behind the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is that the Hårby figurine combines what in Western society is perceived as feminine and masculine traits. I have previously described objects such as these as gender ambiguous, a trait that generally triggers divine interpretations.¹⁶ A likely reason for this is that it is generally considered unlikely that ordinary humans would cross gender boundaries. Gods, on the other hand, could cross gender boundaries since they answer to different rules than humans. This kind of reasoning also applies to the Hårby figurine and could explain why it is perceived as representing something divine and not strictly human.

To sum up, I believe that the *valkyrjur*-interpretation comes from a position of uncertainty concerning the combination of masculine and feminine traits within the figurines and that this has led many previous archaeologists to turn to a divine interpretation, not least since it has been considered unlikely that human female warriors existed during the Viking Age. The *valkyrjur*-

¹³ Odense Bys Museer, ‘Valkyrien fra Hårby.’

¹⁴ Judith Jesch, ‘Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries,’ The British Museum blog, April 16, 2014. <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/2014/04/19/viking-women-warriors-and-valkyries/>.

¹⁵ Jesch, ‘Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries.’

¹⁶ Wihlborg, ‘The Valkyries crisis of identity: The Hårbyfigurine and the (re)interpretation of gender ambiguous objects,’ BA-thesis., Uppsala University, 2017.

interpretation has then spread from the armed figurines to other female figures through comparative studies.

The valkyrjur identity crisis

There are at least three reasons why the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is questionable, all of which can be found in the medieval sagas. The first is that the way the *valkyrjur* are described in the sagas is not homogenous. According to Neil Price,¹⁷ two different descriptions are particularly distinguishable. One is as bloodthirsty battle creatures, beings with a never-ending appetite for carnage and who are literal impersonations of the horrors of war. This is reflected not least by their names; Hild – battle, Herja – devastater, Gǫll – battle noise, and so forth. The other description of *valkyrjur* is as fair shieldmaidens longing for the love of mortal men. They are full of ancient wisdom, which they happily share with the men who capture their hearts. According to Price,¹⁸ the first description is the one most likely. This presents the *valkyrjur* as conceived of as an impersonation of battle, with the wistful *valkyrjur* being a construction formed by medieval writers. That being said, the medieval sagas do not explain whether these ‘battle creatures’ were feared or not, or even considered evil. Nor do they describe exactly what the *valkyrjur* looked like. It is not impossible that they were believed to have a female form and could blend in among mortal women. The duality of the *valkyrjur* description in the saga material is thus not a strong enough argument to completely change the *valkyrjur*-interpretation for good.

The second saga-based argument against the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is that only two out of the five most common motifs among the female figurines can be directly linked to the description of *valkyrjur* in the sagas. These two motifs are the women carrying weapons, and the women holding drinking horns. The remaining motifs most likely earned the interpretation through similarity in style, dress and hair to the other two motifs. If we start with the women carrying weapons, it is fair to say that they mostly carry swords and shields before other

¹⁷ Price, ‘The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,’ PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2002, 331-335.

¹⁸ Price, ‘The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,’ 331-340.

weapons. Only two figurines exist that hold spears, except for a number with spears clamped under their thighs. These figures, however, are not *holding* the spears, they are holding swords.¹⁹ This is to be compared with another passage from the previously quoted post by Judith Jesch.

When carrying out their duties on the battlefield [...] they [the *valkyrjur*, writer's clarification] were usually equipped with helmets, mail-coats and spears. Any association between valkyries and swords [...] is very rare as a sword, closely associated with masculinity, would be incongruous on a female figure.²⁰

Jesch here raises the issue that the *valkyrjur* in the saga material rarely use swords, but spears. This is of importance since the figurines are representations, and thus metaphors, and the way metaphors work is through recognition.²¹ This means that if the tangible and the intangible description do not match, the metaphor does not work. By this line of thought, the sword-bearing figurines could not represent *valkyrjur*, but rather some other deity or heroine who was worshipped or admired during the Viking Age, perhaps one that is not mentioned in the written sources. At the end of the day it must be considered that our knowledge about Viking Age cosmology might be far from complete.

The other motif with connections to the *valkyrjur* in the medieval sagas is women holding drinking horns. This motif is most famously known from the so-called 'welcoming motif' on Gotlandic picture stones and is composed of a rider on a horse met by a woman holding a drinking horn. This motif is normally explained with reference to Snorre Sturlasson and his descriptions of *valkyrjur* welcoming warriors to *Valhöll* by serving them mead.²² However, the mead serving scene is also known from sources where no *valkyrjur* were involved, for example in *Skírnismál*,²³ where the giantess Gerðr offers a drink to Skírnir, the

¹⁹ Wihlborg, 'More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.'

²⁰ Jesch, 'Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries.'

²¹ Birgitta Johansen, 'Ormalur. Aspekter av tillvaro och landskap,' PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1997.

²² Agneta Ney, 'Välkomstmotivet på gotländska bildstenar i jämförelse med litterära källor från vikingatid och medeltid,' In *Gotlands bildstenar: Järnålderns gåtfulla budbärare*, edited by Maria Herlin Karnell. Visby: Gotlands museum, 2012, 73-75.

²³ *Skírnismál*, verse 37. Snorre Sturlasson *Edda: Snorres Edda & Den poetiska Eddan*, Svipdag Fritiofsson. Göteborg: Mimer bokförlag, 2015, 218.

messenger of the Vanir god Freyr. Another interesting source in this context is the Old English poem *Beowulf*,²⁴ in which queen Wealhþeow welcomes guests to her hall by, in order of rank, letting them drink from a drinking horn. By doing this she not only shows her and her husband's hospitality, but also establishes the order of power in the room, by letting her husband drink first. These kinds of drinking ceremonies also have support in the archaeological material through findings of drinking vessels and similar equipment in halls across Viking Age Scandinavia, and it is possible that the lady in the house had a major part to play in the execution of these.²⁵ The women holding drinking horns could thus just as likely represent legendary human women, as they could *valkyrjur* or other godlike beings.

A third and final argument against the *valkyrjur*-interpretation drawn from the saga material is that other characters could fit the same description as the *valkyrjur*. To name a couple, there is the goddess Freyja, who according to Gylfaginning²⁶ claims half of all warriors who fall in battle, and some of the giantesses, who represent the chaos powers of the world and thus are the gods' number one enemy.²⁷ Both Freyja and the giantesses are figures of great power. They are ladies of their own halls and have connections to warfare and battle. What I mean to say by this is that it is not very likely that nearly all female images from the Viking Age represent the same thing. When making comparative studies between the saga material and material images, the probability of finding only one character with attributes matching those of the image is very small. They might represent *valkyrjur* but they might just as well represent something else. To use '*valkyrjur* figurine' as a category term, which is the case in both the Swedish SHM catalogue²⁸ and the Danish NS catalogue,²⁹ is more misleading

²⁴ *Beowulf*, verse 610-625. *Beowulf*. (Trans.) Björn Collinder. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Natur och Kultur, 1954.

²⁵ Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996.

²⁶ Gylfaginning, verse 24. Snorre Sturlasson *Edda: Snorres Edda & Den poetiska Eddan*, Svipdag Fritiofsson. Göteborg: Mimer bokförlag, 2015, 32.

²⁷ Anette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi*, København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2003, 112; John Lindow, 'Addressing Thor,' *Scandinavian Studies* 60, no. 2 (1988) 127-128.

²⁸ Historiska Museets Samlingar.

²⁹ Nationalmuseets Samlinger.

than helpful. If a category term needs to be used, which sometimes is very practical, perhaps ‘female figurines’ is a better alternative. This term is also flawed, as I will argue, but it does refer to something all these figurines have in common—a female Viking Age high-status dress or hairstyle. That character-bound interpretation comes with major weaknesses is in any case evident. For that reason, I will now present three alternative studies of the Hårby figurine based on gender and queer theory.

Changing the approach

Since the female figurines are now left with something of an identity crisis, other ways of interpreting them needs to be found. A more in-depth discussion on this topic is presented in my MA-thesis,³⁰ but in this article I introduce three alternative interpretations of the Hårby figurine drawn from first gender theory and then queer theory.

To become a man

If we start with gender theory, the Hårby figurine’s ambiguous nature makes for some interesting results. Especially if one applies Thomas Laqueur’s³¹ one- and two-sex model, according to which women throughout history have been considered either as a lesser form of men—the one-sex model—or as the opposites of men—the two-sex model. As stated in Laqueur’s theory,³² and supported by Michel Foucault in his work ‘Histoire de la sexualité’,³³ the two-sex model did not grow into existence until the eighteenth century when modernist thinkers had divided the world into different oppositions. A prominent philosopher in this context was Rene Descartes who in the seventeenth century presented a theory today known as Cartesian dualism. This theory came to strongly influence the subsequent view on men and women by

³⁰ Wihlborg, ‘More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.’

³¹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

³² Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. I-III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978-1984.

stating that human beings consist of two parts—mind and matter—of which matter was considered feminine and of a lesser value than the masculine mind.³⁴

Applying Laqueur's theory³⁵ to the Viking Age would mean that it most likely was arranged following the one-sex model. This assumption, if true, would shatter the old stereotype of Viking men as the natural actors in the public sphere and Viking women as masters of the home.³⁶ Instead, we would have had a situation where masculinity is the norm, but men did not automatically claim it. Men would constantly have had to fight to retain their manhood through masculine deeds, such as upholding his and his family's honour. If he did not uphold his manhood, he would risk becoming *ergi*, that is, an unmanly man equal to a woman.³⁷ The constant fight for masculinity also meant that women, if doing masculine deeds, could advance their status and become men. This idea has previously been discussed by Carol J. Clover,³⁸ in her article: 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.' In this article, Clover presents examples from the medieval sagas where women acted like men and gained increased respect as a result. One of these women is Auðr from *Laxdæla saga*,³⁹ who took up arms to defend her honour after her brothers refused to do so. This deed was afterwards met with great praise, even though she had worn trousers at the time—an action deemed reason for divorce during the Viking Age.⁴⁰ Another example comes from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where the women Bergþóra and Hildigunnr are described as *drengr*.⁴¹ This term that can be translated to 'bold, valiant, worthy man.'⁴² These two examples of manly women

³⁴ Lynn Meskell, 'Writing the body in archaeology,' In *Reading the Body: representations and remains in the archaeological record*, edited by Alison E. Rautman, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, 14-15.

³⁵ Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*.

³⁶ Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, *Genuskonstruktioner i nordisk vikingatid: Förr och nu*, PhD diss., Gothenburg University, 1998.

³⁷ Brit Solli, 'Det norrøne verdensbildet og ethos: Om kompleksitet, kjønn og kontradiksjoner,' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004, 277-279.

³⁸ Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993) 363-387.

³⁹ *Laxdæla Saga*, chapter 35. See Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex.'

⁴⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, verse 35.

⁴¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 95. See Clover, 'Regardless of Sex,' 372.

⁴² Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' 7.

indicate that women indeed had the opportunity to advance into the role of men if acting accordingly.

If we were to apply gender theory to the Hårby figurine it would mean that the sword and shield of the figurine might work as a way to manifest the story of a woman who became a man or had manly qualities. This is especially exciting in light of the on-going discussion concerning the individual in Birka chamber grave Bj. 581 who, through aDNA-testing, turned out to be genetically female.⁴³ This result, soon after its publishing in 2017, went viral and attracted both positive and negative criticisms, arguing back and forth concerning the existence of female warriors during the Viking Age.⁴⁴ What I wonder is whether the question is not asked in the wrong way? Perhaps it is not whether female warriors existed that is the issue, but whether they were regarded as men or as women. Maybe the female warrior buried in the Birka grave and the Hårby figurine were actually regarded as men.

Female warriors as the real deal

The Hårby figurine can also be used to argue that female Viking warriors did exist during the Viking Age, not least if investigated through the eyes of Judith Butler. Butler⁴⁵ presents the idea that gender is produced through performativity, arguing that femininity and masculinity is something humans learn from their surrounding society and culture, and then try to replicate in order to be understood as a person and gain agency. In this equation, the Hårby figurine can be positioned in the role of culture. It is an image produced by someone to mimic their idea of gender, and at the same time it is part of the creation of

⁴³ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 'A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics,' *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 4 (2017) 1-8.

⁴⁴ For instance; Fedir Androshchuk, 'Female Viking Revised,' Accessed March 20, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/34564381/FEMALE_VIKING_REVISED; Jesch, 'Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again,' Norse and Viking Ramblings Blog, September 9, 2017. <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/lets-debate-female-viking-warriors-yet.html>; Jesch, 'Some Further Discussion of the Article on Bj 581,' Norse and Viking Ramblings Blog, September 18, 2017. <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/some-further-discussion-of-article-on.html>; Price et al., 'Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581,' *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 181-198.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

gender by being an active gender expression within the world. In this way, the figurine must be interpreted as understandable by its Viking Age audience, or it would not have been created in the first place. This means that the combination of feminine gender expressions, such as the long dress and Irish knot hairstyle, during the Viking Age could realistically have been combined with weapons without the person losing their ability to act within the social frame. This suggests that female warriors might well have existed during the Viking Age and that the Hårby figurine might portray one of them.

In a transformative world

Another performative possibility related to the Hårby figurine requires some engagement with Viking Age cosmology and the seemingly vibrant and ever-changing view of the world which can be found therein. There are examples of this worldview in animal ornamentations where animals are torn apart, divided into pieces and then put together again in ways that do not exist in nature.⁴⁶ Another example is the concept of *ulfbæðnar* and *berserker*, people who could turn themselves into animals on the battlefield and fight with the rage of a beast.⁴⁷ Even the boundary between people and gods were not stable, as suggested by Neil Price and Paul Mortimer⁴⁸ in an article concerning the Sutton Hoo helmet—which they propose could, during the right circumstances, turn its wearer into Óðinn himself. All these examples indicate that Viking Age people lived in a transformative world where few boundaries were stable and where seemingly fixed categories could be broken under the right circumstances. For example, it has been suggested that *seiðr* could allow a person to leave their

⁴⁶ Lotte Hedeager, 'Dyr og andre mennesker: mennesker og andre dyr: Djuvornamentikkens transcendentale realitet,' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004, 221-226; Kristina Jennbert, 'Människor och djur: Kroppsmetaforik och kosmologiska perspektiv' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004;193-199.

⁴⁷ Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 390.

