



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Villainy and Gender in the *Íslendingasögur*

Sigrun Borgen Wik

Department of History

A thesis submitted to Trinity College Dublin for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Supervised by Professor Ruth Mazo Karras

2024

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

I consent to the examiner retaining a copy of the thesis beyond the examining period, should they so wish (EU GDPR May 2018).

Sigrun Borgen Wik

March 2024

Summary

This doctoral thesis explores how villainy and violence are presented in the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), and the different ways these depictions are affected by the gender of the character performing these actions. To do this, the thesis is separated into three chapters that look at different kinds of violent actions that are widely condemned and vilified in the sagas, and how characters that perform these actions are presented differently based on their gender, their relations, and the context. The sagas were written during a period of great social changes in Iceland, with the civil war period Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) and the later subjugation under the Norwegian king in 1264. The *Íslendingasögur* have here been used as a 9th-11th century past constructed by the 13th-15th century Icelandic society and its anonymous authors. The views presented in the *Íslendingasögur* are compared with those found in contemporary laws, sources, and events.

In the first chapter, the literary motif of whetting a man into doing violent actions is analysed. Whetting is here considered a way to utilise the importance of honour within Old Norse society by pressuring the whettee into doing the violent action or else lose honour. This is frequently used to explain a blood feud. It is here shown that both men and women whet, as well as servile people. For men it is generally more shameful to whet, while for women it can be considered a cruel act, but not necessarily. Chapter two examines magical violence and the supernatural. Here the views of magical violence and witchcraft found in the *Íslendingasögur* and in more contemporary Norse sources are compared. It is here found that female witches, in general, are less condemned than male ones, as men performing acts of magic are seen as cowardly or effeminate. However, both male and female witches can, through their actions, be considered monstrous and thus viable targets of brutal killings. In the third chapter, different acts of physical violence are studied, and the violence shown in the *Íslendingasögur* are compared to the view of violence in the 13th century laws and the contemporary sagas (*samtiðarsögur*.) Here the most negative forms physical violence are actions done with a sense of uncontrollable excess and cruelty, as well as cowardly, hidden attacks. What also matters here is the victim of the physical violence, with the harm done to defenceless women, children and old men usually being considered unviable.

In the thesis it is concluded that the villain's gender plays a large part in how their actions are received. It is also shown that socially transgressive expressions of gender and sometimes by extension sexuality are recurring features of villainous characters. It is also shown that within the sagas, acts of violence done by women are frequently presented more neutrally or positively compared to those done by men, as men's actions are judged more by their masculinity and honour. However, this does not mean that the villainy is presented negatively in predictable ways throughout the *Íslendingasögur*. This is partly due to the diversity found within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus and the different anonymous saga authors, as well as these sagas being written within a time period in which great societal changes were introduced.

Acknowledgements

During the years that it has taken to realise this thesis, I have been very fortunate to meet and work with so many kind and knowledgeable people. Firstly, I am very grateful for the counsel of my supervisor, professor Ruth Mazo Karras, for her insight, engaging discussions, and for making sense of my drafts filled with sideline comments.

Secondly, I want to thank the lovely people in the medieval office in Phoenix House for all the fun times and conversations both during and after work hours. I must also thank the members of the Online Gender Reading Group who brought a weekly sense of normalcy during the foggiest times during lockdown.

Thirdly, I must give great thanks to the group at the history group at Nord University who invited me as a guest researcher and made me feel very welcome whenever I was there. In particular I must thank Miriam Jensen Tveit and Frank Jacob for reading through the thesis, and Beñat Elortza Larrea for his input. An extra thanks also goes to Mat Clear for the last short notice reading.

Finally, I thank my family for their constant support and patience during this whole research period.

Table of Contents

DECLARATION	2
SUMMARY	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
ABBREVIATIONS	8
GLOSSARY	8
INTRODUCTION	9
THE HISTORICAL SETTING AND THE SAGAS	12
THE SOURCES AND THEIR USES	13
The Íslendingasögur	13
Legal sources.....	16
Cultural memory in a period of upheaval.....	18
Gender theory and its uses	20
PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON GENDER, VILLAINY, AND HONOUR IN THE OLD NORSE SOCIETY	22
Villainy – Monstrosity, morality, otherness, and marginality.....	27
Honour and its place within the Old Norse world.....	29
CHAPTER 1: WHETTING AND WEAPONISING SHAME.....	34
DEFINITION AND ITS USE.....	35
THE DEVELOPING VIEW OF (DIS)HONOUR AND VENGEANCE IN THE OLD NORSE SOCIETY	39
THE WHETTING’S PLACE WITHIN THE NARRATIVE.....	42
What counts as whetting?.....	42
A weapon not limited by class? Servants who whet	44
Plot devices and scapegoats	48
When whetting fails	52
Additional elements of whetting	54
FEMALE WHETTERS	57
Women and loyalty	58
Hallgerðr and Bergþóra.....	61
Mothers, sisters, and other relatives	66
Servile women.....	74
MALE WHETTERS – THE WEAK COWARD’S WEAPON?.....	76
Old men and fathers	77
Friends, kin, and acquaintances of similar status	82
Servile men	91
CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS	95
CHAPTER 2: MAGIC AND MAGICAL VIOLENCE.....	98
MAGIC, OLD NORSE RELIGION, AND THE UNKNOWN OTHER: INTRODUCTION AND THEORY	101
Some Old Norse terms for magic.....	103
THE VIEW OF MAGIC IN THE 13TH CENTURY	111
Old Norse laws and magic	111
FEMALE WITCHES	118
The Monstrous Feminine	118
Witch fights.....	123
Female assassins and magic as paid services	128
A (foster-)mother’s magic for support and vengeance.....	129
MALE WITCHES.....	133
Male witchcraft and <i>ergi</i>	133
A coward’s weapon.....	137
Guilt by association – The case of Þórbjörn Öngull.....	140
The male shapeshifter	143
MAGIC IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD	145
CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS	149
CHAPTER 3: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE.....	151
Scholarship on physical violence in Old Norse culture and literature.....	153

Contemporary saga attitudes to violence compared to the Íslendingasögur.....	155
Killing and murder in the laws	157
Gender (in)balance within the laws	158
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE DONE BY WOMEN.....	160
Women attacking men.....	160
Women attacking other women.....	167
Women's violence against children.....	169
Some trends and patterns with female physical violence	171
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE DONE BY MEN	171
Physical violence done by men to other men	172
Main types of physically violent male villains.....	172
The <i>ójafnaðarmaður</i>	173
Challengers.....	174
The berserkr	174
Hirðmenn and the Norwegian king	178
The Outlaw: fitting the society's ideal too much to fit within it?.....	179
Outlaws incapable of 'controlling themselves', and aimless violence	179
The good outlaw and the bad man of the law.....	182
Hidden physical violence and ambushes.....	183
Shame and effeminising violence.....	185
Physical violence against women.....	195
Physical violence and the killing of women.....	195
Sexual violence done to women	196
Domestic violence by husband on wife.....	204
Men's torture and abuse of women	207
Physical violence against children.....	209
CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS	212
CONCLUSIONS	214
The findings	215
The patterns.....	217
REFERENCES	222

Abbreviations

<i>Complete Sagas</i>	<i>The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales</i> . Edited by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997.
Fritzner	Fritzner, Johan. <i>Ordbog over Det Gamle Norske Sprog</i> . Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1867.
Grágás K	Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. <i>Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog I Fristatens Tid</i> . 2 vols. Vol. 1 and 2. Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings bogtrykkeri, 1852.
Grágás St	Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. <i>Grágás: Efter Det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 Fol. Staðarhólsbók</i> . Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879.
ÍF	<i>Íslensk Fornrit</i> . 33 vols., Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933-2008.
NgL	<i>Norges Gamle Love Indtil 1387</i> . Edited by Rudolph Keyser, Peter Andreas Munch, Gustav Storm and Ebbe Hertzberg, 5 vols. Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn, 1846-1895.

Glossary

<i>Argr, ragr</i>	Wicked, unmanly, effeminate, cowardly. See also <i>ergi</i> (n.)
<i>Eggja, hvetja, frya</i>	Terms for whetting
<i>Dreng, drengiligr</i>	Manly, capable
<i>Goði</i> (pl. <i>goðar</i>)	Term for chieftains during the Icelandic Commonwealth
<i>Hirð</i>	The Norwegian king's sworn men
<i>Húsbonði</i>	The man of the farm, <i>paterfamilias</i> . Húsfreyja: <i>materfamilias</i>
<i>Íllr</i>	Bad, evil
<i>Níð</i>	Defamation
<i>Níðingr</i>	Villain, traitor, despicable person
<i>Seiðr</i>	Kind of magic with effeminate, pagan connotations
<i>Skörungr</i>	Someone outstanding
<i>Trolldómr</i>	Witchcraft
<i>Þing</i>	Assembly. See also <i>Alþingi</i> : The General Assembly in Iceland
<i>Úbotamál</i>	An unattonable crime

Introduction

In the 14th century Icelandic saga *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, Atli the Little and the witch Þorgrímr Dýrason face off outside Atli's home after Þorgrímr and his men approach to set fire to it. Just before, Atli had seen Þorgrímr in a shared dream in which he had the form of a female fox leading a gang of wolves. As the two groups of men meet, the following events play out:

Ok er þeir Atli sjá mennina, þá mælti Atli: 'Þat er er ætlan mín, at þeir sé hér komnir Dýrfirðingarnir ok sé fyrir þeim Þorgrímr Dýrason, er verstr maðr er í öllum Dýrafirði ok fjölkunnugastr. [...]' Þá mælti Þorgrímr: 'Hverr veit, nema Atli inn lagi sé brögðóttari en vér ætlum, en þó skulum vér á móti þeim allt at einu.' Hlaupask menn nú at, svá sem ætlat var. Þat var it fyrsta athlaup, at Atli inn litli hljóp at Þorgrími ok hjó til hans tveim höndum með sverðinu, ok beit eigi á. Þeir hjuggusk til nökkura stund, ok beit ekki á Þorgrím. Þá mælti Atli: 'Trolli líkr ertu, Þorgrímr, en eigi manni, er þík bíta engi járn.' Þorgrímr svarar: 'Hví dirfisk þú at tala um slíkt, því at ek hjó til þín áðan svá sem mér var hægast ok beit eigi á þinn vanda skalla.' Atli sér at eigi mun svá búit hlýða; kastar síðan sverðinu ok hleypr undir Þorgrím ok rekr hann niðr við völlinn. Nú er eigi vápnit hjá honum, en hann veit, at liðsmunr er mikill, verðr honum þat fyrir, at hann greyfisk niðr at honum Þorgrími ok bítr sundr í honum barkann, dregr hann síðan þangat til, er sverð hans var, ok sníðr af honum höfuðit.¹

When Atli and the others saw the men, Atli spoke: 'It is my belief that the men of Dyrafjord have come here and that Thorgrim Dyrason, the worst man in all Dyrafjord and a great magician, is their leader. [...] Then Thorgrim spoke: 'Who knows but what Atli the coward is more cunning than we thought, but all the same let's attack them at once.' They ran at each other as planned. In the first rush little Atli ran at Thorgrim and struck at him with both hands on his sword, but it did not bite. They struck at each other for a while, but Thorgrim remained unscathed. Then Atli spoke: 'You are like a troll, Thorgrim, not like a man, for no iron bites you.' Thorgrim answered, 'How dare you speak of such a thing, for I struck at you as often as I could just now, and nothing bit into your miserable bald head.' Atli saw that he was getting nowhere fast. He then threw away his sword and slipped under Thorgrim's grasp and threw him to the ground. Now he was unarmed and knew that the odds were much against him. He decided to bend over and bite through Thorgrim's windpipe, then dragged him over to his sword, and cut off his head.²

This passage raises a number of themes that will come up repeatedly in this thesis. In this short but deadly encounter the reader is presented with a variety of despicable and criminal deeds done by both men. This includes a murder attempt through a planned house burning, witchcraft and accusations of trollishness, and a bestial killing. Furthermore, both men are given emasculating and effeminate traits that make them wretched in the author's view as well as each other's. In the end, Atli and his men are the victors, and in a stroke of hatred Atli has the few surviving attackers shaved and coated in tar, and their ears cut off. When this treatment is recounted at the next *þing*

¹ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ÍF 6, ch. 15, 19, 21.

² 'The Saga of Havard of Isafjord', trans. Fredrik J. Heinemann, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders: including 49 tales*. ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík, Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 5:338-9, 343-4.

(assembly), the victory of Atli and his men against the attackers is received positively, while the ones who planned the attack receive much dishonour.³ Before all this, Atli is introduced as the tiniest, most miserable kind of man (*minnstr ok vesalligastr*) as well as miserly, and Þorgrímr is introduced as being big and strong (*mikill ok sterkr*), very knowledgeable about magic, and to have done much with witchcraft (*fjölunnigr ok inn margvísasti ok gerði mart með göldrum*).⁴ Despite both being shown as despicable characters, Atli is ultimately presented more favorably.

The aim of this dissertation is to understand the gender structures in late medieval Iceland by studying the villainous and incriminating depictions of characters in the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), and the ways that the framing of these characters' actions depend on their gender. The goal is not only to look at what constitutes gendered villainy in the sagas, and how a character's gender affects their violent actions and whether or not these actions in turn are considered villainous, but also to question how these depictions may have been influenced by 13th-14th century authors looking back at their ancestors' lives in the 9th-11th century. In these sources the actions of men and women are shaped in different ways depending on their gender, and while they sometimes avoid scrutiny due to their gender, sometimes their villainous and potentially monstrous actions will instead change the ways that the characters are regarded based on it.

This thesis combines two main themes. Firstly, it looks at transgressive and violence-based actions that incriminate the character doing them. Secondly, it studies the way the gender of the character doing the actions can change both the perspective of said action, and the regard of the character performing it. The villainous actions that will be looked at are the act of whetting, the use of magical violence, and acts of physical violence. What these three actions have in common is their violent and destructive nature, and the way they are frequently deemed incriminating within the sources. As will be shown, however, the reception of these actions differs among the sagas, as well within them based on several factors. These three types of action do not cover all forms of villainy within the sagas, and in this thesis, there are characters whose actions fit within two or more categories, which in turn will have an influence on their characterisation. However, by comparing the repeated depictions of these violent

³ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 22.

⁴ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 15, 19.

actions for this study, the goal is not only to detect patterns in how violence itself is regarded differently based on the perpetrator's gender, but also to see how violence and villainy are tied together in different forms based on specific factors.

To study the topics of villainy and gender within the *Íslendingasögur*, this thesis will take an interdisciplinary approach. Here, concerns such as context, genre, authorial priorities, and contemporary influences will be taken into consideration to get a better insight into the sources, as well as the use of literary devices and motifs such as type-scenes and stock characters. This philological approach then aims to establish a historical understanding based on the linguistic, narrational, and cultural depictions found within the *Íslendingasögur*. Each chapter will go through different female and male character roles within the sagas, analyse cases where male and female actors perform these specific actions, whether and how they are depicted in a negative and villainous manner, and if not, what it is in the depiction or the mentioned external perception that prevents them from being presented in a negative manner. This introductory chapter will map out the theoretical and methodological groundwork for the thesis, as well as the necessary historical and historiographical background.

Chapter 1 will discuss the concept and depiction of whetting, and the power of weaponising the societal pressure of honour and the fear of emasculation. Whetting is a verbal rather than physical action used to incite men into performing violent acts, which frequently initiates or intensifies blood feuds and destruction in the sagas in the name of re-establishing honour. Chapter 2 presents the concept of magical violence as it is depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, an unknown and supernatural power that is frequently depicted as being used for evil deeds by women, foreigners, degenerate men and other outsiders. This magical violence can be othering to the extent of changing or erasing one's gender, effeminising men to the degree of making them degenerates, as well as magical trollishness overriding women's gender to the degree of being considered viable targets of murder. Chapter 3 looks into the depiction of physical violence done by men and women and its place within the *Íslendingasögur*, the maintenance of honour and viable targets of physical violence, and the limits of physically violent (hyper) masculinity. Finally, the concluding chapter compares the various types of villainy and violence in order to compare the patterns found in the previous chapters.

