



Kyngervi



Foreword

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir

Kyngervi, 1 (2019) 9–14.

Copyright © 2019 Kyngervi

Published in the United Kingdom

www.kyngervi.wordpress.com



Foreword

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir¹

Kyngervi, the Modern Icelandic word for gender, first appeared in its contemporary usage in the late 1990s. As a compound noun, it was coined following the ancient Germanic custom of synthesising two or more words into one to articulate something new. The first part, *kyn*, has a plethora of meanings in Old Norse and Modern Icelandic, including kin, ancestry, kind, (biological) sex or even wonder, while the second component can refer to an outfit, apparel, kit, gear, or costume—something one puts on in order to adopt a certain persona or identity. Together, these components form an abstract concept—a modern kenning, even—which imagines gender as a metaphorical cloak each person dons as a part of their existence. In the last decades, *kyngervi* has been used to refer to the socially constructed, non-biological aspects of identity that make a person ‘male’ or ‘female’, a usage that highlights the performative nature of gender roles and entails a rejection of biological essentialism. Scores of books and articles have been published about different facets of gender and sexuality in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, which is hardly surprising considering the wealth of pertinent evidence that survives. The study of gender theory as an academic subject is carried out in many different fields within which specialists in Norse culture work, and it has been modulated in several phases, e.g., from the first to the fourth waves of feminism, and lesbian, gay and queer studies developing as disciplines in their own right. We are now in the midst of a period where transgender and intersex perspectives are rapidly adding to, refining and changing our knowledge about sex and gender as they appear in ancient texts, becoming more fine-grained as the theories themselves develop. The new roads down which they will take us will revolutionise the sprawling field of Viking and Medieval Scandinavia in ways we probably can’t quite foresee yet.

¹ Lecturer, Yale University; johannakatrin@gmail.com.

It's a fun exercise to speculate whether a medieval person would have understood the word *kyngervi*, had they been able to time-travel to 2019: they certainly would have known the individual components, though it is open to debate if they would primarily have associated them with gender. As mentioned previously, the word *kyn* has a wide range of connotations, but it is used in the sense of 'the sexes' in an *exempla* (a short, Christian, didactic story) copied in a manuscript from around 1350.² Moreover, it appeared in various different compound words, including *karlkyn ok kvenkyn* (male and female), in the mid-fourteenth-century biblical text *Stjórn*, referring to God's command to Noah before the Flood to bring a male and female animal of every species on the Ark. The word *gervi* appears in compound words that appear fairly frequently in sagas, such as *atgervi* (physical or mental abilities, esp. positive ones) and *gervileiker* (prowess)—most famously in the proverb *sitt er hvárt, gæfa ok gervileiker* (they are two different things, luck and ability)—seemingly going back to the idea that each individual possesses figurative 'equipment'.³ *Gervi* has a different shade of meaning in words like *stafkarlsgervi* (a vagrant disguise), *konungsgervi* (an outfit appropriate for a king) and, notably, *karlmannsgervi* (a man's *gervi*), which appears in chapter 4 of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. This is the point at which Hervör sheds her femininity and adopts the name Hervarðr, spending the next phase of her life as a Viking, sailing the seas and harrying with a band of followers. The question is how a medieval audience would have understood *-gervi* here: was it a 'disguise', implying a degree of deception—that you could masquerade as someone other than yourself? Or is it conceived of more neutrally as an 'outfit', which would mean that Hervör was viewed as having an inherent cisgender female identity, but that she cross-dresses and goes by a male name so she can be a Viking warrior? Or does *karlmannsgervi* mean that it was possible to inhabit a male gender identity regardless of one's biology? In other words, is Hervör's character a medieval expression of something similar to what is now called a transgender identity?

² For the lexical evidence discussed in this paragraph, see the entries for *kyn*, *gervi* and related words on onp.ku.dk.

³ *Grettis saga Asmundarsonar*, ch. 34.

This is a complex issue and I'm not going to try to resolve it any further here, except to note that the scholarship on this text and similar sagas would probably be a good case study of the dramatic impact that each new wave of gender theory has had on the Old Norse field, and to remind us that yet new and probably more sophisticated interpretations will appear in time. Scholarship is always dependent on and in dialogue with what came before, and fortunately, none of us will ever have the last say on a subject. The possibilities of non-binary and queer readings is one of the running themes in this first issue of *Kyngervi*, and though the primary sources are sometimes frustratingly challenging to work with (for all sorts of reasons), each new study allows us to take a step further in mapping the many manifestations of gender identities and roles in Viking and medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. The concept of gender itself does not have one meaning for everyone today, nor did it in the past. Thinking about the variety of connotations evoked by the components of the word *kyngervi* in different configurations, one could speculate that individual Icelanders or Scandinavians might also have assigned the word different meanings, had they possessed it in their vocabulary. Although people who lived in the Viking and medieval periods would perhaps not have understood the contemporary terms we use to describe aspects of gender and sexuality, criticism is constantly deepening our knowledge of the innovative ways in which they explored gender in the literature or visual art they created, or how they memorialised their dead as gendered beings in burials.