⁴⁸ Price & Paul Mortimer, 'An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo,' *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (2014) 533.

body.⁴⁹ Another transformative scenario could be oral performances during which both objects and people, through various actions, such as wearing masks or other props, were perceived as transforming into gods or other mythical beings.⁵⁰ It is thus not impossible that the Hårby figurine depicts a woman who, under certain circumstances, used weapons. Accordingly, it is possible that the boundaries between genders were fluid and that a person in different situations could take upon themselves the attributes of another gender and still be gender congruent. Just as a person could bear an animal *hamr* and still be understood and hold agency, so could a person combine what today are considered clashing gender attributes. In the end, it is all about not placing our own ideas of gender onto the lives of people who ultimately existed in a time very different from our own.

Final remarks

The female figurines and other female images from the Viking Age have for a long time been connected to the same supernatural beings—the *valkyrjur*—and not been interpreted to their full potential. This has resulted in the loss of archaeological information and contributed to un-wanted stereotypes in the present. I have in this article explained where I believe the *valkyrjur*-interpretation originated from, and discussed why it is questionable. I believe that the saga material sometimes hold too much influence over interpretations of Viking Age imagery, which limits the present understanding of Viking Age society. As an alternative, I have experimented with the kind of results gender and queer theory could create concerning the Hårby figurine. It is my wish with this article to present alternative ways to use Viking Age imagery beyond representation, in order to encourage fellow researchers and other interested parties to embrace the polysemous attributes of the material at hand. I do not argue that medieval sagas should not be used at all, but only as reference material

⁴⁹ Solli, 'Odin the queer: On ergi and shamanism in Norse mythology,' in *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum: en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh*, edited by Anders Gustafsson & Håkan Karlsson, Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 342.

⁵⁰ Back Danielsson, *Masking Moments. The Transitions of Bodies and Beings in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2007, 100-106.

and not as the basis for an entire argument. This is perhaps easiest done by first interpreting an object solely from archaeological knowledge, through different methods and from different theoretical frameworks, and only later comparing this with the written sources. Artefacts are, after all, not bound by the representations human minds place upon them, but have their own properties that create affect in their meeting with humans. This means that objects influenced people of the past (as well as they influence people of the present) in ways sometimes hard to deduce. It is possible that an object's shape, size, material and so forth were of greater importance than what the object represented. Nevertheless, when a motif is open for interpretation, it is important to realize that sometimes the easy answer is also the one most likely. Sometimes a woman with a sword is just a woman with a sword.

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Baugrýgjar: Old Norse ‘Ring Ladies’ and Legal Husband-Killing in *Ynglinga saga*

Ashley Castelino¹

Abstract

Ynglinga saga in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* describes a cycle of three queens responsible for the deaths of their Swedish husbands. Although the nature of the killings and the individuals involved might make it easy to unquestioningly condemn these women, this article explores their means, motivation, and agency within a wider context of established contemporary social and legal principles. It considers how the first two women are responding not just to their husbands leaving them, but to an unfulfilled oath and a broken marriage contract. Meanwhile, the third queen Skjálf, much like Guðrún of *Atlakviða*, is dutybound to kill her husband in order to avenge the death of her father. In fact, all three women may be read as *baugrýgjar*, the ‘ring ladies’ of the *Grágás* law-codes who are expected to perform active roles in feuds and settlements. By thus justifying these acts of husband-killing, the women themselves may be reconfigured as agents of the law, of social order, and of their own lives.

Keywords: *Ynglinga saga*, women, law, marriage, killing

Early in *Ynglinga saga* of Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* is a short cycle of three formidable queens causing the deaths of their Swedish husbands.² The first is Drífa, the daughter of Snjár *inn gamli* of *Finnland*. When her husband King

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² This article adopts the convention of using italics for the titles of individual sagas in collections, and of Eddic poems in the Poetic Edda. It also adheres to the widely-held belief that Snorri Sturluson is the author of *Heimskringla*.

Vanlandi abandons her, she pays the ‘seiðkona’ (‘sorceress’) Hulð ‘at hon skyldi síða Vanlanda til Finnlands eða deyða hann’ (‘so that she would work charms to send Vanlandi to *Finnland* or kill him’).³ Hulð is once again called upon by the (unnamed) wife of Vanlandi’s son Vísurr. Like his father, Vísurr abandons his wife and two sons, Gísl and Qndurr, and refuses to pay the required bride-price. Urged on by their mother and with the help of Hulð, Gísl and Qndurr ‘kómu at Vísbur um nótt á óvart ok brendu hann inni’ (‘came upon Vísurr by surprise at night and burned him inside’).⁴ A crucial element of this story is a ‘gullmen’ (‘gold neck-ring’), part of Vísurr’s bride-price and seemingly cursed by his sons.⁵ This ring later becomes the means by which a third queen, Skjálfr, hangs her husband King Agni to avenge the death of her father Frosti.⁶ The nature of the killings and the individuals involved makes it easy to unquestioningly condemn these three women. However, through an exploration of means, motivation, and agency, within the wider context of medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian social and legal principles of oaths, marriage, and the vengeance ethos, this article will demonstrate that in all three cases, the queens were legally and ethically justified in killing their husbands.

Any discussion of these women must first address two major interrelated concerns: their association with the Sámi (known as *Finnar* in the text⁷) and their association with magic. At least two of them—Drífa and Skjálfr—are clearly of Sámi descent, a group that some scholars have argued is portrayed negatively in the Norse sagas.⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to present a thorough

³ Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 29. All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 31.

⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

⁶ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37–8.

⁷ This article uses the conventional term ‘Sámi’ to refer to the *Finnar* or *Lappir*, used interchangeably in this text. For a survey of Sámi terminology in Old Norse literature, see Hermann Pálsson, ‘The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,’ *Nordlit: Tidskrift i litteratur og kultur* 3, no. 1 (1999) 30–1.

⁸ See, among others, Hermann Pálsson, ‘The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,’ 29–53; Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, vol. 1 (Sastamala: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2009); Jeremy DeAngelo, ‘The North and the Depiction of the “Finnar” in the Icelandic Sagas,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 82, no. 3 (2010): 257–86; and Nicolas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

critique of this perspective, but suffice it to say that being of Sámi descent does not on its own necessitate a negative portrayal of an individual. Certainly not in *Heimskringla* which depicts a wide range of Sámi characters. This includes respected leaders like Drífa's own father Snjár *inn gamli* ('the Old'), and loyal followers of Norse kings like King Hrærekr's manservant and confidant Finn *litli*, talented shipbuilders like Sigurðr *slembidjaken*'s joyful drinking companions, and skilled archers like Jarl Eiríkr's companion Finn.⁹ Interactions between Norse and Sámi individuals involve trade and taxation, love and war, friendship and murder. Like all these individuals, Drífa and Skjálfr cannot be denounced simply because they are Sámi. Instead, reading their Sámi identity within and alongside the other social and legal institutions discussed in this article might allow for a more nuanced consideration than is sometimes afforded them.

The other major concern about these women, very often associated with the Sámi, is their use of magic. Both Drífa and the mother of Gísl and Qndurr engage with some form of supernatural power, either themselves or through other agents like the *seiðkona* Hulð. Once again, however, the use of magic is not in itself damning. Nicolas Meylan explains that

Icelanders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries committed to vellum an alternative definition of magic. Unlike the mainstream one, it did not imply a condemnation. On the contrary, to possess magic was to master a morally neutral instrument; it meant being possessed of great knowledge, skill, and power.¹⁰

For instance, a form of magic that appears particularly malevolent is the *mara* (translated variously as 'nightmare', 'demon', or 'incubus') summoned by the *seiðkona* Hulð to trample Drífa's husband to death. However, even with the *mara*, Catharina Raudvere has clarified that there 'are no moral judgements, no declaration that shape-shifting is either good or evil. It is the purpose of the act

⁹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29. Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 2, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1945) 120. Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1951) 311–12. Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 362–63.

¹⁰ Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland*, 122.

that determines which, although most act for personal gain.¹¹ Magic, therefore, is simply a neutral means to an end; its morality is to be judged according to the specific end it is used to achieve.

Considering then that the precise means of the killings may be neutral, one must look at the motivations behind them to judge their righteousness. Drífa's motivations are clear: she employs Hulð to bring her husband back to her or to kill him, in retribution for abandoning her and their child. The issue here is not merely that Vanlandi left, but even more so that 'hét hann at koma apr' ('he promised to come back').¹² From a legal point of view, the framing of the issue in this way is critical—Vanlandi having promised and failed to return implies that Drífa is not simply avenging a broken heart but, more importantly, a broken oath. Oath-breaking is one of the most severe sins in Old Norse society. In *Völuspá*, for instance, the gods breaking an oath to the giants is a major harbinger of *Ragnarök* itself, while 'menn meinsvara' ('perjured men') are named first among the mortal damned.¹³ In this context, Drífa's response seems not only perfectly reasonable, but even expected. Making it even more reasonable is the fact that Vanlandi is first given an opportunity to return—the slightly awkward addition of the clause 'at ǫðrum kosti' ('as the other alternative') makes it clear that to Drífa, killing Vanlandi is a final resort.¹⁴ When he refuses to return and fulfil his oath, Drífa is left with no other option.

The ensuing story of Vísburr follows much of the same pattern. This time, Vísburr's young sons Gísl and Ǫndurr, abandoned by their father, track him down in order to 'heimtu mund móður sinnar, en hann vildi eigi gjalda' ('claim their mother's bride-price, but he would not pay it').¹⁵ The use of the verb 'gjalda' ('pay') frames the bride-price, and indeed the marriage itself, as a kind of contractual agreement that Vísburr is refusing to fulfil, justifying the

¹¹ Catharina Raudvere, 'Now You See Her, Now You Don't: Some Notes on the Conception of Female Shape-Shifters in Scandinavian Tradition,' in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996) 47.

¹² Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29.

¹³ *Völuspá (Konungsbók)*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) 301, st. 38.

¹⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 29.

¹⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

consequences that follow. Non-payment of *mundr* is a serious matter, the bride-price being an obligatory payment on the bridegroom's side in a marriage. In the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, for instance, the giant Þrymr's bride-price (*brúðfé*, literally 'bride-fee') to Freyja is key to Þórr retrieving his hammer and therefore maintaining the social cosmological order.¹⁶

On the other hand, an incident towards the end of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* provides an example of the consequences of breaking such a marriage contract. A dispute between King Sveinn of Denmark and King Búrizláfr of Vinðland is resolved through a double marriage—Sveinn is to marry Búrizláfr's daughter Gunnhildr, and Búrizláfr is to marry Sveinn's sister Þyri, with certain territories exchanged as bride-price.¹⁷ However, things go wrong when Þyri refuses to marry the 'heathen' Búrizláfr.¹⁸ *Fagrskínna* much more clearly puts bride-price at the root of this conflict:

Sveinn Danakonungr þóttisk missa mikilla eigna, þeira er vera skyldu í tilgjöf Gunnhildar konu hans [...]. En Búrizleifr þóttisk þá mjök svikinn, þó at hann hefði tilgjöf þá er Þyri skyldi hafa, því at konan kom eigi til hans.

(Sveinn, king of the Danes, thought he had lost much property which should have been in his wife Gunnhildr's bride-price [...]. And Búrizláfr then thought himself greatly cheated, although he had the bride-price which Þyri should have, because the woman did not come to him.)¹⁹

One party thus receives a bride but no bride-price, while the other receives a bride-price but no bride; in neither case is the marriage contract considered fulfilled and action must therefore be taken. Both versions of the text come to the same fatal conclusion. Þyri flees and instead ends up marrying King Óláfr Tryggvason against the will of her brother Sveinn. This further flouting of the marriage contract sparks a series of events that quite swiftly leads to the death of King Óláfr himself. While Þyri seems to have little agency to make her own choices within this system, it is these same social and legal codes that allow both

¹⁶ *Þrymskviða*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 427, sts. 29.3, 32.3.

¹⁷ Snorri, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 273.

¹⁸ Snorri, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 341.

¹⁹ *Fagrskínna: Nóregs konunga tal*, in *Ágrip af nóregskonunga sögum, Fagrskínna*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, Íslensk fornrit 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985) 146.

Drífa and the mother of Gísl and Qndurr to take action when their own marriage contracts are broken.

A crucial element of Vísburr's story is the introduction of the *gullmen*. This neck-ring is part of the bride-price Vísburr owed his wife and when he refuses to pay it, his sons Gísl and Qndurr 'mæltu [...] at gullmenit skyldi verða at bana inum bezta manni í ætt hans' ('said that the gold neck-ring would kill the best man in his family').²⁰ This turns out to be a potent curse, as the same *gullmen* later reappears in the possession of King Agni and becomes the physical means by which he is hanged by his wife Drífa.²¹ A ring in Old Norse society—and indeed much of the medieval Germanic world—is frequently invoked as a symbol of reciprocity. The kenning 'hringdrifi' ('distributor of rings') is thus often employed to mean a king or a lord, as in the poem *Atlakviða*.²² In such cases, the *bring* becomes a symbol of the lord's patronage in return for the loyalty of his men. Oaths may be sworn on rings too, as Guðrún reminds Atli in *Atlakviða*:

Svá gangi þér, Atli,
sem þú við Gunnar áttir
eiða oft of svarða
ok ár of nefnda,
[...] at hringi Ullar.

(So it will go with you, Atli, according to the oaths you often swore to Gunnar and declared long ago [...] by the ring of Ullr.)²³

Conversely, just as a ring can be a symbol of a promise made, so too can it become a symbol of a promise broken. Thus, the section of the Icelandic law-codes *Grágás* dealing with *vergild* ('man-price') is titled 'Baugatal' (in the standardized spelling), 'enumeration of rings'.²⁴ The *Baugatal* crucially permits a

²⁰ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

²¹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

²² *Atlakviða*, in *Eddukvæði II: Heiðskvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) 379, st. 33.11.

²³ *Atlakviða*, 379, st. 31. On the swearing of oaths on rings, see Irene Anne Riisøy, 'Performing Oaths in Eddic Poetry: Viking Age Fact or Medieval Fiction?' *Journal of the North Atlantic* 8 (2016) 141–56.

²⁴ *Grágás (Konungsbók)*, vol. 1, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974) 193–207.

woman to carry out *vergild* functions in certain circumstances (the specific circumstances will be discussed later). This so-called *baugrýgr* ('ring-lady') would, according to Margaret Clunies Ross, 'provide a fruitful basis for fantasy in Old Norse literature as she is a woman, classified as a male and acting as a male in special circumstances.'²⁵ Within this system, the element of the *gullmen* in *Ynglinga saga* can be read as signalling that Vísburr's wife is to take on this role of 'ring-lady,' as is Skjálf later in the saga. The implication, consequently, is that the actions of these two women might not just be ethically warranted, but legally warranted as well.