The historical setting and the sagas

The historical period that in modern times has been defined as the Viking Age is generally placed in the period 793-1066, when raiders, traders, and settlers from the Scandinavian geographical area made themselves known to the outside world, including the settling of Iceland. The period from 870 to 930 on Iceland is called the *Landnámsöld* (the settlement period) as this was the period when Iceland was settled by Norwegians, and this is a period frequently depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁵ Soon after followed the establishment of the Icelandic Commonwealth with the rule of *goðar* (chieftains) spread out across the island with free *þingmenn* (thingmen) underneath them. In 1000, Christianity was chosen as the new religion at the *Alþing* (the general assembly of the Commonwealth).⁶ This resulted in a gradual change with Christian values and ideals conflicting with and eventually taking the place of the old pagan ones. During the 13th century when many of the sagas were written down in Old Norse, the Commonwealth saw an increasing centralisation of power amongst the *goðar*, culminating in the Civil War period fought between a few powerful families.⁷ This period is called the *Sturlungaöld*, meaning the age of the Sturlungs. Internal conflict and increased dependency on the Norwegian king resulted in the collapse of the Commonwealth, and the *goðar* swore allegiance to the Norwegian king in 1262/64.⁸

Despite or due to the increasing conflicts in Iceland, the 13th-15th centuries proved to be fruitful time for Old Icelandic literature. These stories describe the lives and deeds of Old Norse people of the past, and their manuscripts are based (to a degree

⁵ For more on the settlement period of Iceland, see Kevin P. Smith, 'Landnám: The settlement of Iceland in archaeological and historical perspective', *World Archaeology* 26, no. 3 (1995); Orri Vésteinsson, 'Patterns of settlement in Iceland', *Saga-Book* 25 (1998).

⁶ For more on the Christianisation of Iceland, see Dag Strömbäck, *The conversion of Iceland. A Survey*, trans. Peter Foote. Viking Society for Northern Research. London, 1975; Jenny Jochens, 'Late and peaceful: Iceland's conversion through arbitration in 1000', *Speculum* 74, no. 3 (1999). Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a gendered perspective of the Christianisation, see Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'Kristnandet ur ett kvinnoperspektiv', in *Kristnandet i Sverige. Gamla källor och nya perspektiv* (Uppsala: Lunne böcker, 1996).

⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century' trans. Jóhann S. Hannesson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953); Jesse L. Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: A Symposium*, ed. Elisabeth Vestergaard (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986).

⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Det norrøne samfunnet. Vikingen, kongen, erkebiskopen og bonden* (Oslo: Pax, 2008), 16, 60-63, 66, 109-115. See also Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *Norges konges rike og hans skattland. Kongemakt og statsutvikling i den norrøne verden i middelalderen*, Det historisk-filosofiske fakultet, (Trondheim: NTNU, 2006); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'All the King's men. The incorporation of Iceland into the Norwegian Realm', in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 46, no. 5 (2021), 571-92.

that has been hotly debated) on older handed down oral stories with content of debatable historicity. The resulting written sagas are mainly prose but may include skaldic verses, depending on the genre. In modern times the Old Norse sagas have been distinguished into genres based on their spatiotemporal setting, and by the content depicted. Traditionally, the *Íslendingasögur* (often referred to in English as the Family Sagas or the Sagas of Icelanders) deal with the Icelandic families' deeds and conflicts from sometime between the 9th century and the 11th century; the *fornaldarsögur* describe more temporally and frequently more geographically distant, mythical, and unreal 'old times' (*forn öld*) before the 9th century, while the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) are set around 13th century Iceland and the political conflicts between the powerful *goðar*. Other genres are the *konungasögur* (sagas of kings), that are biographies of the Scandinavian kings, the more continental and Romance inspired *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas), and the *biskupasögur* and *heilagra manna sögur* (bishop and holy men's sagas). There are also the *pattir* that are short saga biographies or tales that usually focus on a single Icelander's life and deeds.

The sources and their uses

The Íslendingasögur

While the sagas have been an invaluable source for our modern concept of the Viking Age, their legitimacy and value as historical sources of the past has been a topic of discussion. Due to the discrepancy in time between the time they describe and the time they were written down, there is an uncertainty to what degree the *Íslendingasögur* depict the 9th-11th century Icelandic society. While the content written down by Christian 13th-15th century authors to some degree is believed to be based on past oral traditions, there are still attitudes, practices, and stylistic choices within the *Íslendingasögur* that are more likely to be the result of the authors and their contemporary society rather than the 9th-11th century society. Furthermore, while certain practices and attitudes shown in the sagas are said to belong to the past, the depictions of these are also not safe from being shaped by attitudes belonging to the later Middle Ages. These unclear origins make it difficult to see the sagas as faithful representations of the Viking Age past, and in the early 20th century this led to non-contemporary sagas such as the *Íslendingasögur* and the *konungasögur* being dismissed by many as

unreliable sources for historical events. However, since the 1980s scholars have increasingly regarded these sagas as depictions of the 9th to 11th century society constructed by the 13th to 15th century society.⁹ This thesis will also engage with the *Íslendingasögur* as constructed portraits of the past, and this will be expanded upon in the section on cultural memory theory below.

Another part of the uncertainty associated with the *Íslendingasögur* is that despite all the work done with the sagas, there are still many details about them that are still unknown, such as the authorship and their time of writing. However, work has been done to come closer to dating the individual sagas based on the dating of existing manuscripts, the language, content, references to other sagas or historical events, and other clues.¹⁰

There have been several studies highlighting the importance of kinship, blood feuds, and honour within the Icelandic Commonwealth, and how it is depicted within the *Íslendingasögur*, such as the scholarship of Theodore M. Andersson, William Ian Miller, Jesse Byock, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen to mention only a few.¹¹ Due to the Icelandic Commonwealth being an acephalous society

⁹ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964); Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). For more on the history and waves of the saga debate, criticism, and methodological approaches, see Andersson, *Saga Origins*; Else Mundal, *Sagadebatt* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Some Methodological Considerations in Connection with the Study of the Sagas', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992). Knut Helle, 'Hvor står den historiske sagakritikken i dag?', *Collegium medievale* 24 (2011); Torggrim Titlestad, *Sagasyn* (Stavanger: Saga bok, 2013). Sverre Bagge, *En kort introduksjon til Snorre Sturlason: historiker og dikter* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2019), 19-21.

¹⁰ Some works on the dating of the *Íslendingasögur* include Einar Ól Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas. An Essay in Method* (London: University College London, 1958); Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); The edited volume *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* address the methodological problems with the dating of the sagas and their position between older oral and younger literature traditions. See Else Mundal, *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013); There are also other studies dedicated to single sagas and the dating of their manuscripts, such as Forrest S. Scott, *Eyrbyggja Saga: The Vellum Tradition*, vol. 18, Editiones Arnarnæ, (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003). Others look at the differences and developments of the sagas through time based on the datings, such as Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, vol. 12, The Viking collection, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Det norrøne samfunnet: vikingen, kongen, erkebiskopen og bonden*; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den vennlige vikingen: vennskapets makt i Norge og på Island ca. 900-1300* (Oslo: Pax, 2010); William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review* 1, no. 2 (1983); William Ian Miller, *'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?' A Reading of Njáls Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); For more on honour and shame, see Preben

with no king, social control and the importance of social virtues are in the sagas often shown to create conflicting situations where the hero must struggle to balance multiple societal expectations such as conflicting loyalties and maintaining one's honour.¹² Although the conflicts can be complex, the group of saga characters feuding tend to belong to a limited set of stock characters including heroes and villains.¹³ Similarly, recurring type-scenes are frequently included to aid the narrative rather than due to historical accuracy. As they are, these literary sources while fictional are still useful to delve into the history of mentalities in late Medieval Iceland.

It has been necessary to limit or exclude other Old Norse sources from the study in order to maintain the study's focus as well as to stay within its limited word length. This includes literary sources such as the *Poetic Edda*, Old Norse hagiographical works, and the other saga genres. Some patterns found across sources and genres are noted, but not extensively. The inclusion of these literary sources could otherwise have offered a wider perspective on villainy and violence, including the ties between religion and views of villainy. Similarly, the thesis does not engage with most archaeological finds and scholarship. While these sources may show otherwise unknown sides of the Viking Age that compliment or contrast with the saga depictions of the past, this thesis primarily engages with the views found in the 13th-15th literary *Íslendingasögur*.

For the quotes from the *Íslendingasögur* in Old Norse I am using the *Íslenzk Fornrit* version of the sagas. I follow a normalised Old Norse spelling of names in text and in my own translations, but when quoting from published translations I retain their spelling. For other English translations I am mainly using the 1997 series *The Complete*

Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, (Odense: Odense University press, 1983); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: studier i islændingesagaerne*, (Oslo: Oslo Universitetsforlag, 1995); See also Javier E. Díaz-Vera and Teodoro Manrique Antón, 'Better Shamed Before One Than Shamed Before All: Shaping Shame in Old English and Old Norse Texts', *Metaphor and Metonymy Across Time and Cultures: Perspectives on the Sociohistorical Linguistics of Figurative Language* ed. Javier E. Díaz-Vera, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

¹² Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 62.

¹³ Lönnroth suggests the common dramatic roles in a typical feud story: The Hero, The 'Prima Donna', The Wise Counsellor, The Comrade-at-arms, The Villain, The Villain's Helper, The Messenger, The Witness, The Agent of Fate, and the Judge or Arbitrator. The Hero and his Comrade actively take part in the feud and have the main sympathies of the narrator and the audience, while the Villain and the Villain's Helper usually initiate the conflicts and generally work against the interests of the Hero. Interestingly, the roles of Hero and Villain can appear on both sides of a saga feud, and a person who appears as the Hero in one part of the saga can return as a Villain in another part, and so on. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*, 62.

Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales edited by Viðar Hreinsson.¹⁴ Where no translator is cited, the translation is my own.

Legal sources

In addition to the saga sources, this thesis' framework and its study of the *Íslendingasögur* will be supported by legal sources and laws from Iceland and Norway to get a more nuanced view of moral and legal wrongs done within the Old Norse society. These laws offer a perspective of normative behaviour within the hegemonic Old Norse society, and the devaluation and penalties given to those who act in opposition to these laws, but they also have their own uncertainties. The laws that will be referenced in the thesis are primarily from the Icelandic collection of laws named *Grágás*, literally meaning 'grey goose' due to a misunderstanding.¹⁵ While not a unified corpus of law and despite its relation to the contemporary 11th century Icelandic laws being questionable, what we have of *Grágás* is useful due to its temporal proximity to the *Íslendingasögur*'s setting. While *Grágás* originally was introduced to the Icelandic Commonwealth in 930 Iceland, it was transmitted orally until it was later codified in 1117.¹⁶ Although it is said to be based on the oldest laws of Iceland that were orally recited at the *þing*, it was never a unified corpus. Today it is primarily found in the two fragmentary manuscripts *Staðarhólsbók* (Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, AM 334 fol) [St] and *Konungsbók* (Copenhagen, Royal Library, GKS 1157 fol) [K].¹⁷ In 1270 *Grágás* was replaced with *Járnsiða* (Ironsides) which was inspired by the Norwegian *Gulabingslög* and *Frostaþingslög*, but in 1281 *Járnsiða* was replaced by the more Iceland-specific *Jónsbók*. In the cases of the later and sometimes titled 'post-classical sagas', comparisons with *Járnsiða* and *Jónsbók* are also applicable due to their closer proximity in time.¹⁸

¹⁴ Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: including 49 tales*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997). The collection of Norwegian translations edited by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen and Jan Ragnar Hagland has also been studied to aid my translations. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen and Jan Ragnar Hagland, eds., *Íslendingesagaene: samtlige sagaer og førtini tættar* (Reykjavík: Saga Forlag, 2014).

¹⁵ *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás, with Material from Other Manuscripts*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 9.

¹⁶ Ari Þórgilsson, 'Íslendingabók', in ÍF 1, ch. 10.

¹⁷ For more on *Grágás* as a source, see Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 20-9; The introduction in *Laws of Early Iceland*, 1:12-33.

¹⁸ On the history of saga categorisations, see Jürg Glauser, 'What Is Dated, and Why? Saga Dating in the Histories of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', in Mundal, *Dating the Sagas*, 9-30.

In addition to referring to *Grágás*, there are also comparisons and references to the regional Norwegian legal sources, particularly the west Norwegian law *Gulapingslög*. *Gulapingslög* is useful as a basis to compare the unique traits of the Icelandic *Grágás* with the Norwegian laws it was partly based on. The *Gulapingslög* was originally one of several regional laws used at the local general assemblies called *þing*. Four of these regional assemblies existed with their own law (*lög*) in Old Norse Norway before the introduction of king Magnús IV ‘lagaböta’ (law-mender) Hákonarson’s *Landslov* (State Law) in 1274/76.¹⁹ The *Gulapingslög* was the legal code used at the west Norwegian *Gulaping*, originally consisting of the historical areas Hordafylki, Sygnafylki, and Firðafylki, approximately covering today’s Hordaland, Sogn, and Fjordane.²⁰ The *Gulapingslög*, or a version of it, can according to Ari Fróði (the Wise) Þórgilsson be dated to before 930. In the early historical work on the settlement of Iceland (*landnám*) *Íslendingabók* (c. 1130), he states that it inspired the earliest Icelandic law brought to Iceland (*Grágás*) and the later established *Alþing* by the first Icelandic lawspeaker Ulfjótr.²¹ The other regional laws of Norway include the coastal east Norwegian *Borgarþingslög*, the eastern interior Norwegian *Eiðsivapingslög*, and the *Prændalög* (Trøndelag) area’s *Frostatingslög*.

Most medieval written laws are not ‘as applied’, and their content may not reflect the legal reality of the 10th-13th century before they were written down in the latter half of the 13th century. Legal discrepancies can also be found between the laws and regulations in the individual *Íslendingasögur*. This suggests either incorrect recordings of the laws by the saga authors, or more legal variation than what is seen in the surviving law sources. However, even with these discrepancies, the way they may or may not correlate helps give an impression of the kinds of values found within the *Íslendingasögur* and the time they were written down in. Then, similarly to using the *Íslendingasögur* as 13th-14th century literary sources depicting a perceived past, the same idea can be applied to the laws such as *Grágás*.²²

¹⁹ For more on the *Landslov*, see Else Mundal et al., eds., *Landslova av 1274. Rett, politikk og samfunn i norsk mellomalder* (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 2023).

²⁰ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, ed. and trans. Erik Simensen (London: Routledge, 2021), 6.

²¹ Ari Þórgilsson, ‘*Íslendingabók*’, ch. 2.

²² For more on the laws and the specific issues with using them as sources of the time period before the 13th century, see Per Norseng, ‘Law Codes as a Source for Nordic History in the Early Middle Ages’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 16, no. 3 (1991).

Cultural memory in a period of upheaval

As previously discussed, there is an uncertainty to what society the *Íslendingasögur* represent, and what attitudes they portray. One response to this uncertainty has been to engage with the sources through cultural memory theory.²³ This theory centres around the idea that cultural memory, unlike the individual's memories, exists between individuals due to its social and communicative components, and that remembrance within a social context is selective. In turn, memory can be called a group reconstruction of the past.²⁴ Historian Peter Burke has stated: 'The social history of remembering is an attempt to answer three main questions. What are the modes of transmission of public memories and how have these modes changed over time? What are the uses of these memories, the uses of the past, and how have these uses changed? Conversely, what are the uses of oblivion?'²⁵ In the article 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the past in Medieval Icelandic Literature', Pernille Hermann builds on Egyptologist Jan Assmann's understanding of cultural memory in the context of Old Norse literature, and points out how the *Íslendingesögur* represent memories of the past, as well as how they are constructed by the contemporary society in which they are written:

Thus, the past dealt with in the *Íslendinga sögur*, the so-called saga age, which is the period following the settlement of the country (late ninth century) until approximately the time of the conversion to Christianity (1000), is seen through an interpretative web indebted to contemporary experiences and current ideologies. For instance, ideologically, Christianity and the learned knowledge implied in a Christian culture coloured the literary representation of the memories of the pre-Christian past. Politically, the power struggles among Icelandic chieftains and the emigrant society's formal dependency on Norway (1262–64), which is often emphasized, would have influenced the literary 'saga world' as well.²⁶

Here the big cultural moments of change, including the new settlements, the introduction of Christianity, the loss of political independence after the incorporation by

²³ The first to speak of the 'social framework of memory' was the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory' in *Varieties of Cultural History*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 44. On the history of memory theory and its uses within Old Norse history writing, see Bjørn Bandlien, 'History' in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

²⁴ Burke, 'History as Social Memory', 44.

²⁵ Burke, 'History as Social Memory', 46.

²⁶ Pernille Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 3 (2009), 72; Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, Spring, no. 65 (1995). See also Jürg Glauser, 'Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and þættir as the Literary Representation of a New Social Space' in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the Norwegian crown, and the overall instability of meaning influence the text.²⁷ Based on this, certain features and aspects of the sagas, including those that are part of the characterisations, may be explained.