Also at stake in this issue is the growing inter- and multidisciplinary nature of our work. When I began my graduate studies in medieval Norse and English literature mere moments (okay, 14 years!) ago, the boundaries between disciplines were firmer, at least in my memory. Literary critics and historians worked mostly in isolation from archaeologists or manuscript scholars and vice versa, with relatively little dialogue over the fences compared to now. With the establishment and growth of new multidisciplinary MA courses and summer programmes in the last 15 years or so, it has become more common for younger scholars to be at least passingly familiar with a whole range of disciplines. I never cease to be impressed and inspired by the dexterity with which many people

coming through their MAs and doctorates these days move from material philology to burial archaeology and textual analysis or runology and everything between, also using challenging theoretical frameworks and all the while maintaining the greatest academic rigour. This development towards multidisciplinary methods will strengthen the field, enabling us to draw productive connections between different types of sources that, when analysed together, might tell us more about Norse culture than they can individually.

In the first volume of *Prolonged Echoes*, published in 1994, Margaret Clunies Ross traced themes related to gender in Norse mythology, such as patterns of negative reciprocity in marriage, and male appropriation of procreation in myths about the creation of the world and the first humans.⁴ The compelling evidence Clunies Ross provided for her arguments caused the book to become generally considered as one of the most authoritative secondary sources available on Norse mythology, which is, as she shows, mercilessly stratified by gender. However, one does not have to go very far back in Old Norse scholarship to find dismissals of her analysis, typical for the resistance earlier critics using feminist and/or queer methodologies often faced: for example, in as recently as 2005, the book was labelled as ‘myth-making’ and ideologically driven.⁵ The rejection of feminist analysis on such grounds expresses a line of thought which suggests that there is such a thing as an unbiased reading position, one that is—often as not—male, heteronormative and white. Few younger scholars today would consider the analysis in *Prolonged Echoes* particularly radical, and I for one am grateful to Clunies Ross and other scholars who blazed trails when the field was much more skeptical than it is now to approaches informed by feminism, let alone queer and transgender theory. Whatever particular theoretical gender framework we adopt as critics, we are thankfully in a phase where incorporating gender perspectives is becoming ever

⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, vol. 1, *The Myths*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 7 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994).

⁵ ‘Clunies Ross’s ... feminist-influenced ideology again suggests that the mythologist cannot avoid becoming a myth-maker’, in John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 23.

more ‘mainstream’ and accepted as a legitimate lens through which to study primary sources, and one that many believe should ideally be used alongside and integrated with other methodologies. That is not to say that we have arrived in a perfect place yet, and as the articles in this issue show, there are many ‘untapped resources’ for budding scholars to choose from, both in terms of investigating neglected sources and producing more nuanced interpretations of better-studied ones. Looking at the issue and its editorial team, the future looks bright!

In these times, most of us in academia understand and acknowledge that there is no way to separate our subjectivity as humans from our scholarship, i.e., that the idea of critical objectivity is an illusion. All scholarship is political and inevitably underpinned by ideology, whether a conservative or socially progressive one. Many young scholars today are activists to some degree, refusing to stay silent in the face of bigotry or oppression, whether within or outside the academy. They are firm in their view that structural conditions, life experiences and multi-faceted identities determine to a large extent how we approach the primary sources: what we study, with what methods, what conclusions we draw from the evidence, and how competing ideologies in the political sphere impact the ongoing dialogue in scholarship. For example, at the beginning of his recent book *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Gareth Lloyd Evans explicitly lists ‘the markers of [his] racial, sexual, gendered, social, and educational status’ in what might become a standard way of prefacing our work.⁶ Social media has brought out such themes as well, and it has also enabled us to discuss our work and views in very different ways from only ten years ago: faster, less formal and more egalitarian. The founding of an online journal, run by students, for students, where they take responsibility for the editorial policies, is yet another exciting sign of how scholarship might develop in the next decades.

⁶ Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

By creating this medium, the editorial team of *Kyngervi* has opened up a forum for promising, up-and-coming scholars to take their first steps in publishing their work, experience the peer-review process (with its pros and cons) and hone their arguments. Perhaps more importantly, it encourages this generation—who are the future of our field—unapologetically to take up space and set the agenda. The cohort which presents their first published work here in this inaugural issue of *Kyngervi* won't create any myths about the past, any more than their predecessors did. They'll create new knowledge—whether to identify new contours on the map of Norse gender or draw in more detail what we previously knew only in broad strokes— and that is knowledge for which we will all be the richer.⁷

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir

⁷ Many thanks to Chihiro Tsukamoto, Dale Kedwards and Merrill Kaplan for constructive feedback about various points in this piece.