The case of Skjálf is much more directly tied to the demands of *vergild*, for she kills her husband Agni in order to avenge his killing of her father Frosti. The context for her act thus lies in a culture centred around honour, as framed by several scholars. For instance, in a book introducing the Icelandic sagas, Peter Hallberg named honour as 'ethically the key concept in the world of the Icelandic saga. This was not an abstract idea, but a deep and passionate experience, a condition of life as basic and essential as one's daily bread.'²⁶ Similarly, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij sees Guðrún's vengeance in the Poetic Edda as following 'the ethics of the society where this heroic legend and the lays based on it were popular. Since the greater the sacrifices a vengeance requires the more heroic it is, Guðrún's vengeance for her brothers no doubt seemed an unexampled heroic deed.'²⁷ Under such 'ethics,' therefore, taking someone's life is an insult to their family's honour, and recompense must be sought by the family to maintain their honour at any cost.

That said, the question of an Old Norse ethos of vengeance is a complicated one, particularly after the spread of Christianity throughout medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. Whether or not thirteenth-century texts like *Heimskringla* idealise or denounce this ethos has been a question of great debate. David Clark hence argues instead that characters like Guðrún, representative of

²⁵ Grágás, 201. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society, Volume 1: The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994) 121.

²⁶ Peter Hallborg, *The Icelandic Saga*, transl. Paul Schach (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1962) 99.

²⁷ M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, 'Valkyries and Heroes,' *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 97 (1982) 86.

this ideal in heroic poetry, are ‘simultaneously also vehicles through which the poet can explore the dilemmas of heroic society; [...] it is arguable that the ‘heroic ideal’ is not (and should not be) applicable to the present.’²⁸ Clark posits that this effect is achieved in Eddic poems by observing the heroic ‘from a distanced perspective.’²⁹ While perhaps true of Eddic poetry, such a distancing effect is not so valid in a text like *Heimskringla* that seeks to situate the ancestry and legitimacy of Christian kings within the heroic heathen past. In order to do so, *Heimskringla* works precisely through a synthesis of the heroic past and Christian present.

Regardless, as convincingly as Clark might dismiss the persistence of an ideal of revenge, the notion of atonement for a killing is very much enshrined in law-codes like the *Grágás*. The *Baugatal* section of these ‘Grey Goose Laws’ enumerates the *langbaugar* (translated by Dennis, Foote, and Perkins as ‘wergild rings fixed by law’³⁰) that must be paid, according to the relation of the kin member who claims retribution.³¹ It is true that such Icelandic law codes establish legal monetary frameworks as in the *Baugatal* precisely to avoid cycles of violence. However, in Snorri’s textual world, a world characterised by violence and vengeance, the taking of a life would be the heroic equivalent to *Grágás*’ material *wergild*.

This article refers chiefly to the Icelandic *Grágás* among the various law-codes of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, for it is a reasonable assumption that Snorri’s own understanding of Icelandic law would have been along similar lines. *Grágás* refers not to a ‘unified corpus of law, shaped and finite’ but to a more haphazard collection of the ‘laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth that we know in sources originating before the 1262–64 contract of submission to the Norwegian crown.’³² The site for the establishment and enforcement of these laws in Iceland would be the *Alþingi*, of which Snorri himself was *logsögumaðr*

²⁸ David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 20.

²⁹ Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 18.

³⁰ *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, ed. and transl. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980, repr. 2006) 175.

³¹ *Grágás*, 193.

³² *Laws of Early Iceland*, 9.

(‘lawspeaker’), between 1215 and 1218, and later between 1222 and 1231.³³ With such an extensive legal career, Snorri would have had a good understanding of Iceland’s laws, which very likely influenced his writing as well. Thus, although one cannot assume that the substance of these thirteenth-century legal frameworks exist at all within the almost self-contained textual world created in *Heimskringla*, one would still find the ethos, the spirit of the law within its pages. Key to both these legal and heroic frameworks is the necessity of atonement for a killing.

Skjálfr’s killing of Agni does, however, present two main difficulties under this legal framework. The first is the question of whether Agni’s killing of her father Frosti is an act that warrants atonement in the first place—Agni is, after all, a king, and the killing took place within a larger context of warfare. This battle, however, is clearly described in the text as unilaterally provoked by Agni when he ‘gekk [á Finnland] upp ok herjaði’ (‘went up to *Finnland* and went harrying’).³⁴ Importantly, *Heimskringla* is a kind of founding story for the Scandinavian kingdoms and presenting the Sámi as subjects within larger unified Scandinavian kingdoms is key to the project. Accordingly, *Ynglinga saga* merely gives Frosti the title of ‘hǫfðingi’ (non-specific ‘chief’ or ‘leader’) of the *Finnar*, even though he is named in other texts like *Orkneyinga saga* in a line of mythical ‘konungar’ (‘kings’) of *Finnland* and *Kvenland*.³⁵ Under these circumstances, it is unacceptable for a king to carry out unprovoked ‘harrying’ on his own subjects. Since the parliamentary Iceland had no king, we might look outside for specifics on prevailing kingly ethics. *Konungs skuggsjá* (‘King’s mirror’), a Norwegian moral-political educational text from around 1250 (shortly after Snorri’s time), lays out the appropriate behaviour for a king:

Nu skal konongr hogga hværn utan awunnd mæð rettri ræfsing. En hværn er hann dræpr firi awunndar sacar þa er þat manndrap oc a hann at swara manndraps soc firi guði.

³³ Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 12.

³⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37.

³⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 37. *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnboði Guðmundsson, Íslensk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965) 3.

(Now a king should always strike out not in hatred but for righteous punishment. But if he slays any one out of hatred, it is murder, and he will have to answer for it as murder before God.)³⁶

Agni's raiding certainly does not qualify as 'righteous punishment.' Under a Christian ethos then, his acts fall under the behaviour of a bad king and are punishable. Meanwhile, under a legal-heroic ethos of vengeance, the respective positions of Agni and Frosti are irrelevant to kinship responsibilities and Frosti's *male* relatives are obliged to claim retribution for his death.

This is where the second significant problem arises, that of agency. As a woman, Skjálfr's options for vengeance are rather more limited. The *Baugatal* section of *Grágás* does allow a woman to accept compensation for the killing of her father, but only under certain conditions:

Su er oc kona ein er bæðe scal bavage beta oc bavg taca ef hon er einberne en su kona heitir bavgrygr. En hon er dottir ens davða enda se eigi scapþigiande til höfuð bavg en betendr life þa scal hon taca þrimerking sem sonr. ef hon toc eigi full sætte at vigs bótóm til þess er hon er gipt. endá scolo frændr a lengr taca.

(There is also one woman who shall both pay the *wergild* ring and take the *wergild* ring, if she is an only child and that woman is called *baugrygr*. And she who is the daughter of the dead man, if no other lawful receiver of the main ring exists, shall take the three-mark ring like a son, if she has not taken full settlement as compensation for the manslaughter, and until she is married, then her kinsman shall take it.)³⁷

Carol J. Clover describes this *baugrygr* as a 'surrogate son,' a situation where 'in the genealogical breach, a woman becomes a functional son, not only in the transaction of *wergild*, but also in the matter of inheritance and also, at least in principle, in the actual prosecution of feud.'³⁸ Assuming the required conditions are met, Skjálfr as *baugrygr* thus takes on the duties of Frosti's legal heir, which includes avenging his death.

³⁶ *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Norrøne tekster 1* (Oslo: Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1983) 124.

³⁷ *Grágás*, 200–01.

³⁸ Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1993) 68.

Having said that, does Skjálfr actually meet the required conditions? According to the above quoted passage, the avenging daughter must be unmarried, and the deceased must have no other direct male relatives, outlined earlier in the text as ‘faðir, oc sonr, oc broðir’ (‘father, and son, and brother’).³⁹ Skjálfr’s marriage is rendered irrelevant by the fact that she is married to her father’s killer. *Atlakviða*’s Guðrún is evidence that blood ties take precedence over ties of marriage—in order to avenge the deaths of her brothers Gunnar and Högni, Guðrún can, and indeed must, kill her husband Atli, a man whom, according to the poem *Atlakviða*, she ‘lint skyldu / optarr um faðmask’ (‘would often softly embrace’).⁴⁰

A key difference is that the deaths of Guðrún’s brothers—and the deaths of her sons by her own hands—leave Guðrún no immediate male relatives to take action on her behalf. In comparison, matters are complicated by the existence of Skjálfr’s brother Logi, captured along with her. There are two possible explanations, however. The first is that it is possible that Logi did not survive to see Skjálfr avenge their father. It is curious that he is only mentioned once at the time of his capture, then disappears from the narrative entirely. This raises the possibility that he too is killed soon after capture, leaving Skjálfr with the responsibility to avenge both father and brother. A second, perhaps more convincing, explanation is that Logi could be one among the unnamed men helping Skjálfr hang Agni from the tree.⁴¹ This interpretation is further suggested by the stanza chosen by Snorri to conclude the chapter, in which Skjálfr is specifically named ‘Loga dís’ (‘Logi’s sister’) when she ‘þás gæðing / með gullmeni / [...] / at lopti hófr’ (‘raised aloft the nobleman with gold neck-ring’).⁴² In fact, in the preceding prose, Skjálfr merely fastens the rope to Agni’s neck-ring; it is these other men who actually pull it to carry out the hanging. Skjálfr’s hands would thus be technically clean of the actual deed, having incited other men to enact her vengeance.

³⁹ *Grágás*, 195.

⁴⁰ *Atlakviða*, 381, st. 42.6–7.

⁴¹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

⁴² Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

Either way, Skjálfr hence fulfils her responsibility—as inciter if Logi is alive, or as ‘surrogate son’ if not. The female inciter is considered a perfectly acceptable role for women, and a very common trope in Old Norse literature. Susan Clark summarised that ‘a bloody family feud is not complete without a ruthlessly determined woman urging her kin to retaliation and revenge,’ a sentiment tempered by Sarah Anderson, who uses an example from *Njáls saga* to explain that ‘as lamenters and as whetters to revenge, women [...] are engaging in one of the few speech acts represented by the literature as open to them, and they are speaking on behalf of the customs of their society—not in monstrous aberration from them.’⁴³ This is a very important point to be noted when considering both women and Sámi individuals like Skjálfr. When the Sámi population are reduced to absolute outsiders, an archetypal Other, it becomes tempting to read an act like that of Skjálfr as a ‘monstrous aberration’ against Scandinavian custom. In reality, however, as this analysis demonstrates, the women of *Ynglinga saga* very much act within the norms of Scandinavian society.

It is perhaps most telling that all three women go entirely unpunished in the saga. There is no mention in the text of any attempt to hold any of these women accountable for their actions. No-one seeks to avenge the fallen kings. Vanlandi, Vísburrr and Agni each have at least one surviving male heir, yet there is no thought of vengeance. It is perhaps understandable that Vísburrr, Vanlandi’s son, would have no cause to confront his own mother for killing the father who abandoned him. Meanwhile, Vísburrr himself died at the hands of his own sons, Gísl and Qndurr. Surely, however, Vísburrr’s other son Dómaldi would want to seek retribution from the woman who is said to have ‘lét síða at honum ógæfu’ (‘brought misfortune on him through magic’) and from her sons who killed his father, but he takes no steps to do so.⁴⁴ In fact, Agni’s story ends with a stanza quoting the poet Þjóðólfr’s surprise that ‘Agni her / Skjálfrar ráð / at sköpum

⁴³ Susan Clark, ‘Cold are the Counsels of Women: The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas,’ in *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages: An Anthology of Feminist Approaches to Middle High German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991) 6. Sarah M. Anderson, ‘Introduction: “og eru köld kvenna ráð”,’ in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002) xii-xiii.

⁴⁴ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 30.

þóttu’ (‘Agni’s men thought Skjálfr’s plans *sköpum*’).⁴⁵ Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes have translated ‘sköpum’ as ‘acceptable,’ likely based on the root ‘skap’ which might denote something right or lawful.⁴⁶ Alternatively, it is possible to interpret ‘sköpum’ as meaning ‘fated.’ Either meaning suggests that Agni’s men did not attempt to avenge their king because Skjálfr’s actions could not be faulted. The fact that these women are not held accountable is extremely important. Acts of vengeance in any form of Old Norse literature are rarely isolated incidents; on the contrary, they are usually part of what David Clark describes as ‘a cycle of endless future vengeance.’⁴⁷ The acts of these three women are violent, yes, but they do not contribute to the vicious cycle of violence and vengeful killings. Rather, each of these acts actually manages to bring the cycle of violence to an end.

Theodore Andersson has made the argument that (family) sagas, despite all the heroic modes and gestures borrowed from tradition, portray a normal society. They tell the stories of strong individuals who disrupt the social fabric, but despite the respect paid many of these strong personalities, the sagas are ultimately opposed to social disruption.⁴⁸

At first glance, strong women like the three discussed in this article might appear to be the ‘individuals who disrupt the social fabric’ of the world within *Ynglinga saga*. However, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is actually kings like Vanlandi, Vísburrr, and Agni who bear responsibility for social disruption. Thus, the saga seeks to restore the social order by having them killed. Whether as agents of the law, fate, society, or of their own lives, the three women of *Ynglinga saga* are therefore fully justified in killing their husbands.

⁴⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 38.

⁴⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Volume I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, ed. and trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011) 22.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 88.

⁴⁸ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,’ *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (1970) 593.

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But, What About the Men? Male Ritual Practices in the Icelandic Sagas

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Abstract: Using an ethnographic methodology paired with historical and literary analysis this article will aim to investigate the foundations and categories of magic within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus when it intersects through sections of gender, sexuality, and concepts of masculinity. As this article is an altered version of a much larger body of research, the main saga under consideration will be that of *Eiríks saga rauða* compared to the recorded experience of Rǫgnvaldr réttilbeini. Careful reflection will be taken as to the breakdown of acceptable and reprehensible uses of magic and their correlation to the construction of identities within the saga. Through an intersection of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality the breakdown of magic and ritual will be explored in a saga context where magic is not only prolific and considered the fodder of entertainment but also speaks to socially cultural identification.