This thesis will engage with the sagas with cultural memory theory in mind, as the more contemporary attitudes and the way the past is remembered and constructed may affect the sagas' content in several ways. This includes how a character may be presented negatively and villainously based on their actions. The depiction of the characters may also be influenced by family ties between the present and the past that are displayed through extensive genealogies.²⁸ Here characterisations may be affected by the familial connections between historical figures and their descendants whose own status would be tied to their ancestors. This is partly why characterisations can differ in different sagas, and may explain why the most villainous foes often are outsiders not tied to the contemporary society as they have been safely dealt with in the past.²⁹ Secondly, the contemporary authors may be trying to critique the culture and actions of the past, such as pagan beliefs and morals, for example the act of going viking. While the honourable pagan warrior ideal is a feature of the *Íslendingasögur* genre, Christian ideals and actions are sometimes introduced by the end of the sagas in time for the depictions of the historical Christian conversions of Iceland.³⁰ This is at times then used to underline the positive qualities of the Christian convert or give a sense of redemption to others. This sense of conflicting religious and social values is shown in several ways, such as depicting heroes following the honour code in every detail and being lauded for this, but then eventually facing tragic outcomes due to following these principles.³¹ As Jon Gunnar Jørgensen says: 'the discrepancy between a brave and honourable action and its tragic results may imply a criticism of the clan society's code of honour.'³² In a

²⁷ Thomas Fechner-Smarsly has in turn called the *Íslendingasögur Krisenliteratur* (crisis literature). Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, *Krisenliteratur. Zur Rhetorizität und Ambivalenz in der isländischen Sagaliteratur*, (Bern: P.Lang, 1996), 1-28. See also Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Trauma Studies,' in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 252-4.

²⁸ Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory', 75.

²⁹ This is particularly visible in the cases of the supernatural, from foes to helpful magical foster mothers. See chapter 2 on magical violence.

³⁰ Other times, there is a tendency to present the pagans in a Christian-adjacent manner, meaning they display virtues associated with Christianity while remaining pagans, something that may make them appear more positively in the eyes of the contemporary Christian society. See Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1969).

³¹ On the heroic ideal, see Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (1970).

³² Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, 'Code of honour under debate in two Icelandic sagas', in *Literature and Honour*, ed. Aasta Marie Björvand Bjørkøy and Thorstein Norheim (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017), 37.

similar vein, according to the concept of cultural memories, the public's own interest may have changed and developed while the story was still in its oral form, further shaping the features of the sagas.

Another element that may reflect change between the time of the story and the time of writing in the *Íslendingasögur* is gender. Compared to the contemporary sagas, women are shown to have more freedom of action and different roles to play within in the more distant sagas including the *Íslendingasögur*, despite also here often being placed in the background during key events. Furthermore, while there is a sense of equality between the genders in the oldest, pre-Christian laws such as in *Grágás*, in the *Íslendingasögur* there is a tendency to overlook female crimes.³³ The sagas can at times also display moral repercussions from a Christian perspective, such as depicting pagan non-consensual marriages that end in tragedy. In general, the sagas give a mixed impression of notions, one torn between contemporary, Christian morals and a sense of nostalgia for the old and free Iceland, something that also influences the depictions of the heroes and villains within.

Gender theory and its uses

This thesis is a study of the depictions of gender in a fictionalised past as portrayed by 13th century authors, and how the gender of the character decides the reception of the performance such as different kinds of violence.³⁴ These depictions of gender within the sagas are constructed interpretations of the past and are the results of the ideals and fears of a combined past. Masculinity is a social position, a set of practices, and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination.³⁵ As R. W. Connell has established, there are multiple modalities of masculinities to be found not only between

³³ Jenny Jochens, 'Gender Symmetry in Law?: The Case of Medieval Iceland', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 108 (1993); Miriam Tveit et al., "'En kvinne skal straffes for alle forbrytelser som en mann"' Kjønnsspesifikke straffer i nordisk middelalderlovgivning ca. 1100–ca. 1300', *Historisk tidsskrift*, 101, no. 4 (2022). Meanwhile, the gender contrast is larger in supposed pre-Christian skaldic poetry such as *Hávamál* (The Words of the High One). In this poem, the High One, 'Óðinn', gives advice for how to properly behave and interact with others. A minority of these poems are dedicated to women, and in women are being presented as dangerous with their unpredictable nature, some of which is referenced in the *Íslendingasögur*. See in particular st. 84, 90. St. 84 that describes women's flightiness and how their hearts are made is also cited in *Fostbræðra saga*, ch. 21.

³⁴ On the social construction and maintenance of gender through performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1990).

³⁵ R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

communities or societies, but there also exists diversity within a given setting.³⁶ These masculinities exist within a hierarchy where the idealised hegemonic masculinity subordinates femininity as well as subordinating and marginalising other masculinities.³⁷ There are also multiple femininities, but no direct hegemonic femininity, as all forms of femininity in this society have been moulded into the subordination of women to men.³⁸ Of these forms of femininity, one is that of ‘emphasised femininity’, which relates to subordination and compliance with patriarchy. Other kinds are primarily defined by non-compliance or other strategies of resistance, while others again are defined by strategic combinations of co-operation, compliance, and resistance. While these theories were originally based on the then contemporary 1980s western world’s masculinities, the patterns they present are also recognisable in the sagas’ depictions of gender. As will be shown, the hegemonic ideal of honour and displays of courageous masculinity is of utmost importance, cowardice and weakness is punished. These ideals also bleed into the reception of female characters’ behaviour, albeit with some distinct limitations.

Furthermore, as will be seen with the examples used within the chapters, the identities and status of the saga characters will when applicable be regarded with the intersection of their identities in mind, meaning how they are built up by a multitude of facets, including gender, race and ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, sexuality, (dis)abilities and impairments, and how the specific identification and challenges tied to these intersecting identities effects their depictions.³⁹ While Old Norse (proto-)racial

³⁶ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 10. See also R.W. Connell, ‘Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics’, (1987); R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept’, *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005). See also Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). For a medieval perspective, see Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); For a more recent Old Norse perspective, see Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁷ On Old Norse hegemonic masculinity, see Bjørn Bandlien, *Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society* (Oslo: Unipub, 2005), 22-26; Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 15-23.

³⁸ Connell, ‘Gender and Power’, 187, 184-185; Mimi Schippers, ‘Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony’, *Theory and Society* 36 (2007), 88-89.

³⁹ While civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 coined the term intersectionality to look at how individuals due to their multifaceted identity could fall into unique forms of oppression and inequality, it has since also taken on different forms to discuss identities and inequities within a diverse society. One recent medievalist example here is Roland Betancourt’s study of Byzantine society. Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989). Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); For more on medieval concepts of race,

matters differ from contemporary perspectives both in what is regarded as race and in who it affects, the matter of social standing of oppressed identities is still visible.⁴⁰ This is particularly the case with male and female slaves, as well as the ambiguously racial identity of trolls and the supernatural other facing their own marginalised realities. This is also the case with the depictions of Sámi (finnar), whose identities are frequently tangled up with that of the supernatural Other.⁴¹ This together with the characters' social positions and relations will be of interest here to see in what ways these facets of their identity, as well as the gender, affect their depictions. Additionally, considering the varied nature of the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, the facets of a character's identity may be valued in a number of different ways depending on the individual saga.⁴²

Previous research on gender, villainy, and honour in the Old Norse society

Women and femininity

An important part of the characterisation within the sagas is each character's gender and whether they either meet or exceed it according to the culturally established gender norms and expectations within the sagas. While the field of women and gender studies is young in comparison to other fields of history, in the Old Norse history field there has been a centuries-old interest in the Old Norse trope of the 'strong Viking woman' based on past less critical readings of the sagas, and despite the changes since then within academia, this idea has remained generally unchanged in the public

see Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ For interpretations on racial encounters in the sagas, see Jenny Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity in the Old Norse world', *Viator* 30 (1999); Richard Cole, 'Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the Blámaðr', *Saga Book-Viking Society for Northern Research* 40 (2015); Basil Arnould Price, 'Búi and the Blámaðr: Comprehending Racial Others in Kjalnesinga Saga', *postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (2020).

⁴¹ For more on depictions of Sámi people in Old Norse literature, see Hermann Pálsson, 'The Sami People in Old Norse Literature', *Nordlit*, no. 5 (1999); Sirpa Aalto and Veli-Pekka Lehtola, 'The Sami representations reflecting the multi-ethnic North of the saga literature', *Journal of Northern Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017); Miriam Tveit, "'Otherness' Within? The Sámi in Medieval Scandinavian Law', in *'Otherness' in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

⁴² For a look into which facets of women's identities are shown to be prioritised within Old Norse culture, see Judith Jesch, 'Women and Identities', in *Kvinner i vikingtid. Vikingatidens kvinner*, ed. Nancy L. Coleman and Nanna Løkka (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014).

consciousness. In the academic context this perspective was generally unchallenged until the 1950s. Since the 1970s there has been an increase in work on women's and gender studies, including interest in Old Norse women as a group in addition to the study of exceptional individuals, as well as their position within Old Norse society.⁴³ Feminist studies have also noted the misogynist depiction of women in Old Norse literature, while others like Jenny Jochens have noted the seeming gender equality within the oldest laws.⁴⁴ Also important to bringing a wider and general awareness on the lives of Old Norse women were Judith Jesch's and Jochens' studies among others on the lives of women in the Old Norse society and in the Old Norse literature in the 1990s.⁴⁵ Since then scholarship has moved away from only women's studies and instead looked more into gender studies, queer studies, and the matter of intersectionality.⁴⁶ Standing out here are the gender binary-defying works of Carol J. Clover, with 'Maiden Warriors and other Sons', as well as the much debated

⁴³ Berit Jansen Sellevold, Else Mundal, and Gro Steinsland, eds. *Fokus på kvinner i middelalderkilder. Rapport fra symposiet 'Kilder till kvinnehistoriske studier i nordisk middelalder', Isegran, september 1990* (Skara: Viktoria, 1992). Feminist analyses of female saga characters include Helga Kress, 'Ekki höfum vér kvennaskap: nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu', in *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Petursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977); Ursula Dronke, *Narrative insight in Laxdæla saga*, in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, (New York and London: Garland, 1989); Patricia Conroy, 'Laxdæla saga and Eiríks saga rauða: Narrative Structure', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 95 (1980); Heather O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njáls Saga', in *Introductory Essays on Egils Saga and Njáls Saga*, ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992); Loren Auerbach, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in "Laxdoela Saga"', *Saga Book* 25, no. 1 (1998).

⁴⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga* has been called misogynistic by Helga Kress, as well as in Carol Clover's description of its authorial voice as the 'most consistently misogynist in Icelandic Literature.' Decades earlier, Einar Ól. Sveinsson shared the sentiment without actively referring to feminist theory: 'Njáls saga is a story for men. This is not to suggest that the author did not expect to have women among his audience, but he wrote from a man's point of view, with a man's understanding—and lack of understanding—of women. Njáls saga lacks the leniency and sensitivity of Laxdæla in regard to women.' Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: a literary masterpiece*, ed. and trans. Paul Schach, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 108; Helga Kress, 'Manndom og misogyni: Noen refleksjoner omkring kvinnesynet i Njáls saga', in *Gardar* 10 (1976); 'Regardless of Sex', 22n30; Others, such as Andersson and Ármann Jakobsson have argued that the saga undermines the focus on masculinity with the negative view of the lack of it. Ármann Jakobsson has also pointed out that the less typically masculine characters like Njáll and his foster-son Þórhallr are still presented positively by the saga author despite their feminine traits. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga', *Viator* 38 (2007), 195; Jochens, 'Gender Symmetry in Law?'

⁴⁵ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991); Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga* (Háskólaútgáfan, 1993); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, eds., *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁶ Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd. Ära, kön och konflikt i det nordiska medeltidssamhället', in *Feider og fred i nordisk middelalder*, ed. Erik Opsahl (Oslo: Unipub, 2007); On the topic of servile and unfree women in the sagas, see Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age', *Scandinavian Studies* 62, no. 2 (1990); Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120-1400' (Gothenburg: Historiska institutionen i Göteborg, 2001).

‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, based on Thomas Laqueur, where Clover questions the masculine-feminine binary in favour of one male gender.⁴⁷ Here the distinction is presented as that of being more or less masculine, powerful, solid, and active, rather than weak, soft, and dependent, a system that would also include women. While interesting from a literature standpoint, several scholars have noted the limited practical usage of this model. For example, Helga Kress and Pragya Vohra have noted how masculinity (as well as patriarchy) as it is shown within the Old Norse literature is tied to the oppression and exclusion of the feminine.⁴⁸ Some of the more recent scholarship on Old Norse women include Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir’s look into saga women’s different roles, as well as Lars Hermanson’s and Auður Magnúsdóttir’s edited work *Medeltidens genus*.⁴⁹

Men, masculinities, and níð

While in a gender studies context there have been more studies explicitly discussing Old Norse women and femininity, and while there have been a good amount of studies on continental and English medieval masculinities, this has been a less prominent topic within Old Norse scholarship until more recent times.⁵⁰ Here Bjørn Bandlien and

⁴⁷ Laqueur here argues for the pre-modern societies before the late 18th century having a one-sex model of the body, with men being deemed superior to women due to body humours, rather than being inherently better. This, together with Clover’s theory and its applicability has been a topic of debate within Norse and Nordic scholarship. Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Representations*, no. 44 (1993); Bandlien, *Man or Monster?*

⁴⁸ Kress, ‘Taming The Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature’, in *Cold Counsel*; Vohra, ‘Creating Kin, Extending Authority: Blood-Brotherhood and Power in Medieval Iceland’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, ed. Christopher Fletcher et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Lars Hermanson and Auður Magnúsdóttir, *Medeltidens genus. Kvinnors och mäns roller inom kultur, rätt och samhälle: norden och Europa ca 300-1500* (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2016).

⁵⁰ Other more recent works on the topic of masculinity and the lack thereof have been written by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, as well as Yoav Tirosh. See for example Ásdís Egilsdóttir. ‘Kolbítur verður karlmaður’, In *Miðaldabörn*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi Tulinius (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga’, Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Trollish acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of troll and ergi in Medieval Iceland’, *Saga-book* 32 (2008); Yoav Tirosh’ deep dive into *Ljósvetninga saga* and its gender depictions: Yoav Tirosh, ‘The Fabulous Saga of Guðmundr inn ríki. Representation of Sexuality in Ljósvetninga saga’ (Master Thesis, University of Iceland, 2014); Yoav Tirosh, ‘Argr Management: Vilifying Guðmundr inn ríki in Ljósvetninga saga’, *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature* (Munich: Utzverlag, 2017); Yoav Tirosh, ‘On the Receiving End: The Role of Scholarship,

Gareth Lloyd Evans stand out, as they look into masculinities, the limits of manhood and monstrosity.⁵¹ Additionally, there are the works of Henric Bagerius, including his doctoral thesis ‘Mandom och mödom: sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island’, which looks into the role of sexuality and the construction of chivalric masculinity within the aristocracy.⁵² Despite this, the matter of masculine gender performance is arguably more important in the case of male saga characters, as the hegemonic masculinity ideal and the honour tied to it shown within the Old Norse sources is presented to be of the highest importance for a man’s characterisation and position within society. In turn, the threats of libel speech and the accusations of depravity, effeminacy, and homosexuality have received much attention due to the fear of dishonour within the sagas.⁵³ As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has stated in his influential work *The Unmanly Man*, a translation of his 1980 work *Norrønt nid: forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer*: ‘In ancient Icelandic consciousness, the idea of a passive homosexuality was so closely linked with notions of immorality in general that the sexual sense could serve to express the moral sense. In other words, the substance of *níð* is not sexual perversion, even though it is cast in this form.’⁵⁴ In the sagas he finds a vulnerable quality of the masculinity presented in the sources, and states ‘a man was a man only as long as he had the strength, courage and virility to be so.’⁵⁵ In accordance with the negativity tied to *níð*, the sagas frequently depict the weaponising of it through dishonouring slander or whetting, the latter to be

Memory, and Genre in Constructing *Ljósvetninga saga*’ (PhD Thesis, University of Iceland, 2019). Beyond the scope of works on Old Norse masculinities, see Clare A. Lees, Thelma S. Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara, eds. *Medieval Masculinities Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Jacqueline Murray, *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York, Garland, 1999); Karras, *From Boys to Men*, ed. Dawn Hadley, *Masculinity in medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁵¹ Bandler, *Man or Monster?*; Evans, *Men and Masculinities*.

⁵² Henric Bagerius, ‘Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island’ (PhD thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2009).

⁵³ As far back as 1902 the Norwegian historian Ebbe Hertzberg, hidden behind the pseudonym ‘eines norwegischen Gelehrten’, wrote ‘Spuren von Konträrsexualität bei den alten Skandinaviern’, where he presented what he called the most important references to homosexuality in the Old Norse sagas. While the references to *níð* are insults rather than real depictions of homosexual identities, he deemed the amount of homosexual insults as proof that the Old Scandinavians were aware of the concept of men loving men. Ebbe Hertzberg, ‘Spuren von Konträrsexualität bei den alten Skandinaviern’, in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität*, 4 (1902).