Keywords: Masculinity, Icelandic Family Sagas, Magic, Gender, Sexuality

Introduction: Put 'Em Under the Scope

To understand an apparent social breach of practice we must first look to what we believe to be sanctioned, normal, and even purported as traditional. The demarcated “other” is shown in the face of the familiar, and in the realm of magic this is no different. There is something that destabilizes and feebly attempts to knit itself back together when men in Old Norse Literature and poetry attempt magic. The conclusion for these men usually ends in punishment

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by outlawry, threatened injury, or even the finality of death. This breakdown does not involve a simple interaction between men and the practice of magic as an activity, but as a masculine breach into that which is delineated by scholarship as feminine in totality. As such, this research is guided not merely by the sarcastic demand of ‘what about the men?’ but precisely what about men’s relationship to magic, in contrast to the women who have, in our minds, predominantly wielded this supernatural and often potent power. When does magic break down for the male user within and result in their derision and when is magic deemed accessible and sanctioned for the male practitioner? What boundary is eventually crossed and blurred, and when does it remedy itself once more—if it can be reconciled at all? Do the male magicians in saga notation reshape themselves into a new identity or masculinity entirely? Such is the scope of this paper.

It must be acknowledged that within any literary or historical discourse attention paid to the lives and practices of women are vital to compose an informed and holistic analysis of the specific literary or historical period one is investigating. When viewed specifically through the lens of literary discourse, women are often extremely visible to almost uncomfortable lengths, or are purposely hidden or skewed in relation to certain categories of interpretation. While often relegated to the position of the inferior, women are active members within their specific culture and society and thus can detail an immensely helpful alternative narrative from the male-dominated referential scope. As women are also historically poised within a marginalised position in opposition to the male gender, one is privy to learning other underrepresented practices and cues that can take the scholarship a step forward in investigating outside the binary.

Specifically, when women’s narratives are visible within *Íslendingasögur*, such scenes are rightly paired with necessary conversations about misogyny, violence, and the marginalized female form. Gender in saga literature has been articulated in a variety of ways, including evaluations of the ‘Maiden King’ type in *fornaldarsögur* and goading women securing the honour of their families during family feuds in *Íslendingasögur*. Conversely, when magic is involved, its potency acts as one of the few options women can manipulate to grant themselves

agency, and thus is an intrinsic part of discussions on gender and empowerment within Old Norse literary studies.²

Authors like Jenny Jochens, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Karen Jolly, Carol Clover, and Gareth Lloyd Evans have succeed in analysing gender intersectionality within saga literature to unearth narratives that have previously been unexamined or skewed when women figures are concerned.³ As such, the ways in which we accept bodies of knowledge, in relation to historically and culturally marginalised people and their dominant comparatives, must always be critiqued and questioned. Like some anthropological mystery to explain, women—if they are talked about at all within academia—are relegated as something accompanied to men, never to be explored on their own. Instead, I propose a slight trajectory change that seeks to additionally put men on full display so as to be equally scrutinized within the medieval corpus of literature. In the spirit of Gareth Lloyd Evan’s new composition *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, I seek to demonstrate that to see men as normative and women as the available “Other” fit to be studied is problematic and serves to further relegate women as being the only gender category suspect to being dissected by scope and pen.⁴ This theme in the humanities and social sciences unfortunately demarcates women as a partitioned inversion of the masculine gender, whereas men remain whole—and to prod and examine them is seemingly unnecessary.

My research goals are not intended to detract from the large bodies of progressive and vital analysis that has been assembled in relation to Old Norse women. The attention given to men in this literary analysis is not to suggest that men are more important figures within the saga corpus nor that there is little

² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power* (Philadelphia: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 56.

³ Carol Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’ *Speculum* 68, (1993) 363-387; Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in Sagas of the Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power* (Philadelphia: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Karen Louise Jolly, Edward Peters, & Catharina Raudvere, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁴ Evans, *Men and Masculinities*.

else to be learned about women in Old Norse literature. Contrarily, by approaching male practitioners through the theoretical lens of queer, gender, and anthropological cultural theory I seek to demonstrate that men are just as accessible to intersections of study as women are, especially within the untested sphere of magic.

Relative to this discussion are the recent developments in the study of magic in Old Norse literature which have foregrounded women as the progenitors and keepers of archetypal concepts of magic. As a result, men have remained in an outlier position with little in-depth analysis beyond relegating them to the characteristics of *ergi* (queerness, perverseness) and *argr* (unmanly, cowardice) and essentially suspending research beyond that. Acknowledging this, I seek to redress this assumption; that the only qualitative data to be gleaned from men practicing magic within saga society is that they are not supposed to.

While scholars in the past have attempted to fixate magic within the realm of the female, it is my aim to investigate those seemingly anomalous men who partake of such a distinctly feminine practice. I suggest that these men themselves become part of a hybrid masculine identity by operating and acquiring shards ‘of marginalized and subordinated masculinities and, at times, femininities.’⁵ As such, it is my estimation that men are just as susceptible to cutting-edge analysis as women, especially when a vast majority of Old Norse magical scholarship is dedicated reservedly to female practitioners and their experiences. Instead of painting an image of the woman in relation to the man, I think it time we reverse the methodology and see what smokes forth from the cauldron.

The Archetypal Magician: From Woman to Woman

The bulk of research dedicated to Old Norse magic is rightfully predicated on women and their skill in prophecy, incantations, and influencing life’s outcomes for the benefit of themselves or others. It is the *vǫlva* that settles upon her

⁵ Tristan Bridges, ‘A Very “Gay” Straight?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia,’ *Gender & Society* 28 (2014) 59-60.

offered high seat and relays fortunes. Next is the malevolent sorceress who sows destruction. Kinder still is the woman in a tutelage position who offers to share her knowledge with the next generation. These women are posited as experts in their craft by saga literature and scholars alike, and it is no wonder that when imagining soothsayers and wielders of magic it is a female practitioner that comes to mind.

Within her work on images and representation of women in Old Norse literature and material culture, Jenny Jochens asserts this possession of magic by women in stating that ‘the term *vǫlva*... was reserved for the female diviner, mythical or human. Gendered later, the activity of prophecy was performed by a *spámaðr* or a *spakóna* respectively.’⁶ Indeed, many Old Norse magical titles and terms are feminine in origin and include but are not limited to the *vǫlva* (seeress), *spákona* (female seeress), *seiðkona* (sorceress), and a woman who is *markinggunn*, or who is aware of things.⁷ Nevertheless, it is no secret that male practitioners of Old Norse magic exist and they themselves are given names that etymologists’ have suggested are ‘masculinized’ versions of the feminine form, keeping the original female connotations but making the title more accessible for adoption by men.⁸ As such, terms like *spámaðr* (male seer), *ffólkunnigr* (male magician), and the more famous *seiðrmaðr* (sorcerer) exist.

It is this accommodation to men in the saga literature that scholars like Jochens and Friðriksdóttir attempt to historically reconcile, with certain threads of research concluding a variety of responses. These include the rationalization that authors of Old Norse literature ‘felt it necessary to modify the ancient female sibyl by casting men in this role both in pagan and Christian settings.’⁹ Conversely, connections to the Sámi have been made in which ‘some scholars point to shamanic practices, especially in northern Eurasia, to which the Norse drew inspiration from.’¹⁰ The Norse within *Íslendingasögur* certainly share a mixed

⁶ Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 120.

⁷ Unless stated otherwise, translations my own using Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004).

⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 117.

⁹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 118.

¹⁰ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 265.

relationship with the Sámi that ranges from absolute domination to mystical awe, as will be explored later.

Nevertheless, within *Íslendingasögur* men are shown to practice magic in equal numbers to women. François-Xavier Dillman's research identifies about seventy magicians in the *Íslendingasögur*, distributed almost evenly among women and men.¹¹ Jenny Jochen finds forty-one women and thirty-nine men.¹² The most quintessential form of magic that is usually negatively associated with men is that of *seiðr*, a type of highly feminised magic that is fixed between a female heathen locus. *Seiðr*, by its very conception and production, is aligned with the feminine sphere. Snorri Sturluson asserts in *Heimskringla* that, with regards to witchcraft, it was an art brought forth by Freyja from the Vanir, and that 'in its execution, [it] is so queer that men could not practice it without dishonor and so the goddesses were taught this art.'¹³ One of the apparent first men to co-opt its power of foresight and control was Óðinn, who hoped that with its use he could better advance his scope of knowledge.

In the aforementioned translation of *Heimskringla*, Ármann Jakobsson chooses to align the term *seiðr* with queerness when the practice becomes infected, as it were, with the male gender. In Faulkes's translation, *seiðr* is aligned with the perverse and invoked shame to befall the male practitioner.¹⁴ Likewise, authors like Ström and Sørensen have rooted the conversation around men practicing magic firmly in connotations of perversity and deviance from quite

¹¹ François-Xavier Dillmann, 'Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne,' Diss. *Doctorat d'État*, (Caen, 1986).

¹² Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 123.

¹³ Translation by Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*, (Punctum Books, 2017) 117; *Heimskringla*, 1:19 Snorri Sturluson c. 1230. In addition, 'we are told that this sorcery is queer: it is not for men, and therefore seen as a female practice,' Ármann, Jakobsson, 'Óðinn as Mother: The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch,' *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi* 126 (2011) 8.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Volume 1, The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, (trans.) Alison Finlay & Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011); Ármann, 'Óðinn as Mother,' 8. Faulkes's translation of *seiðr* as black magic has further implications for how we view magic in the domain as the shadowy "other," and how we racialize the term.

early on in scholarship, by connecting the practice with socially delineated concepts of *ragr* (cowardly) and *ergi* (perverseness, queerness).¹⁵

The Tools of the Trade: Establishing Magic as a Practice

In tackling the concept of magic, I am operating under the understanding that ritual magic is not merely an entangled belief system, but a practice embedded and reliant upon a set of social relations that are context bound. Such a context further intersects between ascribed and shifting achieved statuses, of which this article will address, including: sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. The magic that one encounters in the *Íslendingasögur* is multiple and varied.¹⁶ While dreams and prophecies abound that demonstrate a subtle supernatural resonance, other types of easily verifiable magic include rune carvings, invoked curses, chants, charms, weather magic, the laying of hands, *útiseta* (mound-sitting), *ganga til fréttar* (going to inquire), and magically imbued items (usually weapons) which are also scattered throughout specific *Íslendingasögur*. The *Íslendingasögur* genre has plenty of instances of magic, but the texts usually avoid using certain supernaturally charged terms and instead imply a character's ability to sense or extend prophecy via dreams or their wit.¹⁷ Some of these elements are highly feminized forms of magic and are marked ethnically effeminate because they originate outside the hegemonic Old Norse worldview, as with the *Noad's* drumming or shamanistic invocations.¹⁸

¹⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, (trans.) Joan Turville-Petre, (Odense, 1983), 19; Folke Ström, *Nið, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973).

¹⁶ Unlike Catharina Raudvere I will not be including *trolldómur* as I believe it is beyond the scope of this paper, nor will I be using the term witchcraft as I feel it has too many uncontrolled connotations and is better used in an Early-Modernist period of magic exploration. Catharina Raudvere, 'Trolldómur in Early Medieval Scandinavia,' in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, (eds.) B. Ankarloo & S. Clark (London: Athlone, 2002) 73-171.

¹⁷ There has been in the past valid academic criticism with regards to dreams and prophecies and if they can safely be regarded as magic or merely intuition being acted upon and as such I will not grant too much attention to their usage. John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005) 95-96; William Ian Miller, 'Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland,' *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986) 58.

¹⁸ Eldar Heide, 'Spinning Seiðr,' *Old Norse Religion in long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions*, Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, & Catharina Raudvere (eds.) (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006).

The Magical Female Archetype of Eiríks saga rauða

When corroborating the established scholarship in which magic is deemed a female-dominated landscape complete with women practitioners, rituals, and a clear societal impact upon the cultural milieu, it is *Eiríks saga rauða* that springs to mind. This case study neatly aligns with contemporary Old Norse scholarship as a display of women’s pivotal role within the practice of magic and seeks to establish a traditional narrative of supernatural invocation. By traditional, I mean the most obvious standard of magic that we are privy to when encountering the *Íslendingasögur*: led by a powerful seeress and involving, by default, only other women.¹⁹

Specifically, the scene of interest is set in Herjólfssnes at the Eastern Settlement along the west coast of Greenland where Þorkell propositions a visiting elderly woman named Þorbjörg, or known more affectionately as *litihvǫlva* (the little seeress), to divulge through her supernatural skills the household’s fate in the midst of famine. Guðríður, a Christian woman, is reluctantly coerced into joining the chanting required by the seeress to invoke the spirits, as she reluctantly confesses her knowledge of such songs taught to her by a foster-mother. Pleasantly surprised by Guðríður’s ability to sing beautifully, Þorbjörg states that no one could have attempted a better rite and as a result ‘many spirits had been drawn there now who thought it lovely to lend ear...’²⁰

This scene exemplifies an important initial credence to the reason why Old Norse scholarship is extremely keen on identifying most aspects of magic within the female domain. It is this scene that I would suggest is the most generous depiction of an “archetypal” version of Old Norse magic. It is a ritual moment woven into being by the many generational voices of women. This is not to say that magic itself is hereditary—Old Norse concepts of magic assert the opposite, in most cases. Magic within the Icelandic sagas is not an innate

¹⁹ *Eiríks saga rauða* deals with the Norse exploration of Greenland and North America and describes events between c. 970—1030 though the text itself is composed at a later date around 1260—1280. *Eirik the Red: and Other Icelandic Sagas*, (trans.) Gwyn Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²⁰ *Eirik the Red*, 136.

quality that passes generationally through bloodlines, but instead is most likely introduced, taught, and later performed as need be for oneself or others.²¹

However, while not necessarily blood-bound, we are still privy to an unbroken chain of women, starting with Þorbjörg, who (it is assumed) doled out her fortunes with the assistance of her nine other sisters before they died. In the case of Guðríður, it was her foster-mother that taught her the necessary songs. Furthermore, it is a supernaturally powerful woman's coaxing that invokes the songs from the Christian woman's lips. Guðríður is saliently surrounded by women who can invoke the chant by heart, as the seeress specifically states she needs only women's voices to assist her—men will not do. The entire scene is invoked as a woman's space and thus alludes to a literary unbroken line of women fortune-tellers and singers passing on knowledge only to their female predecessors—from the very beginning of the scene, the role of magic is regulated into the hands and voices of women only.

Enter Rǫgnvaldr réttilbeini: The Male Outlier?

Þorbjörg's chant is not the only one like it in Old Norse cultural memory. Just as Þorbjörg gathered round her women to start her songs, earlier in the reign of King Haraldr *hárfagri*, Rǫgnvaldr *réttilbeini* was supposedly preoccupied in a similar magical rite where chanting was deemed necessary.²² However, while Þorbjörg was revered and respected by her community, the ninth son of King Haraldr was condemned to death for his incantations. Accused of practicing *seiðr* in Haðaland, as retribution his father sent Rǫgnvaldr's brother, Eiríkr *blóðöx*, to murder him. This resulted in a house fire where Rǫgnvaldr and eighty other *seiðmenn* were burned alive.²³

²¹ Stephen Mitchell, 'Magic as Acquired Art and the Ethnographic Value of the Sagas' in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, (ed.) Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: UP Southern Denmark, 2003) 141.

²² *A History of Norway and The Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, (trans). Devra Kunin and Carl Phepstead (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001) 14, 17.

²³ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in Njal's Saga,' *Viator* 38 (2007) 191-215. The implication of a house burning is one marked by cruelty, stigma, and shame both for the deceased and the arsonists, as exemplified by *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Snorri Sturluson's *A History of Norway* contradicts his earlier claim in *Ynglingatal* by stating Rǫgnvaldr was thrown into a whirlpool in Haðaland. *A History of Norway* 17 stanza's 8-11.

With regards to a glance at Old Norse concepts of magic, there exists a confusing flurry of context when magic is a stable and encouraged endeavour, and when it is rendered completely taboo. This stability exists, but it is frustratingly hard to pin down when intersected by identifying emblems, as John Lindow identifies them.²⁴ For Rǫgnvaldr, magic invokes the most pressing emblems of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. The term “hybrid” further lends itself to the concept of emblems, allowing each category to be mixed and blurred into creating an ever-shifting identity.²⁵ Thus, by practicing magic Rǫgnvaldr’s stable masculine identity becomes twisted into a hybrid-masculinity exacerbated by socially informed interpretations: sexual and gender instability during magic, and magic as an ethnically marked practice.

For instance, if Neil Price’s work on *seiðr* is carefully considered, then *seiðr* could have been sexual in practice. Whether involving mimetic or reality-based acts of sexual intercourse, it could have led to the practitioner becoming so variably marked that they transformed into another gendered position entirely. The male subject entering a feminine domain (that of magic) harbours implications for the male practitioner; that they engage in each ritual and rite as a woman would morph them into an intolerable hybrid identity. The concept of men who engage in “women’s activities” as being lesser men and “tainted” by femininity is nothing new, and stems partly from misogyny, homophobia, and a complete demotion of women’s spaces.²⁶ The *seiðmaðr* borrows, or indeed appropriates, the magical actions of women and as such drapes femininity across his shoulders to become a hybrid individual that blurs sanctioned actions informed by gender and sexuality.

Additionally, this marking of a hybrid identity is not without imposed borders in the form of punishment and derision. As stated in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, ‘this new persecution of the peripheral sexualities enticed an

²⁴ John Lindow, ‘Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millennium of World View,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 67 (1995) 67.

²⁵ Bridges, ‘A Very “Gay: Straight?” 60.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2002).

incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals.²⁷ Those who were punished for the crime became the crime itself, and thus the male practitioner of magic was given the oxymoronic label of *seiðmaðr*, a male practicing magic. The use of *seiðr* by men would then be highly stigmatized and seen as effeminate, and essentially in need of cleansing through fire.²⁸ Indeed, *Heimskringla* includes a verse, originating from *Ynglingatal*, that describes Rǫgnvaldr's actions through his fellow *seiðmaðr* Vitgeirr of Hǫrðaland. Vitgeirr of Hǫrðaland describes his apparent misdeed in unkind terms.²⁹ To be a *seiðmaðr* was nothing to boast about, at least according to the sagas, and yet men apparently continued in their magical endeavours.

In continuing with sexuality and gender, the methodological production of the non-normative subject can be traced as a stigmatized marker when compared to the hypermasculine character regularly found in Icelandic sagas. Foucault traces this original lineage of the “Other” as being outside heterosexuality, in its relation to the individual as nothing more than a “perpetrator” of the act, not the embodiment of the act itself.³⁰ Greenberg too stresses this historical shift of secular individual acts to a more fully formed identity when he states ‘insofar as behaviour is theatrical, it need not be attributed to any underlying trait or “essence” of the actor. Seen this way, masculinity, femininity, queerness, straightness are not so much what one is, but what one does.’³¹ Thus, it must be stressed that it matters not if Rǫgnvaldr identified as a non-normative sexual or gender identity comparative to hegemonic masculine men. It matters not if he actually engaged in, what the contemporary medieval authors of the time, call perverse actions. What does matter is that he was accused of the actions, and as such these activities became the tantalizing rubric for the *seiðmaðr* of the medieval period.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 42-43.

²⁸ Ström identifies this torturous method as having a neutralizing effect that engulfs the magical offender. Ström, *On the Sacral Origin of Germanic Death Penalties*, (Stockholm: K. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademiens handlingar, 1942)127.

²⁹ *A History of Norway*, Þjóðólfr of Hvinir is the likely author of *Ynglingatal*, circa 855—930.

³⁰ Foucault, *The History*, 42-43.

³¹ David, F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 191.

The Ethnic “Other” Made Effeminate

If we are to focus on the lineage of female magic users proposed in *Eiríks saga rauða*, then what are we to make of Rǫgnvaldr? Where did he and his eighty other *seiðmaðr* learn their songs—is there such a thing as men’s archetypal or traditional magic specifically for the male gender to learn and disseminate? Some genealogical work might be able to shed some light on this query. While Foucault was predominantly fixated on the nineteenth-century social construction of homosexuality, his sentiments on the holistic construction of a peripheral identity still reign true and can be readily applied to Rǫgnvaldr. For the son of King Haraldr, ‘nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.’³² Rǫgnvaldr’s parentage and his subsequent ethnicity feed into his supposed perversity, which mean broader implications tackled by race and colonial theory. His sexualized hybrid masculinity, as a *seiðmaðr* perhaps engaging in penetrative sex, is enhanced by his subjecthood as an ethnic “Other:” specifically, as an Indigenous Sámi magic practitioner.

Rǫgnvaldr is attested in *Heimskringla* as having a mother named Snæfríður Svásadóttir who is revealed to be ethnically Sámi—a trait that many scholars have linked to the supernatural via cultural, religious, and geographical distance and difference when encountered by hegemonic Norse society.³³ As Rǫgnvaldr is linked to a Sámi origin, his hybrid identity becomes that much more complicated. Tangled up in a storyline of colonization, Indigenous identity, and the constructed feminization of the “Other” his masculinity becomes increasingly strained.

Continually, the Sámi are treated derisively by characters in a variety of sagas including but not limited to *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Hrafnista saga*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*, and *Ljósvetninga saga*. As a hegemonic culture, the Norse are positioned within a variety of sagas as antagonists and exploitative debt-collectors when

³² Foucault, *The History*, 43.

³³ Lindow, ‘Supernatural Others,’ 10-12; Stein R. Mathisen, ‘Sámi,’ in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife*, (eds.) William M. Clements and Thomas A. Green (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005) vol. 3. 135-139; Heide, ‘Spinning Seiðr,’ 165-166.

interacting with the indigenous Sámi of Northern Europe.³⁴ Indeed, Haraldr *hárfagr*'s meeting, quick marriage, and eventual obsession over his new wife is steeped in xenophobic and mystical happenings with detrimental effects presumably due to her cultural positioning.

The sanctioned culture and norms of the Norse thus give way to proper modes of identity expression, 'many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation.'³⁵ These categorized types profiled oppositions to the white-cisgender-heterosexual-dyadic, resulting in a conglomeration of aberrant and delinquent types that only had variation within their stigmatized deviation from the norm. What is especially salient with regards to the re-imagining of Rǫgnvaldr as a colonized ethnic subject interpellated by the Norse is McClintock's analysis of the "Other" within colonial relationship making.³⁶ The feminization of the "Other" relies upon the colonizer being susceptible to the anxieties and distresses of retaining his masculine penetrator status in the face of the liminal threshold of the far North and East where magic reigns. It is this territory and its peoples, deemed primitive or soft, that the dominant subject is supposed to ravish and conquer for his culture's economic gain and ethnic superiority. The Norse domination of the Sámi within the sagas speaks to the fears and anxiety of the hegemonic culture being susceptible to feminisation and total engulfment by the liminal unknown of the supernaturally-charged terrain that no amount of individual masculinity could stave off the 'danger [that] lies in transitional states.'³⁷ Once again, Rǫgnvaldr is positioned within a feminine sphere not of his making, as the Norse concept of the physical "Other" has continually been relegated to feminizing language.

Interestingly, *Historia Norvegiae* also includes a reference to the death of Rǫgnvaldr, yet the son of Haraldr *hárfagri* seems to have been taught this art not

³⁴ Within *Ljósvetninga saga*, the "dream Finn" that Guðmundr bides to speak with initially wants nothing to do with the Norseman as he is still conscious of 'the injuries we have suffered,' Andersson, Theodore Murdock & Miller, William Ian, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga Saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 198.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiii.

³⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 24.

³⁷ McClintock *Imperial Leather*, 25.

by his Sámi mother, but like Guðríður, by a foster-mother of indeterminate ethnic and cultural background.³⁸ This mother is situated in Haðaland, the area where Vitgeirr of Hǫrðaland assured that Rǫgnvaldr's shameful act occurred.³⁹ It is especially salient that his indigeneity comes from his mother, as into the contemporary moment, governments and legislation have been adamant at regulating who is and is not Indigenous based upon the mother's bloodline.⁴⁰ It is no wonder that at least one of her sons should similarly become involved in the supernatural arts of his matrilineal line and pay for it with his life.

The Norse reckoning with the Sámi is further feminised by associating the Sámi completely with magic, mysticism, and supernatural primitiveness. The position of Rǫgnvaldr with the Sámi, as seen in his matrilineal heritage, is also equally expressed in his association with the extreme north of the Old Norse cultural and topographical concept—where 'the northern areas were certainly the centre of magic, in which magic was most efficient and most dangerous.'⁴¹ There is nothing innately perverse, sexual, or taboo about Rǫgnvaldr's indigenous blood, yet it serves a powerful tool to position his ethnicity as supernaturally and effeminately inclined.

³⁸ *A History of Norway*, 14, stanza 31-34.

³⁹ The motif of foster-mothers taking in male apprentices who wish to learn the skills of magic is a common and useful a thread of investigation with regards to a variety of male practitioners, not just Rǫgnvaldr. See Gunnlaug's tutelage under Geirrið in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Kormák's visit to Þórdís the witch in *Kormáks saga* and Kolbak's protection under Gríma the sorceress in *Fóstbræðra saga*. However, it need not merely be foster mothers, as whole families can be involved in the practice, as was the case in *Laxdala saga* with Kotkell and his wife Gríma, who presumably taught their sons the art of sorcery. Additionally, Andersson and Miller suggest with relation to women and men's interactions and familial kinship ties 'male virtues could be transmitted through females,' often leading to similar dispositions or goals. This is demonstrated when women play their role of enforcing and maintaining honor for their household in the ways available to them such as in *Brennu-Njál's saga* and *Laxdala saga*. Andersson & Miller, *Law and Literature*, 15.

⁴⁰ Louise Bäckman, 'Female—Divine and Human: A Study of the Position of Woman and Society in Northern Eurasia,' in Åke Hultkrantz (ed.) *The Hunters: Their Culture and Way of Life* (Tromsø: Tromsø Museums Skrifter, 1982); Jo-Anne Fiske 'Boundary Crossings: Power and Marginalisation in the Formation of Canadian Aboriginal Women's Identities,' *Gender and Development* 14 (2006) 247-258; Rauna Kuokkanen, 'Indigenous Women in Traditional Economies: The Case of Sámi Reindeer Herding,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34 (2009), 499-504; Bonita Lawrence, 'Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview,' *Hypatia* 18 (2003), 3-31.

⁴¹ Hans Jacob Orning, 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the fornaldasögur,' *Scandinavian Journal* 35 (2010) 7.

The feminisation and deprecation of the demarcated “Other” that the Norsemen encounter is not a new topic of study, and although this discussion is predicated upon the Indigenous Sámi, the case can also be made for people of the Hebrides, Orkney Isles, or any person with Irish connections or a patronymic Irish name within Viking Age Scandinavia and onwards.⁴² As such, Rǫgnvaldr would have been an easy target twice-marked by the slander of effeminacy as not only a practitioner of a feminine magic, but as the son of a Sámi woman. Through the ascription of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, these examples illustrate a distinct picture that leads to violent repercussions that still play out in today’s society on a systemic level.

Nevertheless, while we can speculate on all the attributing factors that made Rognvaldr an easy target for corrective punishment “Othered” by magic, we cannot wholly understand where he learned the art itself. He could have learned these arts from his Sámi mother or foster-mother in Haðaland, if not a secret lead *seiðmaðr* akin to Þorbjörg herself. What is salient, however, is that while Rǫgnvaldr must enter a feminine space that expands his subjecthood into a peripheral hybrid identity, Þorbjörg need not extend outside the bounds of the tradition. This mixing of gender in the arts does not diminish Þorbjörg’s power or mysticism, as she is still able to produce fantastic results and is revered for her efforts unlike Rǫgnvaldr. In a technical and mechanical sense, Rǫgnvaldr presumably did everything right. His use of chants like the ones Þorbjörg employed demonstrated that his magical ritual was in essence the correct approach, yet his gender acted as a destructive catalyst which tainted his actions with perverseness and shame.⁴³

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

⁴³ Jochens states that ‘cross-culturally, male magicians enjoy far greater prestige than their female colleagues. Even when male and female practitioners coexist within the same culture, women do not receive the same credit for magical performance.’ Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 119. I must disagree with this as far as it concerns Old Norse cultural depictions of magic within saga society. It cannot be regarded as prestige to be labelled perverse, monstrous, and indeed worthy of being marginalized to the extent that one must suffer a house burning as a consequence of their gender distorting their magical capabilities.

Though we cannot assure ourselves that Þorbjörg was a real person, she represents a construction of what a thirteenth-century saga audience would consider a seeress to look and act like, and she plays her role well. How faithful and receptive the Greenlandic settlements were to their prophetesses before conversion is unknowable, and yet her image shines through vellum roughly seven-hundred years later as one of the best literary descriptions of her kind. Even so, it is important to acknowledge that her male counterparts do exist, though not all of them are burdened under the guise of fantasy.