⁵⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 20; Before Meulengracht Sørensen’s work on *níð* there has also been Folke Ström, *Nid, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes: The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies Delivered at University College, London, 10 May, 1973* (London: University College London, 1974). See also Alison Finlay, ‘*Níð*, adultery and feud in *Bjarnar saga hítðlakappa*’, *Saga Book* 23, no. 3 (1991).

⁵⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 87.

discussed in chapter 1.⁵⁶ This fear of losing masculinity and appearing effeminate is found both in the sagas and in the laws.⁵⁷ This is for example seen in the use of and reception of the highly offensive adjectives *argr* and *ragr*, with *ergi* being the noun form of *argr*.⁵⁸ These words refer to someone behaving in an unmanly manner, a description that can include someone being cowardly, effeminate, or similarly dishonourable. Besides being gendered insults, they may also refer to the other man being willing or driven to subject himself to the passive and feminine role in sexual relations with other men. Besides terms like these being made illegal in some of the laws, their extreme offensiveness is also shown in the sagas where the use of these and similar terms against others is cause of great conflict. However, while the men accused of passive homosexuality would lose honour, the men dishonouring them are occasionally shown to make up accusations where they were the one sodomising the other, without necessarily losing honour in a similar way.⁵⁹ While these accusations of *níð* are hardly tied to real events, the emphasis of homosexual insults show that the Old Scandinavians were aware of the concept, although it was associated with effeminacy and the loss of manhood, particularly when taking on a passive sexual role.⁶⁰ Furthermore, this effeminisation of men could also be done by women both by words, actions, and physical violence.⁶¹ The female form of *argr* is *örg*, and refers to perceived negative qualities for women such as lack of modesty, perversion, and licentiousness.⁶² Being *örg* is also at times associated with witchcraft, witches, and trollish women, while male witchcraft tends to be associated with being *argr*.⁶³

⁵⁶ Tied to *níð* is the verb *níða*, meaning to perform *níð*. Johann Fritzner has described it as seeking to degrade a person in the opinion of others by referring to him or representing him as a despicable person.’ Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1867), 2:52-3.

⁵⁷ See chapter 1’s section on the view of (dis)honour in the Old Norse society for more details.

⁵⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 18.

⁵⁹ See Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature’ *Scandinavian Studies* 58, vol. 2 (1986); Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 26-7.

⁶⁰ While accusations of passive homosexuality have been portrayed very negatively in the sagas, cases of accusations of lesbianism seem to be non-existent, and female homosocial relations in general are often left out. See Natalie M. Van Deusen, ‘Sworn Sisterhood?: On the (Near-) Absence of Female Friendship from the Íslendingasögur’, *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 1 (2014).

⁶¹ For example, Eldar Heide has studied cases in *Laxdæla saga* where women are the ones to dishonour men by ‘making’ them into women in symbolic ways. Eldar Heide, ‘Kvinner som gjer menn til kvinner i Laxdæla saga’, *Nordlit: Tidsskrift i litteratur og kultur* 5, no. 1 (2001); Ali Frauman, “‘Um öll níðingsverk þín’: Femininity and Cowardice in the Hvot Episodes’, *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 3 (2019).

⁶² Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 18.

⁶³ Goddesses such as Venus and Iðunn are both accused of sexual perversion and *örg* in works such as *Hauksbók* and *Lokasenna*. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 18-9. For more on witches seen as *örg* and *argr*, see chapter 2.

Villainy – Monstrosity, morality, otherness, and marginality

The literary villain role is defined by its oppositional position, where the villain is the aggressor who works against the hero protagonist of the narrative, as presented in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*.⁶⁴ However, when it comes to the sagas as a genre, this gets more complicated as a good number of protagonists display what one today may consider anti-heroic or outright villainous behaviour.⁶⁵ For one, violence against others can be a source of both respect and comedy within the right context. Villainy within the *Íslendingasögur* can then primarily be found through acts of disruption, depravity, and crimes done by characters to the local society and its inhabitants. As there are rules and norms in a society, there are also those who break them and in turn become a threat to said society. By breaking these norms and endangering or otherwise intruding on the hegemonic society, they in turn become monstrous.⁶⁶ These 'monsters' are by their very nature, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has stated in his influential work 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', 'disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.'⁶⁷ The incomprehensible and uncontainable monstrosity can also be found in the form of 'social' monsters, as shown in the works of Rebecca Merkelbach.⁶⁸ This description fits character types such as the *berserkr* and the outlaw, two socially monstrous types that scholars such as Merkelbach, Bjørn Bandlien, and Joonas Ahola have studied.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, 2 ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 79.

⁶⁵ See the introduction of *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*, where editors Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn discuss the complications with the definitions of villains and antagonists. Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, eds., *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature* (Munich: Utzverlag, 2017), 7-15.

⁶⁶ Jennifer Neville, 'Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry', *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, eds. K. E. Olsen, L.A.J.R. Houwen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Reading Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

⁶⁸ Merkelbach, 'The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of the Icelanders', *Quaestio Insularis* 15 (2014).

⁶⁹ Some work on the supernatural and mythological monsters and their encounters with humans: John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 2005); Ármann Jakobsson and M. Mayburd, *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

Together with the monstrous there is the Other. These kind of characters are often shown to figuratively or literally live in the margins of society, or outside of it.⁷⁰ These othered types are frequently featured in a negative light, although there are signs of fluidity to this depiction, rather than a binary.⁷¹ These people are othered by such things as their nonconforming gender presentation, religion, ethnicity, social class, and physical or mental disabilities.⁷² Still, when studying the sagas one must remember that these identity categories and their importance are not necessarily the same as our modern ones, and there are also differences in perspective in the different sources.⁷³ For example, in sources written down in Christian times the Christian-pagan dichotomy may be more important than race, or religion may be racialised.⁷⁴ While different types of pagans can be assigned similarly othered pagan traits such as using witchcraft and being monstrous, there were still cases of the Norse pagan people willingly trading, allying and marrying those considered ‘wilder’ pagans, such as the Sámi.⁷⁵ Here too there are nuances, considering the Old Norse people’s perspective of themselves as peripheral from a continental European cultural viewpoint.⁷⁶ A recent work on the topic of villainy and outsiders is the collective research in Daniela Hahn and Andreas

⁷⁰ On the concept of otherness, see Michael Goodich, ed., *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Victor Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’ in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94-113, 25-130. On marginalised Old Norse masculinities, see Bandlien, *Man or Monster?* 81-90; and Bjørn Bandlien, ‘Marginality’, in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London: Routledge, 2017); For monstrous marginality, see Rebecca Merkelbach, ‘The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of the Icelanders’, *Quaestio Insularis* 15 (2014); Rebecca Merkelbach, ‘Eigi í mannligu eðli: Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Íslendingasögur’, in *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature* (2018); Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Rebecca Merkelbach, ‘Dólgri byggðinni: Meeting the Social Monster in the Sagas of Icelanders’, in *Paranormal Encounters*; Joonas Ahola, ‘Outlawry in the Icelandic Family Sagas’ (PhD University of Helsinki, 2014).

⁷¹ Bjørn Bandlien, ‘Marginality’; Jens Peter Schjødt, ‘Wilderness, Liminality, and the Other in Old Norse Myth and Cosmology’, *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature* 55 (2012).

⁷² Bandlien, ‘Marginality’, 254.

⁷³ See for example Jesch, ‘Women and Identities.’

⁷⁴ For more on the religious (proto-)racism in Medieval Scandinavia, see also Cordelia Heß and Jonathan Adams, eds., *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015). See also Jochens, ‘Race and Ethnicity in the Old Norse World.’ On the *blámenn* (black men) featured in the sagas, see for example Cole, ‘Racial Thinking’; and Price, ‘Búi and the Blámaðr: Comprehending racial others in Kjalnesinga Saga’; Pernille Hermann, ‘The Horror of Vinland: Topographies and Otherness in the Vinland sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies* 93, no. 1 (2021).

⁷⁵ Else Mundal, ‘The Perception of the Saamis and Their Religion in Old Norse Sources’, *Shamanism and Northern Ecology* 36 (1996); Else Mundal, ‘Kong Harald Hårfagre og samejenta Snøfrid. Samefolket sin plass i den norske rikssamlingsmyten’, *Temahefte i norrøn filologi* (1997).

⁷⁶ Kirsten Hastrup, ‘Northern Barbarians: Icelandic Canons of Civilisation’, *Gripla* 20 (2009), 119.

Schmidt's edited book *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*.⁷⁷

Honour and its place within the Old Norse world

The concepts of honour and masculinity are central in Old Norse literature and culture, and in turn these values have much to say for the evaluation of the depiction of saga characters, their actions, and how these actions are perceived. A key incentive of much of the action within the *Íslendingasögur* is that of honour, and the fight to maintain it. Honour as it is referred to in this thesis will relate to the definition given by anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers: 'Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society.'⁷⁸ In tandem with Pitt-Rivers is Frank Henderson Stewart's definition, stating that honour is 'a right to respect.'⁷⁹ Both definitions here point to the duality of honour; the outer sociological aspect of society judging the individual, and the inner psychological aspect of the individual judging themselves based on the outside's societal values.⁸⁰ Honour is according to Pitt-Rivers based on conduct; actions visible for others that are judged as honourable or dishonourable, and that takes part in maintaining but also shape societal norms. Both of these similar definitions are useful when imagining how the Old Norse individual is shaped and regarded by both themselves and their surroundings, considering how honour-driven the

⁷⁷ In particular the articles of Daniela Hahn and Yoav Tirosh are relevant to this thesis, as they look at the specific depictions of some saga characters, and how these depictions of their bad deeds are connected to femininity and emasculation. Daniela Hahn, 'Expanding the Repertoire. Theft as a Means of Whetting in the Sagas of Icelanders', in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*; See also Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn, eds., *Unwanted: Neglected Approaches, Characters, and Texts in Old Norse-Icelandic Saga Studies* (Munich: Utzverlag, 2022); Tirosh, 'Argr Management.'

⁷⁸ Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, edited by John George Peristiany, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 21.

⁷⁹ Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 21.

⁸⁰ This has been formulated in similar ways earlier, such as Arthur Schopenhauer in 1851: 'Honour is, on its objective side, other people's opinion of what we are worth; on its subjective side, it is the respect we pay to this opinion.' Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 62; Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', 21; Arnved Nedkvitne, *Ære, lov og religion i Norge gjennom tusen år* (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2011); The topic of honour and shame has been subject much discussion within the area of anthropology, such as within the study of Mediterranean societies. Michael Herzfeld, 'Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems', *Man* 15, no. 2 (1980); David D. Gilmore, 'Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor', in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987). On the anthropological development on the honour/shame concept, particularly within Mediterranean societies, see Charles Stewart, 'Honor and Shame', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright, 2 ed. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015).

society of the Old Norse world is presented.⁸¹ However, while Pitt-Rivers' definition may fit the depictions found in the sagas, it has its limits and is not universal. As Michael Herzfeld has warned, to overgeneralise the terms can be counterproductive as what could be considered honourable in one community or society could contrast with its definition in another.⁸²

The Old Norse concept of female honour appears to contrast with the contemporary continental European, and particularly on the matter of honour tied to sexual purity.⁸³ Besides the honour they share with their kin and husband, Norse female honour is associated with competence, social rank, and hospitality.⁸⁴ Furthermore, female honour to some extent shares traits with the male concept, for example the way the term *drengr* can also be used of women, as well as the complimenting term *skörungr*, meaning someone prominent who stands out and excels. Furthermore, despite sexual purity itself not being a matter of honour for the woman and her family, her sexuality was still of importance through the family's social control of the woman, as seen by the laws considering any sexual ties with men not confirmed by her male relatives to be sexual assault, (K §90), as well as the concept of the illegal *mansöng* ('love poem'). *Mansöng* is a poetic genre banned in *Grágás* (K §238, St §377) that while previously regarded as a love poem genre, has been argued to instead be about dishonouring the woman through explicit lyrical content.⁸⁵

In Old Norse literature, much blood is spilled, and hardships are had in the name of honour which can seem to be presented as an all-compassing ideal. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, in *Fortelling og ære*, presents honour as the fundamental ethical value system in the society lacking a superior power structure to control it: 'To a

⁸¹ For theory and studies on honour and morality beyond the Old Norse world, see also Herzfeld, 'Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems'; David D. Gilmore, *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, D.C: American Anthropological Association, 1987); Charles Stewart, 'Honor and Shame.'

⁸² Herzfeld, 'Honour and Shame', 349.

⁸³ On the continental medieval concept of female honour through sexual purity, and the lack thereof, see for example Ruth Mazo Karras and Katherine E. Pierpont, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 4 ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 113-63.

⁸⁴ For more on Old Norse female honour, see for example Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: studier i islændingesagaerne* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995), 226-49. On the development in the regard of a bride's sexual honour, see Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and virginity: the christianization of marriage in medieval Iceland 1200-1600* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), ch. 6; Henric Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', *Mirator* 14, no. 2 (2013).

⁸⁵ For example, in *Kormáks saga* a *mansöng* is anonymously dedicated to a woman, causing great offence to her due to its obscenely explicit content. See also *Hallfreðar saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, Edith Marold, 'Mansöng—A Phantom Genre?', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (2007).

society built upon the individual's inviolability and self-reliance and without a dominant power structure to control the inviolability and responsibility belongs a strongly developed concept of personal honour.'⁸⁶ The earliest period of the Old Norse Middle Ages did indeed lack a sufficiently centralised power structure that could control and sanction. This was especially noteworthy in Iceland where during the period of the Commonwealth there were, besides the ecclesiastical office, no political titles besides *lögsögumaðr* (lawspeaker) and *goði* and even the *goði's goðorð* (chieftainship) was ambiguous: it could be inherited, traded and shared with others, and on rare occasions, even shared with one's wife.⁸⁷ All free men were tied to a *goði*, either directly or through the head of the household that they belonged to, but this connection was less definite and stable than a proper vassalage, and could easily be broken, something that added another layer of competition.

Linguistically, the importance of the Old Norse overarching concept of honour is shown in the variety of words in the semantic field corresponding to the English 'honour.' Besides the words *æra* and *heiðr*, there is *sómi* and the verb *sóma* which means 'to be fitting', *sama*, meaning 'befit, be suitable', and *sæma*, meaning 'to honour, befit to someone.'⁸⁸ These words, while being related to honour, are also connected to societal expectations of propriety being fulfilled.⁸⁹ Similarly, the word *verð* (value) shows the relation between value and respect, being connected to the verb *virða*, meaning to value or respect, and the noun *virðing* (evaluation). Other words like *metorð* and *metnaðr* also refer to the renown or opinion of the person judged, for example: '*hafa mikil metorð*' (having great renown).⁹⁰ Further than the honour itself, there is the notion of personal integrity and 'sacredness' (*helgi*), with the individual having a 'sacred' right of honour, and thus the necessity of vengeance in case this honour is violated.⁹¹ On the other side of the coin is the concept of lacking honour, with words such as *skömm* (shame), as well as the words for honour negated by the *ó*-prefix

⁸⁶ One potential issue with Meulengracht Sørensen's interpretation is the vagueness to whether the values presented in the *Íslendingasögur* mirror the pagan, pre-Christian Old Norse society or the author's 13th century. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*. 187. My translation.

⁸⁷ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 29.

⁸⁸ The Modern Scandinavian words being 'ære/ära', and German 'Ehre'.

⁸⁹ Johan Fritzner's dictionary translates the noun *sómi* as 'Ære som bevises' (honour that is proven). Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*. 3:473.

⁹⁰ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 188.