Concluding Consideration: Magical Men and Their Place in Scholarship

I am in no way seeking to establish men as a whole more oppressed within the saga corpus—such a statement, I feel, could never entirely be supported, nor should it. The scholarly declaration of a hybrid-masculinity should not be intended to absolve a figure’s faults, whatever they may be. Currently, there exists a large body of research dedicated to uncovering how hybrid masculinities re-establish systems of inequality, especially among certain privileged groups of men.⁴⁴ Additionally, I am also cognizant that men are Othered and maligned due to their proximity to women and women’s practices, or suspected domains. They are still men, and have advantageous economic, social, and civic freedoms so long as they maintain their masculinity and social standing within the community. However, masculinity is a slippery intangible concept to constantly perform and maintain, and thus is in danger of constantly being lost. Once it is lost, a man is in grave danger as they are seen to be too close to that which is taboo—femininity and all that it conveys within saga society, such as subordination, lust, and mysticism. Women are then indeed an integral part of the story, and a man’s actions mimicking their practices can unfortunately lead to their downfall.

If we are to accept that magic is a feminine role, then men who practice it are irrevocably betraying the socially constructed parameters of their gender

⁴⁴ Bridges, ‘A Very “Gay: Straight?”; Demetrakis Demetriou, ‘Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique,’ *Theory and Society* 30 (2001) 337-361, Michael Messner, ““Changing Men” and Feminist Politics in the United States,’ *Theory and Society* 22 (1993) 723-737.

in a hyper-masculine and honour-driven society like that of medieval Iceland. However, I am prepared to suggest that men who practice magic are best described with a ‘hybrid masculinity.’ Despite their hybrid masculinity, the magic-driven male practitioner is, equally as capable as their hypermasculine counterparts at suppressing the magical women they share folios with, and they usually do. However, there is too much evidence that gender and sexuality distort when a man actively engages in magic, and that there is the possibility of a different type of masculinity taking form.

This does not mean that, because of their Othered state, male magic practitioners cannot be held responsible for any misgivings, nor complacency, in the larger hegemonic masculinity that saturates a majority of Old Norse literature.⁴⁵ Even though Røgnvaldr might be capitulated as a martyr of queer victimhood, we know little more about him to safely champion him as an anachronistic notion of gender equality. Nor should we demand other saga figures who, with a gleam in their eye, curse a household with bad weather, or conjure a *draugr* from the grave, as being so maligned to warrant total sympathy. However, neither is the simple alignment of magical men to mere magical practitioners, denoted by terms like *ergi* and *rugr*, which are then translated by a majority of scholars as “perverse,” “homosexual,” or “queer” without scholarship doing the necessary work to unpack and update this terminology and its connotations. As such, the magical saga-man when he engages in whatever way, undoubtably is credited within Old Norse literature as invoking social anxiety with regards to gender, sexuality, and overarching ideas of traditional masculinity and femininity. There is a lot to be learned about these men and the ways they use, disregard, or engulf themselves within the practice of magic, and what it relays to the societal structure of medieval Iceland through an array of intersections—not merely sexuality, but gender, and ethnicity.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Demetriou, ‘Connell’s Concept,’ 20; Michael Messner, “‘Changing Men,’” 22.

⁴⁶ I would like to thank my former supervisors and mentors Professor Carolyne Larrington, Dr. Amanda Power, and Dr. Gareth Evans who encountered the rough original body of this work with care and patience before it was polished with a bit of magic. Thank you to my professors Jackson Crawford, Ruth Goldstein, Molly Jacobs, Scott Lukas, and Jonas Wellendorf for helping to nurture my love of the sagas and the humanities. To my colleagues, friends, and loved ones who motivated me to keep writing, thank you for your support.

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Book Reviews



Review: Gareth Lloyd Evans. *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Yoav Tirosh¹

In a literature so preoccupied with masculinity as the *Íslendingasögur*, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been awarded to the study of men and masculinities in this corpus. This is partly due to the three decades long shadow cast by Carol Clover's one gender model, which is the topic of frequent lively velitations in conferences, but with very few publications resulting from this. Gareth Lloyd Evans's book does not shy away from Clover's model. In fact, it spends many pages breaking apart the fallacies on which this model is based—most prominently its reliance of Thomas Laqueur's one-sex model—and offers a new, more flexible model instead; that of hegemonic masculinity. Under this model, in each society several kinds of masculinities are in simultaneous operation, with a dominant one subjugating the others. Hegemonic masculinity allows for more complex and intersectional interpretations compared with Clover's 'rainbow coalition', which flattens out the subtleties and differences between, for example, an underdeveloped young man and a Viking disabled in battle.

Evans's book is divided into four main chapters. The first—and most dense—chapter, "Modelling Saga Masculinities," offers Evans's take on how to approach gender and the study of masculinity in the Old Norse world. This chapter functions as the backbone to the rest of the book and alongside the book's introduction offers an updated discussion of matters of gender and

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masculinity. Evans frames the study of masculinity “as a feminist enterprise in its own right” (9). He convincingly argues that if we neglect to study men and masculinities, we set these as a societal standard from which women and femininities deviate. By studying masculinities, Evans promotes viewing these subjects as equally constructed and rejects an essentialist reading that would see these as the natural state of things.

The second chapter, “Homosocial Masculinities,” presents an analysis of relationships between men as different manifestations of homosociality. Evans wishes to somewhat revise Sedgwick’s model of homosociality’s reliance on a woman as a triangulator for the men’s desire, offering a dyadic alternative where one of the two men are subjugated and feminized; where this dynamic fails, homosocial relations become unstable and break down. Here Evans paints a harsh but familiar picture of male relationships that are mediated by the constant threat of *níð* (defamatory insults), and women whose function is as a substitute for skalds’ homosocial desires.

In the third chapter, “Intersectional Masculinities,” the biggest benefit of Evans’s approach compared with the one-gender model is displayed. It reveals how different situations influence one’s own perception and other’s perception of one’s masculinity. Evans goes through issues of youth and old age, race, disability, sexuality, religion and class and how they hinder one’s status as masculine. Discussing *Egils saga* and Egill at his old age, Evans points out that “although he is no longer able to exhibit hegemonic masculinity, he is nevertheless invested in masculinity and his own masculine identity” (82). This key sentence is relevant to all the different intersections with masculinity discussed in the chapter; the fact that a youth, for example, is still too young to be considered a man does not mean that he does not take part in the masculinity game or in creating homosocial bonds. This chapter will most likely be used as a frame of reference in many studies to come as it creates a firm standing on which different kinds of masculinity can be discussed.

The fourth and final chapter, “The Limits of Socially Accepted Masculinity,” consists of the book’s only close reading of a saga, *Grettis saga*. Evans describes Grettir and his anti-homosocial (sometimes confusingly stylized

as “homo(anti)social” (e.g. page 130)) behaviour and reads the saga through this prism. Grettir’s hypermasculinity is used to show that in some cases, too much masculinity could be equally disruptive to the individual and society; the much-discussed lack of luck that characterizes Grettir is explained as his inability to create homosocial bonds, which is caused not by his lack of masculinity but rather by his excess of it.

As in all cases where a large corpus is dealt with, the texts are often read outside of their context, and some of the subtleties are therefore lost. For example, on the book’s very first page one finds the sentence “Burning flames engulf the house as repayment for the misjudged peace offering of a silken cloak” (1) in the context of problematic masculinity in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. This reading both does not take into account Ármann Jakobsson’s argument that there was nothing inherently feminine about the cloak, as well as recent debates questioning the innocence of the silk cloak gesture. In another case, Evans uses an example from *Ljósvetninga saga*’s C-redaction chapter 31 where Hárekr attempts to separate Skegg-Broddi’s hands, which are clinched to his head. When Hárekr fails this, Skegg-Broddi states: “[e]igi þykki mér þú maðr sterkr, en drengr góðr ertu’ (it does not seem to me that you are a strong man, but you are a good man)” (17). About this Evans states that “Hárekr is clearly not effeminized for his lacklustre physical abilities” (17). While this is possibly true, it misses the context in which this story is told; at the beginning of the very same chapter, Hárekr grapples Höskuldr of the Ljósvetningar in order to stop him from attacking the members of the opposing Möðruvellingar. The fact that Hárekr then cannot separate Skegg-Broddi’s hands means that if he is weak, Höskuldr is weaker. Skegg-Broddi’s quip is therefore against Höskuldr rather, who was either too weak to fight back, or did not actually want to engage in battle and let himself be stopped. Both physical weakness and cowardice could be seen as highlighting Höskuldr’s supposed ‘effeminacy.’ Nevertheless, Evans is correct in that Hárekr is not targeted by these words.

In other cases, it seems that the focus on masculinity at times overshadows other analyses of certain events and scenes. In some cases, like with the reading of *Grettis saga*, this produces attractive interpretations that add

much to our understanding of the sagas' workings. In a few cases, the readings are not convincing, such as with Evans' analysis of Egill's plan to rain silver over the attendants of the *alþing*: "Egill's intention betrays a desire to expose the rotten core of the homosociality upon which the social system is built: that the Alþing—the height of homosociality in action—might be so easily undercut suggests the fragility of its foundations" (53). Evans does not provide evidence to support this reading, and it seems that the concept of 'homosociality' does not contribute much to the understanding of this specific scene.

Evans's book is a significant and important step in the research of masculinities in the sagas and Old Norse gender and society in general. It is certainly a product of its own time; throughout the book the author rejects far-right and nationalistic readings of the text, which will sometimes weaponize Old Norse literature in support of their own causes. The personal background that Evans provides is also important; often scholars neglect to acknowledge—to themselves as well as others—the biases that they might be carrying when they approach the material (this would be a good opportunity to note that while Evans thanks me in the book's acknowledgements due to our very positive scholarly interactions, I have tried to treat this review as objectively as possible). One hopes that more scholars will practice this, especially when touching upon controversial topics such as sex, gender, disability, race and class. To lend an expression from Park,² Evans's book finally provides an antidote to Clover's one-gender model by offering a much more helpful framework from which to analyse Old Norse masculinities. As he himself points out, much work is left to be done by expanding the scope of the research to other Old Norse prose and poetic corpuses. It would be interesting to see how his framework could be used to understand attitudes towards masculine females, who are briefly discussed in his book, or non-binary people in the sagas.

² Park, Katherine. 1995. Review of *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* by Joan Cadden. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 28 (3): 551–3.

Rasmussen, Ann Marie, *Rivalrous Masculinities*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019

Rosemary Kelly¹

Rivalrous Masculinities is a collection of essays that are grouped around the broadly defined theme of masculinities, contained within interdisciplinary gender studies. Born out of a research and teaching project investigating ‘changing images of masculinity and the male body from the Middle Ages to the present’ (xi), it evolved into the collection as it currently stands. This collection includes critics who have made significant advances within the field of gender studies such as Gillian Overing, Clare A. Lees, and Karma Lochrie. The collection centres around the argument that masculinity is ‘pluralized’ in medieval literature, distinct from biological sex and existing in multiple forms, which—as the editor acknowledges—closely adheres to Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performative. The collected essays are particularly diverse in their approach, including criticism in literary analysis, art history, religion and history. While this might attract a wider audience, this also means that not every essay will be directly applicable to varying scholars. It is, however, impressive in its variety; indeed, the essays do not adhere to one literary culture, class or even specific period within the broadly defined medieval era. For example, Gillian Overing discusses ‘angst’ among warrior-leaders in *Beowulf*, while Diane Wolfthal assesses the portrayal of male servants in a variety of later medieval portraits, both secular and religious. Rasmussen manages to balance appealing to a wider audience against in-depth research on a variety of different topics. The collection does

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not directly comment on Old Norse studies and applies only in the broadest conceptual sense. While some of these chapters present arguments that can, in turn, readily be applied to Old Norse literature, the collection makes no claim to be a study of Norse masculinities, and therefore is better suited to scholars new to the study of masculinities and looking to ground themselves in different approaches and perspectives. The most useful of these chapters for Norse focused researchers would be Clare A. Lees' 'A Word to the Wise: Men, Gender, and Medieval Masculinities,' Gillian Overing's chapter 'Men in Trouble: Warrior Angst in Beowulf,' and Karma Lochrie's 'Medieval Masculinities Without Men.'

Ann Marie Rasmussen uses the preface of this collection to discuss the original impetus, acknowledging the need for the expansion of masculinity studies into undergraduate teaching. However, the variety of disciplines included in this collection has resulted in some chapters being less relevant to scholars of Old Norse, such as Astrid Lembke's chapter 'Predicaments of Piousness: The Trouble with Being a Learned Jewish Family Man in Premodern Europe.' Rasmussen notes that masculinity is as equally pluralized as femininity. Often, masculinity has been recognised as a singular entity (you are either masculine or not), while femininity has been explored through a broad range of different types of behaviour and characters since the early feminist readings of the 1980s. Clare A. Lees' chapter discusses the relationship masculinity studies has to gender studies, observing that some studies are 'asymmetrical, if not independent of, feminist, gendered, and queer understandings of culture and history' (1). She goes on to state that the early publications of the 1990s were 'prompted, at least in part' by feminist reassessments of women and gender (1). The second half of this chapter moves on to assess the reproduction of 'masculine wisdom [...] across the generations' in the Old English poem *Precepts* (1). This chapter not only reveals points of analysis not yet taken up in Old English scholarship but also provides a wealth of knowledge for those new to masculinity studies, tracing the various avenues in which such a study can be undertaken.

Gillian Overing's chapter, entitled 'Men in Trouble: Warrior Angst in Beowulf,' discusses the difficulty leading men face in the epic poem when negative emotions contrast with their otherwise strict masculine identity.

Overing begins the chapter discussing Old English weather terms, used frequently in *Beowulf* to depict negative emotions and inner turmoil. The framework of this chapter displays the potential for philological analysis to work with gendered readings of medieval texts. This provides great potential readings for scholars of both Old English and Old Norse, as gendered and queer readings do not frequently overlap with philological studies. While not directly commenting on Old Norse literature, this chapter provides a useful starting point for scholars of Old Norse literature looking to use close textual analysis in support of gendered readings through its philological approach, a method applicable to studies in medieval linguistics beyond Old Norse and Old English. The warriors who have become leaders, including Hrothgar, struggle with their own deeply emotional inner turmoil, Overing stating that ‘this precise sorrow ranks above so much else’ (33). She points to the link between masculinity and the painful emotions they are experiencing, claiming that ‘this is a crisis between men, about the crucial relation between the king and his loyal shoulder-companion, and the loss of that relationship, and it is acutely registered, understood by another man’ (33). Overing’s chapter reveals a gap in current *Beowulf* scholarship, with further potential for such analysis to be expanded into the Old Norse heroic corpus.