⁹¹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: studier i islændingesagaerne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993), 182; Simen Syvertsen, 'The Price of Integrity', in *Literature and Honour*, ed. Aasta Marie Bjorvand Bjørkøy and Thorstein Norheim, Books (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017).

such as *ósómi*, *ósømd*, and *ósvirðing* (disgrace). There are also the words *svívirðing* (with the interjection *sví-* meaning shame), *vanvirðing* (*vanr-* meaning lack of, forming the word dishonour), and *engi virðingaför* (not honourable conduct).⁹² Then, when a man's *métorð*, or *sæmd*, in the eyes of both himself and the men around him is considered the most important social currency, they are willing to do, or unable to avoid doing, almost all what is considered necessary to maintain this right to respect. The Old Norse word *sómd* (honour, propriety, acclaim) has within modern sociological discussion on the topic of the Old Norse culture been used to describe a specific social asset or currency that the individual acquires through social interactions with others, and which is assigned to them by other social actors.⁹³ As the result of a court case held at the Þing in the sagas, it can be stated that the winning side has won the most honour from the case ('*ok hafði Gunnar ina mestu sómd af málinu*').⁹⁴ The same can be said for the opposite case where the losing side has lost *sómd* as a result of the event. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen calls *sómd* 'æren som gives' (the honour that is given), but also refers to it in the context of the important diplomatic action of gift giving as compensation for offences tarnishing one's honour ('æresoprejsning').⁹⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, Jesse Byock, and William Ian Miller have similar concepts of honour as a limited and precious social commodity that is given and withdrawn, with Miller calling honour a 'zero-sum game.'⁹⁶ Others such as Vilhjálmur Árnason and Helgi Þórláksson have argued against the tendency of reducing honour to a social commodity, which they argue removes the moral aspect of honour.⁹⁷ In the article 'Virtir men og vel metnir', Helgi Þórláksson introduces the distinction between social honour ('félagslegur heiður') and personal honour ('persónulegur heiður'), where only the social honour can be said to be in short supply as the quantitative *sómd*, and something to compete for.⁹⁸ In contrast, he describes personal honour as the act of improving oneself, greatness of

⁹² Jørgensen, 'Code of Honour', 50-51.

⁹³ Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, 106; Vilhjálmur Árnason, 'An Ethos in Transformation: Conflicting Values in the Sagas', *Gripla* 20 (2009), 225.

⁹⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF 12, ch. 24.

⁹⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 122.

⁹⁶ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30.

⁹⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 122; Byock refers to *sómd* as 'honourable recompense', similarly to Meulengracht Sørensen, but does not go into details about it as a social currency. See Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, 106; Helgi Þórláksson, 'Virtir menn og vel metnir', *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*, ed. by Helgi Þórláksson et. al. (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 15-22; Vilhjálmur Árnason, 'Ethos in Transformation', 225.

⁹⁸ Helgi Þórláksson got these terms for honour from Erling Sandmo, *Voldsamfunnets undergang. Om disiplineringsen av Norge på 1600-tallet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1999), 102-3.

mind, and the strength to defend oneself. A man of personal honour would be a *hófsmaðr*: a person of moderation, justice, temperance, and an advocate of peaceful settlements.⁹⁹ Men with either or both forms of honour are found in the sagas, but villainous characters are shown to frequently have little of either, especially little personal honour. Vilhjálmur Árnason distinguishes between the traditional hero character who thinks primarily of his *sómð* and how to maintain it through duelling and vengeance, and the social hero who displays wisdom fuelled by the moral virtue of *góðgirnd* (benevolence).¹⁰⁰ The opposite of this hero type is the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, an inequitable person who while physically strong and courageous frequently creates discord and problems for the local society, as well as the socially skilled and wise, but antisocial malevolently motivated foe. The *ójafnaðarmaðr* has also been discussed by Ármann Jakobsson, as well as being the topic of Joanne Shortt Butler's 2016 doctoral thesis 'Narrative Structure and the Individual in the *Íslendingasögur*: Motivation, Provocation and Characterisation.'¹⁰¹ Both villainous mirror images of the heroic types noticeably are vilified for their lack of prudence and good intentions towards their community. In the context of analysing the presentation of villainous characters, the antitheses of the heroic characters and their opposing values who then challenge the heroic characters in action or thought are deemed dishonourable within their own society and may represent contemporary social anxieties to be fought. This also raises the question of whether antisocial villains who control others with bad counsel more often are depicted as less masculine compared to the more physically intimidating *ójafnaðarmaðr*, and if part of this immoral malevolence could stem from or rather be further illuminated by his non-masculine or effeminate characteristics. However, these categories alone do not leave much room for a gendered perspective on these roles, seemingly defaulting them to the male heroes and villains in the sagas and neglecting to include female villainy, even if as will be seen, female villainy is very much featured in the sagas together with male villainy.

⁹⁹ Helgi Þorláksson, 'Virtir menn og vel metnir', *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*, ed. by Helgi Þorláksson et. al. (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 20-1.

¹⁰⁰ Vilhjálmur Árnason, 'Ethos in Transformation', 231, 233.

¹⁰¹ Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Impetuousness of Þráinn Sigfússon: Leadership, Virtue and Villainy in *Njáls saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 124 (2009). Joanne Shortt Butler, 'Narrative Structure and the Individual in the *Íslendingasögur*: Motivation, Provocation and Characterisation' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016); Vilhjálmur Árnason, 'Ethos in Transformation', 231, 233-4.

Chapter 1: Whetting and weaponising shame

[...] Skýtt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek særi þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at tú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella.' Flosi kastaði af sér skikkjunni ok rak í fang henni ok mælti: 'Þú ert it mesta forað ok vildir, at vér tækim þat upp, er öllum oss gegnir verst, ok eru köld kvenna ráð.'¹

(‘With God and good men as my witnesses, I bind you to an oath with all of your Christ’s power and with your manhood and courage, that you will avenge all the wounds he had in death, or else be known as a *níðingr* among all men.’ Flosi threw the cape off and into her lap. ‘You vile beast!’ he said, ‘and you would rather that we did what would harm us the most. Cold are the counsels of women!’)²

‘Þat var ok líkara’, segir Gísli, ‘at grey þitt mundi eigi þora við mik vápnunum at skipta.’ Eyjólfur mælti þá til Njósna-Helga: ‘Þat væri nú frægð mikil, at þú reðir fyrstr upp á kleifarnar at Gísla, ok mundi þat ágæti lengi uppi vera.’ ‘Opt hefi ek þat reynt’, segir Helgi, ‘at þú villt aðra hafa fyrir þér optast þar er nokkur raun er at, en fyrir því at þú eggjar svá ákafliga, þá skal ek til ráða, en þú fylg mér drengiliga ok gakk næst mér, ef þú ert eigi með öllu blauðr.’³

(‘It was as expected’, Gísli said, ‘that you, you bitch, would not dare exchange weapon-blows with me.’ Eyjólf then spoke to Scout-Helgi: ‘It would now have been a great honour if you went first up the cliffs towards Gísli. That honourable feat would long be remembered.’ ‘I have often felt’, Helgi said, ‘that you would have others before you when there are any dangers. But since you are whetting me so much I will go forward, but follow me like a man if you are not a total coward.’)

In key moments in both *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, it is words of incitement that finally drive hesitant men into killing the sagas’ titular characters. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the widow Hildigunnr carefully and publicly pressures her uncle into avenging her husband and orchestrating the burning of Njáll’s homestead, and in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, the despicable hitman Eyjólfur attempts to trick his follower into doing his work, only to be shamed into doing it himself. Despite both Hildigunnr and Eyjólfur forcing men into acts of physical violence despite their targets’ own reservations by words alone, the two are presented and received differently within the narrative, where Hildigunnr is called cruel and monstrous, while Eyjólfur is despicable and cowardly. In this chapter the concept and morality of whetting will be looked at from a gendered perspective, as well as the presentation of the characters doing it, in order to see if the gender of the whetter as well as other factors have an influence on its depictions.

¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 116.

² Unless specified otherwise the English translations are mine.

³ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ÍF 6, ch. 34.

Definition and its use

If there is one well known saga stock character that is shown to contribute to the escalation of the conflicts in the sagas while remaining an uncertain phenomenon within history itself, it is the whetter. Whetting, or incitement type-scenes such as the two above are some of the more outstanding scenes in saga literature, often marking the point of no return in a conflict where someone verbally incites a man into taking physical vengeance on someone he has been feuding with, often resulting in a continued cycle of violence until a peaceful settlement is made at the *Þing*. This often negatively portrayed character and their ultimatums of vengeance and losing honour tell a lot about the society they were created in, as well as what this society feared. As shown in these two examples, female and male whetters tend to be presented in different yet both despicable ways.⁴ This chapter will be on the often-vilified whetters and their manipulation of honour, the importance of gender in their characterisation, and what their characterisation can tell about the 13th century's view of its past.

Whetting, as it is presented in the sagas, will here be defined as the action of inciting someone into doing as you wish against their better judgement, based on the outside threat of societal emasculation and damage of reputation.⁵ Within the saga context, this is primarily tied to inciting male mourners into avenging dead kinsmen as well as their honour, but not limited to it. For this concept there are multiple unique Old Norse words, such as the noun *hvöt* (whetting) and the related verb *hvetja*, meaning to whet both in the abstract and concrete sense. Like *hvöt* there is also *frýja*, meaning reproach or blame, like in the context of accusing someone of lacking something (*frýja einhverjum einhvers*). Preben Meulengracht Sørensen along with others have previously distinguished *hvöt* from *frýja* by how the former unlike the latter may have a positive connotation in the way of encouragement.⁶ There is also the verb *eggja* which today is used in several languages including English in the same old context of 'egging on' someone.

⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 238-9.

⁵ Frederic Amory defines whetting as one of provocative speech acts that breach contract. Frederic Amory, 'Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 106 (1991), 77-8.

⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen points out its positive as well as negative uses by referring to the names of the poems 'Húskarlahvöt' and 'Guðrúnarhvöt.' Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 238n72.

The whetting type-scene has also been a popular topic within Old Norse saga literature studies, both due to the connection to the central theme of the blood feuds in the sagas, as well as the many depictions of women whetting.⁷ With few exceptions however, the focus has been on these women due to the unique role they are described to play in this type-scene, while the men who whet have not received the same focus and are more rarely perceived as proper whetters. Since the rise of saga criticism, there have been two major ways of analysing the depiction of whetting: with emphasis on the negative presentation of women as manipulative, or as an insight into how women could influence their surroundings and the course of events, despite their limited position in society. The former way uses the cases of female whetters to analyse the time the sagas were written in and what these 13th century sources can tell about the society's view on women, both contemporary and of the past they describe.⁸ The latter has resulted in multiple studies of the power, or rather, the range of action women in the Old Norse society are portrayed to have had compared to contemporary medieval women.⁹

Despite more nuanced perspectives on power, defining whetting as a power that the whetter themselves possess may be to risk ignoring where it stems from, and what it is exactly that forces the whettee to follow through with the demands against his own will. While the depictions of characters using their own personal abilities in combat, magic or their social standing for influence, whetting seems, whether it was a historical phenomenon or fictional plot point based on societal fears, to be an external influence as it is based on men's powerlessness against the strict concept of honour and masculinity that the Old Norse society was pervaded with. Through it individuals and then often those outside the group of free, able bodied, and *drengr* men could have made use of these men's limited choices to maintain their social status. As Miller states: 'What was common to all inciters was not their sex but their dependence on the men they

⁷ By Rolf Heller's count there are 51 cases of female whetting (*frýja*) in the *Íslendingasögur* where a woman whets a man into vengeance or other actions. See Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*, vol. 2 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1958); Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: a Critical Introduction*.

⁸ Already in 1943 Einar Ól. Sveinsson calls *Njáls saga* a 'karlmannna rit', noting the 'masculine' qualities of the saga in his book *Á Njálsbúð: bók um mikið listaverk*, and bases this on the 'unkindness' towards women. Helga Kress has possibly been the most direct on how sagas such as *Brennu-Njáls saga* displays masculine or misogynist views, both by how negatively whetting women are depicted as well as how men who are seen as insufficiently masculine (feminine) or cowardly are portrayed. 'Njála's view on women is decided by which opinion they have of the masculine ideal and how obedient they are towards the kin and the heroes.' See Kress, 'Manndom og misogyni.' My translation.

⁹ For broader studies of women's actions, see Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*; Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse literature*.

incited.’¹⁰ According to Miller this dependence could manifest in different ways depending on gender and the whetter’s own position in society as well as the specific situation at hand. For my use of the definition, this dependence has less to do with the social dependence between the whetter and the whetted, and it is more situational: the whetter depends on the whetted man to perform an action in their stead as they otherwise will not be able to do so themselves, but they also depend on using the social obligations of the male whettee against him.¹¹ This definition opens the possibility for cases where whetting can be more nuanced and the displays of intentional manipulations of others through whetting, similarly to the example with Eyjólfur at the beginning of the chapter. There are also cases of chieftains and men in higher positions whetting those equal or beneath them in class.¹² Besides this, while those whetting are often women of high social status, their ability to whet is not shown to be connected with their social position, something that will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

What does the literary trope and its research have to do with the historical realities?

Despite its frequent depictions in the *Íslendingasögur* and prevalence in the perception of Old Norse society, there are far fewer uses elsewhere, even within other saga genres. This has made several historians question its prevalence in both pre-Christian society, and the period when the sagas were written in.¹³ For one, the role of the popular whetting woman is to a much smaller degree found in the more contemporary *samtíðarsögur*, where female characters are generally more restricted to the background.¹⁴ While it is tempting to suggest that similarly to warrior women

¹⁰ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 212.

¹¹ In 1990 the term ‘soft power’ was coined by Joseph S. Nye in his book *Bound to Lead*, where it is defined as ‘getting others to want what you want’. While it also involves convincing the whettee into wanting to perform the violent action rather than face dishonour, this is frequently enough done with a sense of coercion followed by a negative response. Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Joseph S. Nye, ‘Soft Power: the Origins and Political Progress of a Concept’, *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (2017).

¹² One example here being Snorri goði in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, something he is not portrayed negatively for. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 139.

¹³ Heller argues that whetting is a literary motif, while Jochens calls it something belonging to ‘the realm of male fiction.’ Miller however has said that there is reason to think of the whetting woman as ‘more than just literary commonplace.’ Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*, 2; Jenny Jochens, ‘The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?’, *Viator*, 17 (1986), 50; Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 20.

¹⁴ Some noticeable examples of whetting in the *samtíðarsögur* is Steinvör in *Þórðar saga kakala*, where Steinvör threatens to take to weapons herself as well as hand over the pantry keys to her passive husband.

characters such as the shield maidens and the more mythical valkyries, the whetter stock characters are safely tucked away in the sagas describing the more distant past such as the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, this alone does not necessarily hold up as a sufficient argument as the more fantastical *fornaldarsögur* too have a total of three cases of whetting characters, and instead place women in particular in the role of the advisor and giver of *heilræði* (sound counsel).¹⁵

Even if these literary stock characters are not a concrete historical phenomenon within in the described time period of the pre-Christian Norse society, or if their role is mostly exaggerated, the inclusion and quantity of them within the literature are still a testament of their time and its views. While literary tropes such as the whetter are being used to present concepts or fears in the culture contemporary with the writing of the story, it will also simultaneously be part of shaping said culture. Therefore, whether or not the historical reality had cases where men or women did use whetting-like means to get their way, their often negative literary portrayals are frequent and spread out within the sagas, which hints of either a societal fear of what the whetter represents, or the need of a plot device to explain the actions they are said to have done. I will look further into these ideas, after a look at the concept of honour in Old Norse society, the laws and unwritten rules managing it, and how this could be used and abused in a way familiar to the whetting presented in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Here Steinvör intentionally describes her own action as incitement (*‘hefi ek hann ok sjaldan eggjat at ganga í stórmæli’*). *Þórðar saga kakala*, in Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, eds., *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols. vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 6. As Clark has noted, the *samtíðarsögur* can here like in the *Íslendingasögur* be blaming women for conflicts. See David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154. Other women who cause trouble here include the two Guðrúns in *Guðmunds saga dýra*, including the whetting by Guðrún Önundsdóttir.

¹⁵ As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has noted, women are in the *fornaldarsögur* mainly depicted as advocating peace, even if there are three cases of incitement speech found in *Sörla saga sterka*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse literature*, 7; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Hygginn ok Forsjál. Wisdom and Women’s Counsel in Hrólfs saga’, in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, eds., Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: University College London, 2010); On the whetter role as a safely distant scapegoat, see Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 191. On whetting in the *konungasögur*, see Jenny Jochens, ‘The Female Inciter in the Kings’ Sagas’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987).