As previously mentioned, the contents of this collection are applicable to Old Norse studies only in the broadest conceptual sense, due to the lack of direct commentary on Old Norse literature or histories of medieval Scandinavia. The following chapters are the furthest from Scandinavian studies in the material they explore, however, their approaches have relevance for a student of Norse material. Diane Wolfthal discusses the portrayal of servants in a variety of later medieval paintings, from the fourteenth century to the early eighteenth century, a majority of which were produced in France and Germany. Wolfthal reveals how the depiction of servants within these paintings constructs a subordinated masculinity not equal to that of their royal masters or significant religious figures,

claiming that these servants are ‘not viewed as fully independent, adult men.’² For example, Wolfthal analyses different portrayals of Christ before Pilate, showing how Christ is centred in the frame due to his significant status in Christian teachings, while servants are often in the background or concealed at the sides, with their faces partially hidden or facing away entirely in different paintings, including the secular ones. While Wolfthal makes a strong argument that contributes well to the collection’s theme of pluralized masculinities, it is difficult to find a direct connection, if any, to Old Norse literature, as it verges on the early modern rather than medieval. Karma Lochrie’s chapter, entitled ‘Medieval Masculinities Without Men,’ explores the possibility of masculinity not being specifically tied to maleness. As pointed out by Lochrie, female masculinity and trans-masculinities are both another area which has been neglected within the still growing field of masculinity studies. While Lochrie discusses a variety of Middle English and late medieval French texts in this chapter, the same argument could usefully be applied to saga heroines or the debate on warrior women.

Despite the variety of focuses within each chapter, there are other chapters that are Norse-relevant. This collection sets out to reveal the plurality of masculinities, using a variety of approaches beyond that of literary analysis, showing through its broad scope just how diverse the picture of masculinity is. However, while this variety of approaches within the collection emphasises the different and sometimes contrasting types of masculinity found within the medieval period, not all of these chapters can directly correlate to equivalent analysis on Old Norse studies, although some of the arguments made within the collection might be directly applied to Old Norse texts. The struggle between the knight and the courtier in Darrin Cox’s chapter ‘The Knight Versus the Courtier’ reveals the battle for domination between opposing masculine identities, depicted through the spiritual courtier and secular, violent figure of the knight in battle. While commenting on medieval France, the analysis of

² Wolfthal, Diane, ‘When Did Servants Become Men?’ in *Rivalrous Masculinities* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) 184.

power structures within a courtly setting is a point worth noting for scholars of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* in particular. Ruth Mazo Karras' chapter 'David and Jonathan: A Medieval Bromance' is a particular effective chapter, looking at male homosocial relationships between and their significance in the realm of the political,³ a recurring theme in Old Icelandic Sagas.

While this collection is perhaps overly ambitious in its international and cross-disciplinary scope, it does manage to live up to its own expectations of revealing pluralized masculinities across multiple fields of medieval studies, from the literary to the historical. Certain chapters of the collection are less conceptually applicable for scholars of a different field, although many of these focus on literary analysis and will be of interest to scholars of medieval literature in particular. However removed from the medieval Scandinavian context many of the essays appear to be, this collection is still a worthwhile read for scholars new to the study of masculinity.

³ Karras, Ruth Mazo, 'David and Jonathan' in *Rivalrous Masculinities*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) 152.

**Review: Christopher Abram, *Evergreen
Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old
Norse Myth and Literature.***

**Charlottesville and London: University
of Virginia Press. 2019.**

Kathryn A. Haley-Halinski¹

[Content warning: climate disaster; language that evokes violence against trans people]

Evergreen Ash is a necessary book. Published in the last year of the warmest decade in recorded history,² *Evergreen Ash* uses ecocritical readings of Norse mythology to ‘foreground and interrogate ecological issues that are relevant both to the medieval past and to a future-focused ecocritical praxis in the present’ (26). Throughout the book, Abram draws parallels between Ragnarøk and the present-day climate crisis. Refreshingly, this book is not particularly concerned with accusations of ahistoricism. Abram states outright that he is not interested in revealing ecological truths behind the texts of the Prose and Poetic Eddas, but rather interrogating what these medieval Icelandic texts, written by a culture whose natural world is ‘perpetually on the brink of one disaster or another,’ (8) might be able to say to readers whose world feels on the edge of ecological collapse. What follows is bleak but compelling reading. Time and again, Abram

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² Press Office, ‘Confirmation that 2019 concludes warmest decade’, *Met Office*, 15th Jan 2020 <<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2020/confirmation-that-2019-concludes-warmest-decade-on-record>> [Accessed 17/1/2020].

shows that the conditions for Ragnarøk were ingrained into the ideologies of Norse myth, just as the conditions for climate disaster are in the present-day global north.

The first thing *Evergreen Ash* does is tackle what could be termed ‘green paganism.’ This idea was made famous by Lynn White Jr., who hypothesised that Christianity’s elevation of human ‘Society’ above an undifferentiated ‘Nature’ in Genesis sowed the seeds of the climate catastrophe (27-8). While Abram acknowledges that Old Norse textual sources were recorded post-Christianisation, he uses etymological analyses of Old Norse terms for the world such as *veröld* (‘world,’ derived from *ver* ‘man’ and *öld* ‘age’) and structural analysis of Old Norse myth to argue that what can be gleaned of pre-Christian Norse culture was ‘hardly less anthropocentric than the Judeo-Christian world, as long as we read the Æsir as occupying the human subject position’ (61). Patterns of dualistic, hierarchical thinking regarding humanity and Nature cannot be pinned to the spread of Christianity.

Abram devotes the chapter ‘Trees, Vines, and the Golden Age of Settlement’ to discussing the sagas’ literary construction of settlement-era Iceland as a Golden Age of natural plenty. While Abram’s depiction of a medieval Iceland blighted by anthropogenic environmental degradation may be exaggerated,³ this does not damage his conclusion that nostalgia does nothing to improve present or future living standards (107). This is one of the most vital messages of the book: while climate despair may drive people toward nostalgia for the medieval period as a pre-industrial ecological haven, humans have always had the potential for harmful relationships with the environment.

As well as addressing the romanticisation of medieval Scandinavia, Abram also argues that both climate disaster and Ragnarøk are linked to inequality. Key to this conclusion is Bruno Latour’s ‘modern constitution,’ which is built upon an absolute distinction between non-human Nature and human Society that is strengthened by the construction and subsequent violent rejection

³ Richard Streeter, Andrew J. Dugmore, Ian T. Lawson, Egill Erlendsson and Kevin J Edwards, ‘The onset of the palaeoanthropocene in Iceland: Changes in complex natural systems,’ *The Holocene* 25.10 (2015), 1662-75.

and subordination of ‘hybrid’ figures and populations. To the Æsir, the *jǫtnar* and *dvergjar* are such hybrids (134-8). While Abram does address the representation of Indigenous peoples (the *skraalingar* of *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*) as another such hybrid group (114-21), this section is brief and lacks engagement with Indigenous Studies and Critical Race Theory regarding the portrayal of Indigenous and racialised peoples in modern and medieval literatures. Overall, Abram’s theories regarding modernity and Ragnarǫk/climate crisis are not wrong *per se*. However, greater attention to their connections to phenomena such as race⁴ and settler-extractivism⁵ is required.

Gender inequality and disaster is discussed in the fourth chapter, ‘The Nature of World in a World without Nature.’ A significant amount of time is spent critiquing earth-mother narratives and James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia hypothesis.’ These readings, Abram argues, are based upon the ever-present nature/society binary, which tends to place a feminine Nature one step below a masculine Society on the hierarchy of being (71-81). The analysis of how *Hákonardrápa* portrays the personified Jǫrð (“earth”) as a victim of sexual assault is a difficult but persuasive reading of how these binaries function alongside gender to justify the abuse of the environment.

Yet, while *Evergreen Ash* argues that the oppression of marginalised groups is central to both Ragnarǫk and climate disaster, it is in the call for social and climate justice that this book is most flawed. Abram repeatedly brings up aspects of ecological disaster that have been cited in eco-fascist manifestos, such as the theory that the Abrahamic religions are less ecologically-sound than Germanic paganism (21, 27-8); and the argument that climate disaster is related to global overpopulation (65). These ideas are usually connected to the myths of

⁴ Defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as ‘a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.’ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 110. See also Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

⁵ The excessive extraction of natural resources for profit, carried out by colonial powers at the expense of indigenous communities. Anna J. Willow, ‘Indigenous ExtrACTIVISM in Boreal Canada: Colonial Legacies, Contemporary Struggles and Sovereign Futures’, *Humanities* 5, 55 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5030055>.

‘white genocide’ and ‘the great replacement.’⁶ Such myths also rely upon the representation of People of Colour as “hybrid” Nature/Culture figures that must be violently rejected and/or subdued, but this is barely addressed. As mentioned, Abram deconstructs the idea of green paganism, and he briefly touches upon the use of green paganism by eco-fascists to justify Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and ethnonationalism in the conclusion (172-7). However, he does not challenge arguments concerning overpopulation, despite studies indicating that resource mismanagement under capitalism, not overpopulation, is the greater danger.⁷ Furthermore, certain passages of *Evergreen Ash* regarding apocalypticism in climate activism do not suggest urgency so much as they do survivalism (20, 125, 129), itself a heavily gendered phenomenon that places ‘masculine’ activities as the most conducive to disaster survival, and thus the abled man as the apex survivor, triumphant over Nature’s disasters.⁸ There is nothing to suggest that Abram sympathises with these viewpoints, but his direct criticisms of far-right ideologies are too little, too late.

In addition to this, Abram occasionally misuses terms without unpacking them. For instance, he labels the naming of Greenland ‘greenwashing,’ on account of it using the promise of abundant foliage to ‘market’ the new settlements (108). While the naming of Greenland may have misinformed Norse people regarding the Greenlandic climate, it is hard to put this in the same category as deliberately misleading climate-conscious consumers into buying an environmentally damaging product. Similarly, Abram calls the common skaldic kenning-metaphor of trees standing for humans ‘a cultural appropriation of a nonhuman phenomenon’ (102). This remark may have been intended as a suggestion that nonhuman life should be held in the same ontological regard as human life, but as it lacks any such explanation, it comes across as somewhat

⁶ A. Dirk Moses, “‘White Genocide’ and Ethics of Public Analysis”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 21.2 (2019), 201-13; Maria Darwish, ‘Green neo-Nazism: Examining the intersection of masculinity, far-right extremism and environmentalism in the Nordic Resistance Movement’, MA thesis (Oslo, 2018).

⁷ Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, ‘Environmental Ethics and Linkola's Ecofascism: An Ethics Beyond Humanism’, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9.4 (2014), 586-601.

⁸ Casey Ryan Kelly, ‘The Man-pocalypse: Doomsday Preppers and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 2–3 (July 2, 2016), 95-114.

dismissive of the very real harm caused by the cultural appropriation of *human* phenomena.

Among these ill-judged uses of terminology is the misapplication of queer ecology. In chapter 2, Abram queers the body of Ymir, the *jötunn* whose legs bring forth a son through what Abram terms ‘frottage’ (54). In his analysis of Ymir as queer, Abram confuses intersex and trans identities, arguing that Ymir’s masculinity and ability to reproduce on his own renders him “intersex” and yet describing the world as ‘dragged from the bloody and broken trans-body of the queer paternal-maternal ancestor’ (56). Purely on the grounds of terminology, this switch between intersex and trans suggests a lack of wider reading, and furthermore the hyphenation of ‘trans-body,’ rather than the use of ‘trans’ as an adjective, suggests that trans bodies are inherently different from other bodies, simultaneously erasing and dehumanising trans and intersex people. Furthermore, the fact that Abram felt the need to re-state the violence enacted upon the only body he queers in such a sensationalist manner, while probably entirely coincidental, is a shock to a queer reader.

Overall, it should be emphasised that *Evergreen Ash* is a necessary book. All disciplines desperately need to address the climate crisis. Yet, *Evergreen Ash* alone will not fulfil this need. It is a defiantly ahistorical text that engages with a broad spectrum of ecocritical theory to make some salient points, and it confidently challenges some core eco-fascist beliefs. And yet, it falls flat in essential areas of present-day environmentalist praxis. While Abram does acknowledge approaches like ecofeminism, it is usually brief, and he spends more time arguing against Lovelock and White than he does engaging with the many approaches that centre marginalised voices, particularly postcolonialism, Indigenous Studies, and Critical Race Theory. It feels uncharitable criticising a book that reads like one scholar’s personal meditation on the climate crisis, but we need to address the weaknesses mentioned here, as they are common in climate activism both inside and outside academia.⁹ I hope that the publication

⁹ Susuana Amoah, ‘Reflections: Overpopulation and the Unbearable Whiteness of Green,’ ONCA website (24th July 2019) <https://onca.org.uk/2019/07/24/overpopulation-the-unbearable-whiteness-of-green/> [Accessed 12th March 2020]; Ben Smoke, ‘Room for Change:

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of *Evergreen Ash* prompts more books in this vein, but I hope they place greater emphasis on the marginalised voices that need to be centred in the fight for climate justice.

the Problem with Extinction Rebellion,' *Huck* (10th October 2019) <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/room-for-change-the-problem-with-extinction-rebellion/> [Accessed 12th March 2020].

Review: Neil Price. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. 2nd Edition. Oxbow Books: 2019.

Jennifer Hemphill¹

Since the publication of the first edition of *The Viking Way* in 2002, and on some occasions as a response to the original study, the field of Viking and medieval Scandinavian studies is only seeing a rise in research focusing on the paranormal and magical practices during the Viking Age. Many scholars within the field are now utilising interdisciplinary approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of pre-Christian traditions from the Viking Age, while also focusing on the reception of these traditions throughout Scandinavian societies following the region's conversion to Christianity. In 2002, Neil Price's publication of *The Viking Way* offered academics a unique glimpse into the world of Viking spirituality. It is fair to say that the work published throughout Price's career, including the present study, has transformed the field of Iron Age Scandinavian research. Price has published a wide range of influential studies focused on the Viking period, including works on the Vikings in Brittany, the archaeology of Birka, mortuary behavior, and circumpolar shamanism.

The research from his PhD dissertation at Uppsala University, *The Viking Way*, was originally published in 2002 and is considered one of the most important contributions to late Iron Age and medieval Scandinavian studies.² In the first and second editions of *The Viking Way*, Price employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining his archaeological expertise with

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² Townend, Matthew. 'The Viking Way: Religion and War in the Late Iron Age Scandinavia' in *Antiquity*, Vol. 77, Iss. 296 (Cambridge 2003) 428.

relevant disciplines such as literature, history, religious studies, and anthropology. It is with this approach that the study aims to establish a broad understanding of what Price coins as ‘the Viking Way,’ or the ‘Viking’ mind. The release of this second edition has been highly anticipated by scholars from all disciplines who hold an interest in late Iron Age Scandinavia. Price notes that the process of revising the original publication into a second volume had been one of compromise, made in an attempt of trying balance a demand for expanding access to the original material and updating the research to include new material (xxviii). The main additions to the publication come in the form of new reconstructions of the burials discussed in the previous edition, updated maps and tables, and the reproduction of images into colour. The revised edition also offers the inclusion of an entirely new eighth chapter, which summarises relevant research that has been released following the original publication in 2002, and the impact that it has on this study of the Norse mind. The new edition has been expanded by almost 35,000 words, all while keeping the structural integrity of the first edition intact.