The developing view of (dis)honour and vengeance in the Old Norse society

As detailed in the introduction, the social currency of honour was of key importance within the Old Norse society. The important yet seemingly brittle nature of honour is also visible through the laws protecting the individual from *níð* and the grave punishments for those who tried to dishonour others through verbal or physical offences. As such, words questioning or rejecting a man's character or masculinity, and other forms of libel speech, were punishable by law, such as in the earliest Norwegian and Icelandic laws of *Gulapinglög* and *Grágás*.¹⁶ In particular *níð* accusations of effeminacy and unmanliness, as well as that of having been forcibly or willingly made to take the sexually passive role with another man were considered severely offensive, as shown in *Grágás* §376 found in the *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript:

Þav ero orð þríu ef sva mioc versna máls endar manna. Er scog Gang varða avll. Ef maðr kallar mann ragan eða stroðin. Eða sorðin. Oc scal sokia sem avnnor full rettis orð. Enda a maðr vígt igeign þeim orðum þrimr.¹⁷

(There are three words that corrupt men's speech to such an extent that they all incur outlawry. If a man calls another man perverse or used sexually by a man or sodomised, he shall prosecute as for other fullréttsorð. A man also has the right to kill for these three words.)¹⁸

According to the law, merely calling another man *ragr*, *stroðinn*, or *sorðinn* is a severe criminal offence worthy of losing legal protection.¹⁹ This punishment of outlawry also extended to those who tarnished a dead man's reputation, proving the gravity of disgracing a man even after his passing. While these laws against libel speech remained strict despite the minor changes, the political as well as religious changes in Iceland during the 13th century seem to have resulted in some changes in the view of honour.²⁰

¹⁶ See also *Gulapinglög* §138, 'Ef maðr níðir annan' (If a man libels another). On sodomy accusations, see also *Frostapingslög*, V, §22: 'Engi maðr skal þat við annan mæla at hann hafe þegit scømm á sér.' (No man must say about another that he has submitted to disgrace...) and *Járnsiða*, XII: 'Engi maðr skal þat við annan mæla at hann have þegit skom(m) a ser'; For more on this, see Kari Ellen Gade, 'Homosexuality.'

¹⁷ 'Grágás St §376.

¹⁸ Translation from Gade, 'Homosexuality', 136; Foote's translation: 'if a man calls another man womanish or says he has bugged or fucked.' *Laws of Early Iceland*, 2:354.

¹⁹ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 17-8.

²⁰ For sources on the social development on Iceland in the wake of the Icelandic Civil Wars and the Norwegian subjugation of Iceland, see Wærdahl, *Norges konges rike og hans skattland. Kongemakt og statsutvikling i den norrøne verden i middelalderen*; Sigríður Beck, 'I kungens fránvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271–1387' (2011); Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, "... vær da så lenge hos kongen som du kan..." Hirden, hoffet og kongens menn på Island i siste halvdel av 1200-tallet', *Heimen* 1, no. 01 (2015); For a comparison between honour depicted in an *Íslendingasaga* and a contemporary saga, see Jørgensen, 'Code of Honour', 56.

However, this is not to say that the characters within the *samtiðarsögur* are in any way free of a strict concept of masculinity and violence. Even by Old Norse saga standards, the *samtiðarsögur* are filled with graphic accounts of murder and of brutal scenes of shame-coded violence, such as the genital mutilation and blinding of Órækja Snorrason, and the murder and robbery of Sturla Sigvatsson despite him having begged for mercy. Instead, there seems to be even less of a glorification of the acts of vengeance in the contemporary sagas. Anthony Adams has pointed out that while the view on the bloodsheds in the *Íslendingasögur* might be eased by the legal proceedings and a sense of justice, *samtiðarsögur* like the *Sturlunga saga*'s violence is only driven along as 'struggle for power is the dominant mode of life.'²¹ These differences and the historical background should be kept in mind when analysing the sagas.

Blood feuds in the Íslendingasögur

Blood feuds are a key narrative feature within the *Íslendingasögur*, and the act of whetting is regularly tied together with the beginning or escalation of a bloodfeud. Blood feud as a concept appears in many cultures and time periods, with some unique features due to factors such as local laws, concept of kinship, economic system and more. A characteristic rule of all blood feuds however is the rule of equivalence in retaliation, or the Lex Talionis principle also known as 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'²² This concept of righteous revenge is also featured in Old Norse laws, including *Grágás*:

'Pat er mœlt. at maðr a sin at hefna ef hann vill sa er á verþr unit til þess alþingis er hann er scýlldr at sækia of averkin oc sva þeir menn allir er vigs eigo at hefna.'²³

²¹ Possibly due to the distance in time, the *Íslendingasögur* seem to more rarely reach the same level of regretful fatigue, as even in *Gísla saga Súrsonnar*, a saga about a man trapped within the old and the new ages, his widow Auðr and the widow of his dead friend are baptised and takes pilgrimage to Rome, symbolically leaving both Iceland and the old ways behind; Anthony Adams, "He Took a Stone Away": Castration and Cruelty in the Old Norse *Sturlunga saga*, in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2013) 193-4; Marlene Ciklamini, 'Biographical Reflections in "Íslendinga Saga": a Mirror of Personal Values', *Scandinavian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1983), 215.

²² Relevant to this is also the importance put on *jafn/ójafn* (balanced/unbalanced) conduct, both legal and social. See William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ármann Jakobsson, 'Impetuousness'; Keith Ruiter, 'Mannjafnaðr: A Study of Normativity, Transgression, and Social Pragmatism in Medieval Scandinavia' (PhD, University of Aberdeen, 2018); Keith Ruiter, 'A Deviant Word Hoard: A Preliminary Study of Non-Normative Terms in Early Medieval Scandinavia', in *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, Beyond Medieval Europe (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

²³ *Grágás* K §86.

(It is said that the man that has been wounded has the right to, if he wants, to avenge himself up to the time of the *Allþing*, at which point he is expected to bring a case for the injuries, and so it is for all men that has the right to avenge a killing.)

Despite this, while revenge could sometimes be considered unavoidable, the important part was to retaliate in equal measure to regain the balance rather than to escalate the feud. Besides the sagas, this notion is also found in the mid 13th century didactic writing *Konungs skuggsjá* (The King's Mirror) that was originally intended for the sons of king Hákon Hákonarson: 'æf þær sannaz oc kœmr til þin hæfnder firir at vinna þa hæfn mæðr hofi oc sannsyni en æigi mæðr illgiarnligri akefð.'²⁴ (if [rumours of slander] prove true and it comes to you to avenge it, then take revenge with moderation and equity, but not with ill-willed vehemence.) In turn, as Miller has stated, an unbalanced vengeance was not a feud but rather war or chaos.²⁵ In the case of the Old Norse blood feuds there were also other rules, like the ones that regulated who were viable targets of this vengeance despite their kinship to the warring *ætt*. Only men of a certain age seem to have been acceptable targets of vengeance, as boys that were younger than sixteen years old were not properly regarded as adults by law.²⁶ These boys, as well as old and otherwise frail men, do not seem to have been appropriate targets of vengeance and killing them tended to unbalance and instead increase the intensity of the feud.²⁷ There are exceptional stories of boys younger than sixteen who kill their father's killer to avenge him, as well as old or otherwise physically disabled men who by sheer will or by supernatural means are briefly given the means to enact their desperately needed vengeance.²⁸ When it comes to women, they did generally not participate in the physical aspect of the blood feuds although there are some exceptions.

²⁴ *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, 2 ed., Norrøne tekster, (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institut, 1983); 66. Translation taken from Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 120; See also Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of 'The King's Mirror'* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), 83-4.

²⁵ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 180-5.

²⁶ In *Grágás* K, a man younger than twelve years of age would not be made an outlaw if he were to kill someone, but his kinsman would instead pay the *weregild* (blood money) for the dead man to reach a peaceful settlement. *Grágás* K § 91, *Grágás* K §94.

²⁷ See the burning of young Þórðr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and the threat of killing the two boys in *Færeyinga saga*. While twelve-year-old boys could be considered *þingfærr*, meaning capable of attending the *þing* and participating in the legal procedures, this right did not necessarily extend to cases of homicide nor appointments of *dómr* (court).

²⁸ See the old Hávarðr from *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* who finally is able to avenge his son, and *Brennu-Njáls* 'Ámundi 'the blind''s brief restoration of sight in order to avenge his father. Another case in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is Þórhall Ásgrímsson, whose injury has made his calf swell up 'svá digr ok þrútinn sem konulær' (as thick and swollen as a woman's thigh), and who is unable to walk until he stabs the effeminising wound with his spear and then is physically able to run out to get his vengeance. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 135, 145.

The whetting's place within the narrative

A considerable amount of scholarship has been done on the concept of whetting, and then in particular to study the otherwise less involved female character's role.²⁹ As previously mentioned in this chapter, the whetting scene has been argued to be more a fictional trope than a proper portrayal of the perceived past, and something that could have been used to put the blame of actions done by others on those who egged them on, aided by the distance in time and sometimes geographical space.³⁰ The typical whetting scene then functions, either based on real experience or intentionally constructed, as an explanation as to why one or more men choose retribution and possibly the escalation of a conflict, despite both the character and the reader knowing the likely outcome of this action. This deadly outcome is portrayed as either an unnecessary or fated tragedy where peace and balance must be restored with the meeting of men at the civilised *þing*.³¹

What counts as whetting?

As stated in the introduction, the concept of whetting that will be focused on in this thesis is defined as the action in the sagas where one individual incites someone else into doing as they wish against the subject's better judgement, based on the outside threat of societal emasculation and damage of reputation. The centre of critical analysis has tended to be on the fully staged whetting type-scene or ritual in the sagas that follows this setup: after the depiction of a brewing conflict or ongoing feud between two sides, one or multiple individuals from an *ætt* experiences a dishonour or violent action caused by the other side that cannot be ignored without the person and their *ætt* losing honour. For some reason, one man or more of the *ætt* do not attempt to avenge the offence. This is presented as being due to personal relations, cowardice, moral

²⁹ In turn, F. Regina Psaki has noted how modern scholarship has made a cliché of cold woman's counsel in the sagas in F. Regina Psaki, 'Women's Counsel in the Riddarasögur: The Case of *Parcevals saga*', in *Cold Counsel*, 201.

³⁰ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 191.

³¹ In comparison to the *Íslendingasögur*, there are far fewer cases of whetting in the contemporary sagas, and feuds are instigated in different yet also similar ways. See Clark's chapter dedicated to women and revenge in *Sturlunga saga* in Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 143-63.

qualms, or religion-based opposition.³² Displeased with the man's reserve, the whetter addresses it directly and then frequently with other witnesses to increase the pressure upon the whettee. The verbal component of the whetting brings up the shame brought upon him and his *ætt* caused by the opposite side, as well as the further shame that will be brought upon him by not standing up to avenge this insult. A personal attack is often also included, based on how his inactivity will, if it has not already, make him be viewed as more dishonourable and *ódrengiligr* (unmanly).

While this genre-specific type-scene has been given much attention due to its unique setup, the fully staged and female-driven whetting type-scene has become as much of, if not more of, a trope within the criticism as within the sagas themselves.³³ Even in the more recent works that look into the topic of masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*, there has been a lack of attention to the man who whets, and what it means for his masculinity and overall reception by his surroundings.³⁴ Despite the focus on the formulaic and fully acted out type-scene, frequently the saga will only briefly state that one character has whet another by using the verbs *hvöt*, *eggja*, or *frýja*, followed by the whettee responding to this with either getting vengeance or by rejecting rejecting said whetting. For example, in *Kórmaks saga* it is only said that the father Þorkell befriends two brothers and then whets them in order to have them put a stop to Kormákr's unwanted advances towards his daughter: 'Þorkell gerir sér dátt við þá bræðr ok eggjar þá at sitja fyrir Kormáki.'³⁵ (Þorkell befriends the brothers and whets them into ambushing Kormákr.) While neither Þorkell's concrete words or actions are stated, nor the brothers' reaction, it is still shown to be successful. While the men may have been influenced by their friendship, the word use *eggjar* still suggests a specific sense of pressure in order to force Þorkell's will through. While extending the regard of whetting beyond the fully played out type-scenes opens up for some potential difficulties

³² A great unbalance in physical prowess or one's inferior number of followers can also be reasons to hesitate, although a blood feud between two sides is by its nature not unbalanced by power or social status.

³³ The major works that have been on the topic of whetting have been primarily brought up in the context of explaining the blood feuds in the sagas, such as the works of William Ian Miller, as well as the critical work of discovering and explaining the position of women in the Old Norse culture, such as Judith Jesch and Jenny Jochens. Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England'; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*; See also Carol J. Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', in *Cold Counsel*; Carolyn Anderson, 'No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal's Saga', *Philological Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2002); Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*.

³⁴ While Evans brings up the fact that men can be a whetter, the question of exactly what this means for the male whetter's masculinity, nor the prevalence of the male whetter is not discussed. Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 45-6.

³⁵ *Kórmaks saga*, ÍF 8, ch. 5.

regarding ambiguously adjacent speech-acts, it also shows that male whetting may be more frequent and occasionally less typically feminine than it tends to be perceived. Additionally, it shows that some men were shown to be able to whet without necessarily dishonouring themselves within the right context and when the right expectations are met.

A weapon not limited by class? Servants who whet

Despite certain actions being whetting-adjacent, the most distinctive difference between whetting and other abilities and displays of influence that the individual must possess, such as counsel giving, the influence based on the person's own social status, martial skills or the knowledge and power of magic, is that whetting is an *external* form of influence driven by men's dependency of honour as a social currency. Therefore, the whetter does not need to possess any special skills, nor do they have to be of a particular status nor gender. This presents whetting as a unique tool for those with very limited freedom of action and otherwise very limited influence within the society portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*. This action is used by a character to get their will across, and then most often by those who do not belong in the able bodied, influential male sphere, be it women, disabled or aged men, or similar, often powerless groups.

Of these otherwise less influential groups there are servants of the men who tend to otherwise be in full control of their lives, but who through whetting and the external influence it is based on, get to pressure these men into doing a possibly deadly action. One such example is found in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, when the *griðkona* (housemaid) rushes in the door to whet Hrafnkell into taking vengeance on those who have previously disgraced him:

Konan tók til orða, er hon kom inn: 'Satt er flest þat, er fornkveðit er, at svá ergist hverr sem eldist. Verðr sú lítil virðing, sem snemma leggst á, ef maðr lætr síðan sjálfr af með ósóma ok hefir eigi traust til at reka þess réttar nökkurt sinni, ok eru slík mikil undr um þann mann, sem hraustr hefir verit.' Lætr griðkonan ganga af kappi.³⁶

(The woman spoke up as she walked in: 'The old saying is often true, that everyone becomes wretched as one ages. Little value is given to the honour that was earned early, if a man later lets himself be disgraced and have no courage to get justice, and it is a great wonder for a man who previously has been so tough.' The servant women kept at it.)

³⁶ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ÍF 11, ch. 8.

The nameless *griðkona* appears only in this scene to whet Hrafnkell, and soon enough he is on his way, but not before he chastises her for her lack of consideration for his wellbeing and has her help him collect his allies: ‘kann vera, at þú hjalir helzti margt satt – eigi fyrir því, at þér gangi gott til.’ (‘It may be that you are right, even if you do not say it out of goodness.’)³⁷ On this instance, Forrest S. Scott has argued that while women might have felt a responsibility as guardians of honour, this specific case might be more motivated by her own social class rather than her gender.³⁸ While many of the cases of servant whetters are female, male servants are also shown to speak up in tense situations.’³⁹

Considering that sagas mostly describe the lives of the wealthier families in Iceland, it was their wealthy and influential descendants who had the stories of their ancestors written down and preserved in the 13th century. The characters that are named and followed in the narrative are either in position of relative wealth or deal with others who do. Servile characters are never the prevalent characters in the sagas, and there are few times that their emotions and intentions are displayed.⁴⁰ These few times where they are given this focus, and occasionally shown to act based on their own will, it is to explain an action which in turn will have consequences for the free characters. However, while they are rarely given depth, be it personal motivations, kinship mentions or even names, the slaves and servants can at times be given the unique role as a mouthpiece of public opinion, or even whet. This is particularly the case for servile women. Despite the difference in class, the master's control over them in other respects, and the fact that these women are clearly insulting their masters, this does not seem to be punished, and at best the men come with a short rebuttal before finally doing what they were egged into doing. This lack of repercussions too can be a sign of how unrealistic these scenes

³⁷ Some other examples of whetting servants include two servile women in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, as well as in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gunnars þáttur Þiðrandabana*. Also of note is how frequent this scene takes place with the servant standing in the doorway or otherwise has just entered a room. This could possibly refer to them either nearing or crossing the border between the masculine and feminine sphere. See also Anna Katharina Heiniger, ‘On the Threshold: The Liminality of Doorways’, in *Paranormal Encounters*.

³⁸ Forrest S. Scott, ‘The Woman Who Knows: Female characters of Eyrbyggja Saga’, *Parergon* 3, no. 1 (1985), 79.

³⁹ There are also several non-whetting cases where slaves, *húsmenn* and other kinds of servants are shown to talk back to both their owners and other free men, where they either might be threatened in return, or get away with it. See for example the *húsmaðr* in *Hænsa-Póris saga*. There are also male servants who comment on the current situation, especially if they are pulled into feuds such as the servants ordered into killing someone else's servants, such as in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

⁴⁰ Some outstanding displays of personalities here being named servile characters like Melkorka from *Laxdæla saga*, Yngvildr *fagrinn* from *Svarfdæla saga*, and Gilli from *Draumr Þórsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*. See also the nonchalant servant girl in *Þórsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*.

are and how these characters could simply be manifestations of the local community's opinions and expectations. Often nameless and without a background, these characters simply appear for the brief scene to take place, only to disappear again afterwards. Their lack of personality and a visible agenda also means that they are also not given much in regard of negative or positive traits. This might further support their role as less of a realised character and more of a plot device, or representative voices of the man's surroundings, whether he likes it or not.⁴¹

A comedic role related to the outspoken slave is that of the satirical 'little man' of low or unremarkable standing, whose taunts towards those in power are softened by humour. This allows them to challenge the position of the powerful men in charge without repercussions. According to E. Paul Durrenberger and Jonathan Wilcox:

The little man's satire of those in power shows the use of humor to decrease the perceived honor of its target. This is centrally achieved through the use of insults, which make a twofold contribution to the stock of honor. The one casting the insult increases his honor-account by his display of wit, while the humor decreases the reputation of the characters he or she verbally attacks.⁴²

This dynamic is most frequently shown in the sagas and *þáttir* centered around Icelanders of low status who travel outside of Iceland and challenge men of higher status with their wit.⁴³ These characters are allowed to offend men of similar and higher standing than themselves and even the Norwegian king with *níð* words, despite the legal gravity of using such offensive taunts against another man. As it is a taunt directed from below and upwards hierarchically, it is similar to how a woman or a servant's whetting would be less punished than the whetting done by a man of equal position to the man

⁴¹ For example, late in *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar* when Egill has grown old and weakened, the house women mock and treat him accordingly. This kind of servile mockery is not only found in the *Íslendingasögur*, and not even only targeting men. In the *fornaldarsaga Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, a group of the slaves mock Hervör by calling her the daughter of the lowest slave (inn versti þræll), aggravating her into going on a viking raid to prove herself. While she behaves and lives in a characteristically masculine way, she too is whetted into action. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, ch. 5; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 65.

⁴² Paul E. Durrenberger and Jonathan Wilcox, 'Humor as a Guide to Social Change: Bandamanna saga and Heroic Values', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (London: Hisarlik, 1992), 117. On the similar trickster type, see for example Anita Sauckel, 'Brennu-Njáls saga: An Old Icelandic Trickster (Discourse)?', in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*. In comparison, there is the continental role of the jester, that also is able to taunt kings without harm. See for example Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴³ See for example the titular Sneglu-Halli from *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*. Grzegorz Bartusik, 'Sarð hann yör þá eigi agði? Humour in the Sneglu-Halla þáttir', *Histories of Laughter and Laughter in History: HistoRisus* (2016), 128.

being whetted.⁴⁴ Arguably, this is also a matter of national pride, with the Icelandic being shown to joke with, but still gain the respect of foreign kings.

While the whetting servile or otherwise ‘little man’ character rarely is negatively presented or punished by the narrative or by their hierarchal superiors for their actions, whetting men and women of higher social status are more often depicted in negative ways. This too can point to the intention behind designating the whetting action to a servant to be more representative of the common people and the social surroundings pushing the man forward than a specific individual’s will. For a comparison on intention and effect, in *Brennu-Njáls saga* after Hrútr has been unsuccessfully sued by his former father-in-law for his inability to consummate his marriage with his daughter, he and his half-brother Hóskuldr witness three children acting out the event with a laughing audience. While Hóskuldr strikes the boy playing Mörðr with a stick to stop the mockery, Hrútr gifts the boy a golden ring and simply tells him to not bother people again. In return the boy says that he will forever speak well of his magnanimity (*drengskapr*).⁴⁵ The children here unintentionally challenge Hrútr’s honour by acting out his disgrace, and their ignorance and innocence is specified in the text: ‘þeir váru málgir mjök, því at þeir váru óvitrir.’ (‘They said much because they did not know any better.’) While this action is not whetting as it lacks both the intention and the verbs connected with the action, the unintentional mockery does both point out the common people’s interest in the situation (Hrútr’s dishonour), as well as the response given by the people watching the children’s game without stopping them (laughter). Like servile people, the children are witnesses of a conflict which they personally have little personal stake in, and their main function is to show the commonly held opinion, and to force a reaction to the dishonour. Seemingly then, a servant or someone else of a lower social standing may avoid the same avarice and repercussions that someone within it may receive. But while they are not there to be punished for their outspokenness that leads their hierarchal superiors to misfortune, they may still share the function with more vilified whetters, namely that of the plot devices and scapegoats.

⁴⁴ Alternatively, it has more to do with when this type of sagas were written, as Bartuzik argues, that the characters being offended in *Sneglu-Halla Þátr* seem to react more in accordance to the newer and more peaceful and Christianity aligned Norwegian landslög Magnúsar lagabætis (1274), Járnsiða (1272-74), and Jónsbók (1281). See Bartusik, ‘Sneglu-Halla þátr’, 128-9.

⁴⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 8.

Plot devices and scapegoats

While some cases of whetting scenes are portrayed with more realism and seemingly fitting more organically together with the rest of the narrative, other examples have a way of appearing as if inserted in-between two scenes to explain the following events that otherwise would be hard to contextualise. As Judith Jesch argues:

In the mindlessly violent world of thirteenth century Iceland, people's concerns and anxieties found literary expression in sagas. Someone had to be blamed and the strong-willed women of the sagas, safely anchored in the Viking past, provided a scapegoat. [...] They were a useful and colourful myth that accounted for the horrors of violence while removing the blame for it from male shoulders.⁴⁶

In a similar vein, Zoe Borovsky has said: 'Both the mythic and saga women can thus be read as screens upon which cultural anxieties – anxieties over a set of values from a heroic past that threaten to disrupt the new 'maleness' and the hero's exploration of what formerly was regarded as effeminate territory – are played out.'⁴⁷ While not necessarily always the saga author's intention, making a whetter a scapegoat would be a way to explain how one's ancestors could do things that clearly oppose the sensibilities and laws of one's own contemporary society. This would vilify another character in the process, but then often someone found guilty of other societal transgressions, or someone otherwise irrelevant to the narrative or to the readers of the 13th century. Of these, there are the one-chapter characters that are introduced with or without name, only to whet a main character of the conflict, and then disappear once more.⁴⁸ Besides servile people, they can also be other kinds of outsiders that still are shown to instigate or fuel great conflicts. One of the more noticeable examples is the Irish Queen Kormloð in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Gormflaith ingen Murchada) who here is made out to be the driving force behind what would become the battle of Clontarf in 1014. In the saga she is portrayed as a previous wife of the high king Brian Boru (Brian Bóruma mac Cennétig), who wants him killed after having been scorned by him.⁴⁹ She is here described as: 'Hon var allra kvenna fegrst ok bezt orðin um allt þat, er henni var

⁴⁶ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 191.

⁴⁷ Zoe Borovsky, "'En hon er blandin mjök': Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature", in *Cold Counsel*, 11.

⁴⁸ These one-chapter whetters can to some extent be compared to the typical one chapter punished challenger stock character that often appear in the sagas. These are usually unruly men, usually non-Icelanders or other outsiders whom the hero faces on his adventures and who challenge his masculinity, honour, and strength. In these cases, these men are killed or badly wounded by the protagonist to prove himself. Like the one-chapter whetters, their introduction seem to be to test the hero's masculinity in some way, either to be proven, or to force him into vengeance. These punished challengers will be studied in more detail in the chapter on physical violence.

⁴⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 154.

ósjálfrátt, en þat er mál manna, at henni hafi allt verit illa gefit, þat er henni sjálfrátt.⁵⁰ (She was a very beautiful woman and her best qualities were in matters outside her own power, but it was commonly said that her character was evil in matters which were within her own power.)⁵¹ This ill will is soon shown, as she strongly whets her son king Sigtryggr silkiskeggi (Silk-Beard) Olafsson (Sitric mac-Aulaffe) of Dublin into taking revenge with the help of Sigurðr jarl of the Orkney and Broðir of Man.⁵² Besides showing up once more to encourage Sigtryggr further, she disappears out of the saga as she has seemingly done her job as the battle commences.

The saga portrayal of her is likely inspired by the older Irish text *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (The War of the Irish with the Foreigners). This text describes the Scandinavian invasions of Ireland in the 10th and 11th century and is written with bias in favour of Brian Bóruma and his clan, while painting the foreign Norsemen as well as the Dubliners in a distinctly negative light.⁵³ This is argued to have been to help consolidate the rule of the Uí Briain.⁵⁴ Interestingly, here it is not Gormflaith's whetting of Sitric that is portrayed, but instead the failed whetting of her brother, Máel Mórda, after he has conceded his vassalage to king Brian Bóruma:

Now, when they arrived at Cenn Coradh, the king took off his tunic, and it was carried to his sister to put a silver button on it, viz., to Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad, Brian's wife; and she was the mother of Donnchadh, son of Brian. The queen took the tunic and cast it into the fire; and she began to reproach and incite her brother, because she thought it ill that he should yield service and vassalage, and suffer oppression from anyone, or yield that which his father or grandfather never yielded; and she said that his [Brian] son would require the same thing from his son.⁵⁵

While she is depicted in both sources as whetting, both the subject of the whetting as well as the outcomes are different. In the adapted *Brennu-Njáls saga*, her anger and following whetting are seemingly depicted as the key reason why Sigtryggr raises an army against Brian Ború, instead of the rising conflict between the two sides. A

⁵⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 154.

⁵¹ 'Njal's Saga', trans. Robert Cook, in *Complete Sagas*, 3:209.

⁵² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 154.

⁵³ For more on *Cogadh Gaedhe re Gallaibh*, see Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Bréifne bias in Cogad Gáedel Re Gallaib', *Ériu* 43 (1992). Poul Holm, 'Between Apathy and Antipathy: the Vikings in Irish and Scandinavian history', *Peritia* 8 (1994); For more on the battle of Clontarf and the people involved from an Old Norse perspective, see William Sayers, 'Clontarf, and the Irish Destinies of Sigurðr Digri, Earl of Orkney, and Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson', *Scandinavian Studies* 63, no. 2 (1991).

⁵⁴ The Uí Briain was a principal lineage of the Dál Cais clan of Munster, being the descendants of Brian Bóruma. Mhaonaigh, 'Bréifne bias', 135.

⁵⁵ Todd, James Henthorn. ed, intro. and trans. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh = The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or, The Invasions of Ireland by the Danes and other Norsemen*. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), ch. 81. p. 143.

woman's scorn being the sole reason for whetting is also rarer in the *Íslendingasögur*'s blood feud stories.⁵⁶ This more personal reasoning can strengthen the scapegoating angle by making it more about the petty revenge of the whetter than the seemingly more righteous goal of regaining man's and his family's honour.

Women are also given the blame for acts of violence done by men in the contemporary *samtíðarsögur*. As David Clark notes: 'misogynistic tropes such as the scapegoating of women for the results of men's violent actions, and negative images possibly resting on religious constructions of women as irrational and corporeal or even abject, are employed in *Sturlunga saga*.'⁵⁷ While more rarely than in the *Íslendingasögur*, women, and in particular those encountered in dreams, are shown as harbingers of death and ruin.⁵⁸ These dream women are not only the messengers of the coming doom, but they may also personify enmity or destruction itself, thus placing some of the blame for the male violence on these women.⁵⁹ While this scapegoating motif is also found in the more contemporary sources, the amount of doom-bringing dream women and other non-identifiable historical women further accentuates its symbolic intent.

Negative symbolism of the cruel female whetter

Together with the whetting and its reactions from the surroundings as well as the author's comments, the sagas often include further details that imply a negative evaluation. For one, there is the recurring symbolism of the feminine coded act of spinning thread and weaving in connection to women's whetting and their manipulation of fate. This symbolism falls into accord with the Old Norse mythological symbolism of the Norns, the three goddesses who decide the life and fate of people.⁶⁰ When women are shown to be spinning or weaving thread during conflicts caused by whetting, it can

⁵⁶ While there are cases of women taking revenge on men who divorce them, this is usually the case when the divorce has been a particularly dishonouring one, such as Auðr's accusation of wearing trousers, as well as Þuríðr stealing her leaving husband Geirmundr's beloved sword and switching it out with their infant daughter to emasculate him. Both of these examples are from the mid 13th century *Laxdæla saga*, and these kind of women's 'revenge fantasies' are otherwise rarely depicted in the sagas. *Laxdæla saga*. ÍF 5, ch. 30, 35.

⁵⁷ Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 162.

⁵⁸ For example, in *Íslendinga saga*, there is the motif of the evil-looking dream woman who announces war. Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 154; In comparison, see the evil dream woman in *Gísla saga*. See also P. S. Langeslag, 'The Dream Women of "Gísla saga"', *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 1 (2009).

⁵⁹ Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 155-6.

⁶⁰ Else Mundal, 'Symbol og symbolhandlingar i sagalitteraturen', in *Middelalderens symboler*, ed. Ann Christensson, et al., (Bergen: Senter for Europeiske Kulturstudier, 1997), 67.

strengthen the impression of them having influenced the situation and its outcome.⁶¹

One particularly gruesome example is one shown in *Brennu-Njáls saga* where a group of mythological women, valkyries, are described as weaving with the body parts and intestines of men as the bloody battle of Clontarf takes place:

‘[...] þar váru konur inni ok höfðu vef upp færðan. Mannahöfuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mönnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en ör fyrir hræl.’⁶²

([...] women were inside there and they had set up a loom with the heads of men as weights, with men’s intestines as weft and warp. A sword was used as sword beater, and an arrow as pin beater.⁶³

The valkyries, like the Norns, are here quite literally working with the lives of men in their hands, and with the weapons-made-tools they control the war on the battlefield. For a less mythological depiction, there is *Laxdæla saga*’s heroine Guðrún’s spinning of thread after she whets her husband Bolli into killing Kjartan, her previous flame. As Bolli returns to her after the deed is done, she says: ‘Misjöfn verða morginverkin; ek hefi spunnit tólf álna garn, en þú hefir vegit Kjartan.’⁶⁴ (Our works of the morning have been different; I have spun twelve ells yarn, and you have killed Kjartan.)⁶⁵ This comment has different interpretations. As Ólafur Halldórsson has pointed out, twelve ells of yarn is the given price in *Grágás* for a burial place, which if intended, would then refer once more to Guðrún’s part in Kjartan’s death. There is also the discussion as to whether Guðrún means to say that she has spun twelve ells of yarn, which would not be considered a big feat by itself, or spun yarn enough for twelve ells of a woven fabric, which would be a significantly more.⁶⁶ Beyond these different potential meanings, What is likely however is as Else Mundal states that:

⁶¹ Karen Bek-Pedersen, ‘Fate and Weaving: Justification of a Metaphor’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009).

⁶² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157.

⁶³ Another connection to the playing with guts as thread is the scene that takes right after the battle, where the defeated viking Bródir is forced to walk around an oak tree with his unwound intestines.

⁶⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 49.

⁶⁵ For a more in-depth analysis on the meaning of the term *morginverkin* and what it means for Guðrún’s intentions on the killing, see Jonna Louis-Jensen, ‘A Good Day’s Work: Laxdæla saga, ch. 49’, *North-Western Language Evolution* 21-22, no. 1 (1993); Mundal, ‘Symbol og symbolhandlingar’, 67.

⁶⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson argues for her to have only spun twelve ells of yarn to mean that the fight has left her unable to work properly, which would support her statement of the different qualities of her and Bolli’s work. While agreeing to this suggestion, Mundal also proposes the alternative that it is intended to be the rather impossible feat of spinning yarn enough for twelve ells of a woven fabric, where her message would instead be that while they have both accomplished impressive feats (spinning a great amount of yarn and killing Kjartan), they are still strictly different in what they can accomplish, and Guðrún must thus still undermine her own impressive feats. Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘Tólf álna garn’, *Festskrift til Ludvig Holm-Olsen på hans 70-årsdag den 9. juni 1984*, eds. Einar Lundeby and Bjarne Fidjestøl, (Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1984); Mundal, ‘Symbol og symbolhandlingar’, 66.