In the book’s opening chapter, Price introduces the notion of ‘cognitive archaeology’, or archaeology of the mind, and continues on to explain how this theoretical perspective in archaeology can be applied to the Viking Age. This section outlines the project’s intent to create ‘a cognitive exploration of the Vikings’ (15) and reveal how late Iron Age Norse culture fits into a wider Scandinavian and circumpolar context. The second chapter of this study begins with a short survey of Old Norse mythology, while also introducing the problems and paradigms of studying Viking-Age spirituality and religion. The chapter’s focus then turns to the book’s primary subject: magic within the Viking Age. However, from the time of *The Viking Way*’s initial publication, an extensive amount of further studies have been published that have advanced the field of Norse magical practice and its magical performers.³ Although the

³ For example, see the following: François-Xavier Dillman, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne: Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2006); Nicholas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014); Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania:

majority of *The Viking Way*'s research surrounding magic remains the same as it was presented in the original edition, Price does address the many advances within the field of magic that were published after 2002 in his final chapter, which will be further addressed below. The study's discussion surrounding the magical concept of *seiðr* begins by defining the term as a form of sorcery that acts as an 'extension of the mind and its faculties' (34). The analysis continues by providing an overview of *seiðr* practices in context with other forms of Norse magic. The book's second chapter concludes with an expansive review of *seiðr* occurrences found within the entire Old Norse corpus, alongside the examination of the academic research carried out prior to 2002 on *seiðr* rituals in the Old Norse world. The third chapter continues the analysis of *seiðr* by examining how this particular form of magic is connected to the pre-Christian gods. The study then considers the role of individual *seiðr* performers and how this role is detailed within written source material from the medieval corpus, followed by the analysis of an extensive collection of archaeological materials which are found in graves that have been interpreted as the final resting place of *seiðr* performers. The chapter's focus then turns to a discussion on the sexual aspects associated with *seiðr* performance, and concludes with an evaluation of the role that the *seiðr* ritual plays within the 'domestic sphere' (186).

The fourth chapter of *The Viking Way* introduces the Sámi practice *noaidevuohta*, which Price describes as the nearest equivalent of *seiðr* performance. Following a discussion on the Sámi-Norse relations during the Viking Age, this chapter offers a detailed overview of Sámi religion within the same time period. The practice of *noaidevuohta* is further examined with a focus on the *noaidi*, Sámi ritual specialists, which is then followed by an exploration of *noaidi* rituals via the analysis of archaeological material. The chapter concludes by comparing the Sámi spiritual practices with the Norse performances outlined in previous chapters. Among other studies with a similar focus towards communal cultures,

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Catharina Raudvere, 'Trolldómur in Early Medieval Scandinavia,' in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in the Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, vol 3 (London: The Athlone Press, 2002) 73-171; Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic: Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, 2009).

Price's advocacy for a shared Sámi-Norse culture has contributed to a change in research that has altered our perception towards these relations in the Viking Age. The fifth chapter of this book addresses broader religious practices from the circumpolar region, which the Sámi are a part of. This chapter provides an introduction to the term 'shamanism' and then continues by considering each component of what is introduced as the 'shamanic world-view.'

The sixth chapter returns to a Scandinavian focus by exploring how the complex rituals and performances that are considered in previous chapters fit within the wider social structure of the Viking Age. In the next chapter, the emphasis of Price's study turns to focus on the analysis of aggression and magic on the battlefield and in the original edition, this seventh chapter concluded the dissertation. However, in the second edition, this chapter has become the penultimate segment. Here Price examines how the otherworldly concepts of aggression found in the sixth chapter were translated onto the physical battleground. In this portion of the study, the actions of lycanthropic warriors of Óðinn (324), such as the *berserker* and *ulfbæðnar*, are analysed.

The eighth and final chapter is unique to the second edition. This closing section retrospectively reviews Viking Age notions of magic and the mind that were presented in the original study. In the preface to the second edition, Price explains that although his original intentions were to completely revise the entire dissertation to include updated research and ideas, colleagues from the field were more interested in having access to the original material (xxvii). It is within this concluding chapter that Price addresses the many research advances that have been made since the original work was published. Here, the study focuses on themes such as questioning Norse shamanism, the development of research surrounding *seiðr* staffs, the expansion of gender studies in the Viking Age, the social world of war, and much more. Although much of the research in this second edition was originally published almost 20 years ago and Price himself admits that he no longer entirely agrees with study's original framework, the research conducted for this publication nevertheless provides a solid foundation for understanding the late Iron Age Norse mind. This is particularly true of the the study's overview and analysis of archaeological material relating to Norse

spirituality. The scholarly information and discussion provided in the second edition, alongside the extensive amount of research published since its original release in 2002, *The Viking Way* will remain essential in understanding the culture and spirituality of Iron Age Scandinavia.

The second edition's bibliography alone can be used as a significant tool for any scholar that is interested in the Viking period. The publication of this new edition includes an extensive list of references that highlight over 500 works released after the original publication. This section includes an impressive list of primary sources and translations, several relevant pre-nineteenth century sources for early Sámi and Siberian cultures, a wide-ranging list of secondary sources on the subject matter, and a catalogue that highlights significant sources found within relevant archives. Furthermore, the updated publication includes the long-awaited addition of an index. With a wide range of topics covered and an enormous amount of material employed throughout this study, the inclusion of an index will allow scholars to focus in on specific terms or ideas with more ease.

Price's easy-to-read writing style allows the study to clearly present and explain an assortment of complicated subject matters, which in turn makes these intricate topics more accessible for a varied audience. Many studies published over the past two decades that focus on late Iron Age Scandinavia have relied on Price's original publication of *The Viking Way* as a building block. I can only image that the highly anticipated publication of this second edition will result in many further studies produced by a wide range of academic disciplines. Ultimately, this book remains one of the most influential studies on the Viking Age, particularly for those interested in an archaeology analysis of Norse spirituality and how it fits into to a wider circumpolar tradition.

Conference and Exhibition Reports



Opening Our Cage: Women, Power, and Agency in the Medieval World, 500-1500; 16-20 May 2020

Raenelda Rivera¹

Following worldwide travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers of the *Opening Our Cage: Women, Power, and Agency in the Medieval World, 500-1500* conference, Dawn Seymour Klos and Samantha Sandy, opted to move the conference from a traditional university setting onto a digital forum. In doing so, their aim was to open the conference up to a wider audience by utilizing multiple online platforms, leaving all presentations available for open access to the general public, ‘beyond the elitism of scholastics,’ in perpetuity.² Each presenter was given the option to submit a paper to be downloaded for reading from the conference website or submit a video of themselves presenting their research to be uploaded to YouTube.³ Two papers were submitted to the website for download, while eleven presentations were uploaded to YouTube for open consumption on 16 May 2020. Questions were posed by email, on YouTube, or forwarded to the presenters to be answered, but there was also an option for attendees to ask questions via Twitter or to login to the two-day question and answer sessions via Zoom on 19-20 May 2020. Although there was

¹ MA graduate, University of Iceland; rjr9@hi.is.

² Samantha Sandy, direct quote during Zoom meeting, day one.

³ <http://openingourcage.webstarts.com>;

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqAZcFFmKNygMA3qjbTyDig>

no attempt to digitally re-create traditional conference sessions, the presentations and papers can naturally be grouped together under broad themes: agency-making in non-traditional gender occupations, persecution and resistance, and religion and power.

Anwita Roy, Melek Karataş, Mathilde Pointière Forrest, and Armando Torres-Fauaz all offered presentations which could be collected under the umbrella of agency-making in non-traditional gender occupations. Anwita Roy's 'Katherine of Sutton: First English woman playwright & a rupture in the Medieval misogyny' examined the abbess of Barking Abbey and her theatrical endeavours. Katherine of Sutton, the first-credited female English playwright, wrote and staged plays with fully female casts, flagrantly opposing the gendered theatrical conventions of the time. In doing so, Roy asserts that she was able to maintain her independent power. This presentation poses questions about the nature of Katherine's plays and their roles in further claiming feminine agency. 'Jeanne de Montbaston and the Bookmaking Women of Medieval Paris' was presented by Melek Karataş. This paper explained that bookmaking, although traditionally understood to be a masculine occupation, had a large network of women who laboured in all aspects of the profession. After detailing the various roles performed in the creation of medieval books, Karataş questioned the reasons that females remain unknown and uncredited, suggesting that there must have been a much larger number than are credited. The paper 'Wielding tools for agency: Christin de Pizan's pen and Joan of Arc's sword,' written by Mathilde Pointière Forrest, explains that feminine agency can often be the result of trauma or crisis. Using Christin and Joan as studies, Forrest explains how Christin's occupation was the direct result of her own trauma and Joan's was due to crisis. She explains that both women could be considered to have been changemakers in their chosen professions and agents of inspiration to other women of their times. Armando Torres-Fauaz presented 'Key reforms and governance during the reign of Alix de Vergy, duchess of Burgundy (1218-1231),' which examined the improvements in ducal governance made by the duchess of Burgundy after her husband's death. Although the duchess's reign has been discussed by

historians in the past, Torres-Fauaz makes the case that Alix de Vergy was not a passive governess of the duchy, but a radical, insightful businesswoman who made changes which benefitted not only the title, but also her people.

The theme of persecution and resistance occurs in the presentations of Nicole Demarchi, Vania Buso, Audrey Covert, Caitlin Moon, and Rachel Davis. ‘A History of Resistance: Lombard Women and Frankish Men,’ presented by Nicole Demarchi, detailed the manner in which influential women and their families were criticized by the Church and their governments. She used the daughters of the Lombard king, Desiderius, as a case study to illustrate how women could use their power to oppose their oppressors and maintain their agency. Vania Buso’s ‘Bodies for Display: Women, Adultery, and the Law in Merovingian Gaul and early Lombard Italy’ presentation examined the manner in which sixth century Lombard women had their agency revoked and ignored when accusations of sexual misconduct were lobbied against them, including a comparison of the gendered penal system. She then explained the extreme actions that women would have to take to reclaim their power and agency. Audrey Covert’s presentation, ‘They’re Burning All the Witches, Even If You Aren’t One: Accusations of Witchcraft and the Danger of Female Influence,’ examined the political nature of accusation of witchcraft in the case of Jacquetta of Luxembourg and how this affected not only her, but also her family. Presenting a part of her doctoral dissertation, Caitlin Moon discussed the prescribed treatment of the female other in relation to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Loathly Conduct.’ She drew interesting parallels between the Wife of Bath and the Loathly Lady, explaining why the socially dictated gender roles of the time could and, in some cases, should be broken. Rachel Davis’s presentation, “‘Lock her up!’: The Imprisonment and Political Career of Isabella, Duchess of Albany and Countess of Lennox,’ examined briefly how the legal system was mistreated when accusations were cast upon women. Davis then turned her attention to the way a female could reassert her agency and regain her power after imprisonment, using the duchess as a case study.

Finally, falling into the theme of religion and power were presentations from both Catrin Haberfield and me. Catrin Haberfield’s presentation, ‘Speaking

or Spoken Through? Examining the Agency of Medieval Visionary Women,' looks at four case studies to illustrate how visions of light allowed women to reclaim agency and work autonomously in patriarchal societies by connecting them to divine light, thus making their personal power not only acceptable, but sacred. My own presentation, 'The Plant-bearing Figure: Accessing Liminality via Feminine Gender Role Adoption,' discussed the necessity of ritually adopting and performing feminine gender roles in order to traverse liminal states and obtain otherwise inaccessible knowledge.

While attendance in the question and answer sessions was small, its informal nature allowed for an inviting, comfortable exchange of ideas. The first day's Zoom discussion centred around gendered agency as it pertained to female suicide after rape, including response of the family left behind and wider community reactions to the family of the deceased, then the discussion turned to the Wife of Bath and how the bawdy nature of her story reflected the role of the female at various points in her life. Finally, the day's question session ended with a discussion of liminality and why *Yggdrasil* can be connected to the liminal and the feminine aspect of supernatural information gathering. On the second day, discussions covered traditionally masculine endeavours and how the medieval female might make a place for herself in such occupations, then turned to the role and reception of gender studies and scholars researching topics related to gender in the modern academic environment. Closing the conference, organizers Klos and Sandy expressed their desire to attempt to make this conference an annual occurrence and their hopes that they could find a way to meld this experience with a more traditional setting next year.



Kyngervi



Call for Submissions

Volume 3: Summer 2021

Over the last few years, increasing conversations have taken place within the field of Old English studies in relation to the use of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ with a focus on its racist history.

In contrast to early English studies, Old Norse studies has yet to experience a similar critical evaluation of our field’s history. Discussions of Old Norse studies’ political ramifications tend to focus on emergent Scandinavian nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the Nazi party’s cultivation of Norse iconography in their aesthetic and political values. The popular ‘misuse’ of Scandinavian history and symbols by current far-right and white supremacist groups has also been discussed. Yet the deployment of Old Norse studies for politically violent and exclusionary ends both within and without the scholarly community demands further critical attention.

Given the need for this conversation, we are seeking articles that critically explore the politics of Norse studies. Some potential subjects for articles include the historiography of a certain topic, Norse medievalism, and the modern uses of our field, citation practices, and/or pedagogy and outreach.

Non-themed submissions will also be considered, so please submit any work that fits our general remit of discussions of gender, queerness, or marginalised Others.

We seek relevant articles of 4000–6000 words and conference reports of conferences attended between Summer 2020 and Summer 2021. As an interdisciplinary journal, articles can be from any relevant field, including, but not limited to: History, Literature, Archaeology, History of Religion, Reception Studies, and Art History.

In order to submit, you must either currently be a student, or have graduated from your programme in the previous three academic years. Students can be any level from BA to PhD.

The deadline for submissions is **31st January 2021**. To submit, read further information, and see our stylesheet, please visit our website at www.kyngervi.org. For questions and inquiries, please email the General Editor, Amy Jefford Franks, at kyngervi@gmail.com.