The rather realistic textual element of yarn is here made into a symbolic reference to the myth of the spinning Norns. The author has very likely intentionally and artistically given this scene a mythical association. This we can see by how he also holds onto the allusion of the Norns, thread, and loom when he paints a picture of Guðrún's role in the murders later in the saga that stand in a causal relation to the killing of Kjartan.⁶⁷

This connection of female-assigned activity of spinning and weaving with whetting further points towards the woman's control and manipulation over the situation, and thus more responsibility for the death caused by the whetting. It may also to a greater degree point towards the woman's individual control and involvement in the case, as opposed to the possibly more 'honour-led' whetting. While in the case of the valkyries it appears to be a more gruesome yet mythical action, a woman treating the lives and deaths of men like thread to be spun and cut is more callous yet realistic. Additionally, there is also the instance of Guðrún's enigmatic smile after Bolli's killer dries Bolli's blood off his weapon with her shawl, and how he himself believes her to be the death of him. This scene is peculiar, as it can be discussed whether it is intended to make her look like someone who smiles in defiance despite her loss, or is it the look of someone already planning her revenge that will not come into fruition for over a decade. A similarly torn sign of joy can be found after Þjóstolfr, Hallgerðr's foster father, kills her second husband Glúmr who had hit her, despite her pleading not to kill him, and how she is now said to laugh despite her previous grief.⁶⁸ Savagely, and likely with only revenge on her mind, she then says 'Eigi ert þú engi í leikinum', (You are certainly playing along) to Þjóstolfr, before sending him off to get killed by her father.⁶⁹

When whetting fails

Despite the challenging words and pressure put upon the whetted man, there are times in the sagas where the incitement falls on deaf ears. Depending on the situation and the saga author's personal view on whetting, this is presented as either a positive thing, or as a sign of cowardice. In turn, the whetting can be presented as something unnecessary and foolish.⁷⁰ For the longest time both Gunnar and Njál from *Brennu-Njáls saga* are

⁶⁷ 'Det i og for seg realistiske tekstelementet garn får her tilført seg eit symbolinnhald frå myten om dei spinnande nornene. Forfatteren har ganske sikkert lagt denne scena under eit mystisk overlys med fullt medvit og eit kunstnarleg siktemål. Det kan vi sjå av at han held fast på allusjonen til nornene, garn og vev også når han gjev eit bilete av Gudrun si rolle ved dei drapa seinare i saga som står i eit kausalt forhold til drapet på Kjartan.' My translation. Mundal, 'Symbol og symbolhandlingar', 68.

⁶⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 16, 17.

⁶⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 17.

⁷⁰ Examples of more whetting negative sagas are for example *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which has several depictions of whetting, all of them being portrayed as negative actions that cause negative outcomes.

able to keep the peace between their two *ættir* thanks to their friendship and reason, despite the increasing pressure from their wives and kinsmen. The first time that Hallgerðr whets Gunnar into responding to Bergþóra's lack of hospitality and taunts against her, he explains his resistance:

‘Heim mun ek fara, ok er þat makligast, at þú sennir við heimamenn þína, en eigi í annarra manna híbýlum, enda á ek Njáli marga sæmð at launa, ok mu nek ekki vera eggjanarfífl þitt.’⁷¹

(‘I want to go home now, and it would be better if you squabbled with your own housemen and not in someone else's house. I have many favours to thank Njáll for, and I will not be the fool of your whetting.’)

As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has pointed out, Gunnarr's negative reaction here seems to be because the whetting is manipulation done to serve Hallgerðr's personal agenda.⁷² Hallgerðr tries to push Gunnar into upholding *her* honour, something that is in conflict with his own goal to keep the peace with his friend and ally Njáll.⁷³ This is not the only instance in the saga where Hallgerðr and her rival Bergþóra are scrutinised for their perceived egoistical whetting, and as previously shown, their constant scheming is constantly being commented upon by the men around them, even if it still works in most of the cases.⁷⁴

Additionally, the term *eggjanarfífl* that refers to the mindless cooperation that is here looked down upon, suggests that there is some sense of acknowledgement of the force egging has on men, particularly towards the senseless. This term, a combination of *eggjanar* (whetting's) and *fífl* (fool), stands in contrast to the ideal image of the man dedicated to his honour. The word itself only appears in the previously presented example in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, as well as one appearance in the contemporary saga *Sturlu saga*.⁷⁵ While rare, the term being used in younger sagas may suggest a more contemporary view of those who are driven to violence by whetting.

⁷¹ *Eggjanarfífl* is by Fritzner translated as ‘enfoldigt Menneske, som andre (e-s) kan faa til at gjære hvad de ville.’ (A simple-minded person that someone else can make do their bidding.); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 35.

⁷² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse literature*, 21.

⁷³ Friendship here possibly both meaning the modern-day concept of friendship, and the Old Norse political one. See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den vennlige vikingen. Vennskapets makt i Norge og på Island ca. 900-1300*.

⁷⁴ In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, there is also Skarpheðinn who taunts Snorri for not avenging his father's murder. Despite this attack to his honour, Snorri simply answers: ‘Many before have said this[...] and I shall not be angered by it.’) *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 139. This taunt is also used against him to no success by Boddi in *Ölkofra þáttur*, ch. 3.

⁷⁵ *Sturlu saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, vol. 1, ch. 20.

There are also what one might call quasi-whettings, where insults have not been directed towards the men as they are said indirectly or to someone else but within earshot of the proper target of whetting. This kind of quasi-whetting may be ignored more easily by the target by pretending not to hear it but is shown to succeed in the case of the *gríðkona* in *Eyrbyggja saga* when she praises the enemy within the proximity of the men.⁷⁶ Finally, sometimes when an attempt at whetting fails this is due to the whetter only whetting verbally, as these attempts are simply ignored by the target: ‘Hon geisaði mjök. Gunnar gaf eigi gaum at því.’ (She raged greatly. Gunnar paid no attention to it.)⁷⁷

Additional elements of whetting

In the cases of whetting where the verbal whetting alone is not enough, there are additional aspects or ‘tools’ used to further rile up the one being whetted.⁷⁸ For one, there is the matter of murder weapons. In *Gísla saga Súrsonnar* the spear *Grásiða* (Greyflank) is used to avenge the previous murder that it was used for:

Auðr vaknar við ok kallar á Þórð hinn huglausa ok biðr hann taka vápnit ór undinni. Þat var þá mælt at sá væri skyldr at hefna, er vápni kipði ór sári; en þa váru kölluð launvíg en eigi morð er menn létu vápn eptir í beninni standa. Þórðr var svá líkblauðr maðr, at hann þorði hvergi í nánd að koma. Gísli kom þá inn ok sá hver efni í váru ok bað Þórð vera kyrran. Hann tók síálfr spiótit ór sárinu ok kastaði alblóðugu í örk eina ok lét engan mann sjá.[...]

(Auðr woke up from this and called upon Þórð the Cowardly and told him to remove the spear from [her brother Vésteinn’s] wound. It was said that the one that pulled out the weapon from the wound was bound to avenge it, and that was called a secret manslaughter and not murder when men let the weapon remain in the wound. Þórðr was so scared of corpses that he did not dare come near it. Gísli then came inside and saw what was happening and told Þórðr to be calm. He himself took the spear out of the wound and threw it, still all bloodied, into a chest and let no man see it[...])⁷⁹

This rule about the murder weapon is not mentioned in the later written laws such as *Grágás* or the *Gulapingslög*, but similar notions are found in *Brennu-Njáls saga* and the *konungasaga Ólaf saga ins helga*.⁸⁰ Besides being the murder weapon, these weapons

⁷⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 44.

⁷⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 37.

⁷⁸ One of the more known and detailed cases is in the *Konungasaga Óláfs saga ins helga* (The saga of Saint Óláfr) in *Heimskringla* where Þórir hundr (Dog) is handed the bloody spear that was used to kill his nephew Asbjörn selsbani, given by Asbjörn’s mother, Sigríðr. *Óláfs saga ins helga*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 2 ed., Heimskringla, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1965), 123.

⁷⁹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 13.

⁸⁰ Gunnarr’s mother Rannveig refuses to bury the *atgeirr* (type of spear) that killed him and forbids anyone from touching it as it hangs on the wall, unless they intend to avenge him with it. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 78; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga ins helga*, ch. 132.

are also the bloodied tokens of the crime. The saga motif of the bloodied token has been used to discuss the legitimacy of whetting, where it could be part of a performed ritual of lamentation more than merely a piece of fiction.⁸¹ The addition of a bloodied token together with the whetting is here presented as a legal ritual that functioned to gather together the kin group to exact a revenge.⁸² In some cases the verbal component of whetting alone misfires, and it is only with the addition of a bloodied token that the whetting succeeds. In a previous scene after the murder of her husband Höskuldr, Hildigunnr is seen carefully drying his blood off with the cape, before neatly folding it and leaving it in a chest until she brings it out for the whetting.⁸³ Here she throws the cloak over her whettee's shoulders so pieces of dried blood shower down all over him, saying: 'Þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi, Höskuldi, ok gef ek þér nu aptr. Var hann ok í þessi veginn.'⁸⁴ ('This cloak is the one you gave Höskuldr, Flosi, and now I give it back to you. It is the cloak he wore when he was killed.') An even more visceral example is found in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here the widow Þorgerðr, after failing to whet on her relatives into avenging her husband, is advised to dig up his head to carry while whetting them into supporting his case. By getting this physical and bloodied proof of his murder, she is able to whet the family into action.⁸⁵ The power of blood is also acknowledged in *Laxdæla saga* after Helgi Harðbeinsson wipes Bolli's blood off his spear with Guðrún's sash.⁸⁶

Another additional tool to guarantee a successful whetting seems to be bringing the whettees to specific locations. The location must be connected to the action that needs to be avenged somehow, either by being the place of a murder, the place of a bloodied token, or in the case of *Laxdæla saga*, the home of the murderer. Dissatisfied by her other sons' inaction following Kjartan's death, Þorgerðr tricks them into joining

⁸¹ William Ian Miller, 'Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* (1986); Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament.'

⁸² Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger', 175, 185.

⁸³: 'Hon tók skikkjuna ok þerrði þar með blóðit allt ok vafði þar i blóðlifrarnar ok braut svá saman skikkjuna ok lagði í kistu sína.' (She took the cape and dried off all the blood with it, and put the clotted blood inside it, folded it together and put it in her chest.) *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 112. See also Guðrún after Bolli's death. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 55.

⁸⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 116.

⁸⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, IF 4, ch. 27; Hallgerðr attempts the same in *Brennu-Njáls saga* when Gunnarr's relative Sigmundr is beheaded, but when the servant does not dare to bring it back her whetting with words alone fails. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 45.

Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 210-11.

⁸⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 55.

her on a fake trip to her kinswoman, only to instead bring them directly to the murderer's homestead:

Fara nú, til þess er þau koma fyrir bæinn í Sæliegsdalstungu. Þá sneri Þorgerðr hestinum upp at bænum ok spurði: 'Hvat heitir bær sjá?' Halldórr svarar: 'Þess spyr þú eigi af því, móðir, at eigi vitir þú áðr; sjá bær heitir í Tungu.' 'Hverr býr hér?' segir hon. Hann svarar: 'Veiztu þat, móðir.' Þá segir Þorgerðr ok blés við: 'Veit ek at vísu', segir hon, 'at hér býr Bolli, bróðurbani yðvarr [...]',⁸⁷

(They now travelled until they arrived outside the homestead in Sælingsdalstungu. Then Þorgerðr turned the horse around towards the farm and asked: 'What is the name of this farm?' Halldor answered: 'You are not asking this because you do not know, mother. This farm is called Tungu.' 'Who lives here?' she says. He answers: 'You know this, mother.' Then Þorgerðr said, and sighed deeply: 'I do indeed know', she says, 'that Bolli lives here, your brother-slayer.'))

Without a bloody token but with enough will to bring her sons there, Þorgerðr successfully whets the sons into action, and soon Bolli is killed.⁸⁸

From these examples we can see that other physical components were sometimes necessary to force a successful whetting. The question is then if the added components affect the depiction of these whetters. In one way, these scenes are more elaborate and often give more insight into the whetter's reasoning and intention, which might give them some sympathy or make their actions seem more righteous. While gruesome, the scene of Þorgerðr carrying around her husband's head is both pitiful and admirable due to the dedication and sense of honour displayed, and she is not judged negatively for it. It could possibly be further excused as it is her relative's idea, and not her own, and arguably it is less severe as she primarily wishes for legal retribution from the killers, not their deaths. Instead it is rather her relatives with convenient excuses to not raise a case against Snorri whose depictions are less favourable. In contrast, whettings with bloodied remains such as Hildigunnr or Guðrún seem very calculated and forceful, seemingly demonstrably so with the verbal acknowledgement of the future victim of whetting in Guðrún's case, and Hildigunnr knowingly going through each whetting action as if following a list. Using additional components of whetting will perhaps not by itself incriminate the whetter, but the way this action is used further proves how determined they are on retribution while disregarding the repercussions and the whettee's resistance. Another detail that also sticks out is how the use of additional components of whetting seems to be something that primarily women are shown to use

⁸⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 53.

⁸⁸ In *Gísli saga Súrsonnar* Þordís leads her husband and her brother Þorkell to the burial hill of her previous husband to reveal that Gísli is his murderer. This location is more poignant as it is where Gísli had covertly confessed his murder in a poem. *Gísli saga*, ch. 19.

in their whetting. While this may be because women are depicted to whet in greater detail such as the more structured lamentation scene, this still gives the impression of female whetters being both more likely to go further to see to that their vengeance is executed, and that their whetting as a cause of this may be regarded more negatively. In this next section, I will look further into the gendered cases of whetting, how they differ between the genders and how they may differ within the genders.

Female whetters

The female whetter role is perhaps the most prevalent and the most noticeable female role in the *Íslendingasögur*. The female whetter, when characterised at all, regularly takes the form of a cold-hearted woman who prioritises honour before the well-being of her husband and male relatives. Previously in this chapter the idea of the whetter role as a plot device has been discussed, and how these female whetters, servants, or women of a higher social standing, may appear in the saga just to incite men into action before disappearing out of the story. A recurring view of women's petty and hostile nature is voiced by Skarpheðinn in *Brennu-Njáls saga*: 'Ekki höfu vér kvenna skap ... at vér reiðimsk við öllu.'⁸⁹ (We have not been made like women, that we become furious over everything). Similarly, a lack of loyalty is also brought up as women are said to have their hearts shaped on turning wheels, and thus filled with treachery both in *Hávamál* (stanza 84), and in *Fóstbræðra saga*.⁹⁰ With this in mind, this section will look at some cases of female whetting and how they are depicted. Here the whetters are categorised by their social status and ties to the one being whetted, namely the ties of matrimony, and the familiar ties of mothers and sisters. This sorting has been chosen because of the importance of relations, status, and loyalty when it comes to the motivation to whet, as well as how this affects the reaction of their whetting.

⁸⁹ Arguably, this line is ironically intended by the author considering Skarpheðinn's own anger. However, I find it hard to count it as simply so considering similar perceptions of this specifically deadly feminine fury.

Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 44.

⁹⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Hávamál* (GEC Gads forlag, 1924) st. 84; *Fóstbræðra saga*, ÍF 6, ch. 21.

Women and loyalty

The whetting housewife is the most common female whetter type within the *Íslendingasögur*, as well as being the kind most frequently depicted as both mercurial and callous. In the article ‘Köld eru kvenna ráð’, Mundal looks into the frequent characterisation of women within the sagas as unreliable and cold-hearted, and argues that this may be the result of women being connected to two *ættir* through family and marriage.⁹¹ Mundal points out how, by being tied to two different families that may risk having opposing interests, the woman will be forced to take sides and thus be hit harder emotionally by these feuds, all the while this struggle is being described by men who only see the lack of loyalty to the ‘right’ side, which is often dependent on the specific saga and its author. This is further complicated by the sheer importance of this loyalty. As women rarely are shown to personally attempt to re-establish their honour through physical violence, their own honour as well as the one connected to their families are dependent on their husbands and male relatives doing this in their stead.⁹² This in turn can explain the position women are regularly given as the moral guardian of a family’s honour. While this in some cases seem to excuse her dishonourable words and intentions, this is frequently not the case.

A clear example of this dual loyalty dilemma is *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Þórdís Súrsdóttir, after her brother’s murder of her husband Þórgrímr, has to choose between siding with her husband or brother. At first, she sides with her dead husband by whetting her second husband (and Þórgrímr’s brother) Bórkr into avenging the murder. Gísli regards this as a betrayal, and compares her lacking sisterly love to that of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir from the heroic cycle, who caused the death of her husband, his men, as well as their two sons in revenge for her two brothers’ murders.⁹³ While Þórdís’ issue of conflicting loyalties is apparent in the saga, she is shown little sympathy and Gísli voices his offence by her betrayal:

‘Ok þóttumk ek eigi þess verðr frá henni, því at ek þykkiumk þat lýst hafa nökkurum sinnum, at mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en síálfs míns; hefi ek stundum lagt líf mitt í háska fyrir hennar sakir, en hon hefir nú gefit mér dauðaráð.’⁹⁴

⁹¹ Else Mundal, ‘Köld eru kvenna ráð’, in *Kvinner og bók: festskrift til Ellisiv Steen på hennes 70-årsdag 4. februar 1978* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978).

⁹² As seen in the example of the divorced Auðr in *Laxdæla saga*, a woman may however wish to avenge the dishonour done to her through physical violence. More on her in the chapter on physical violence. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35.

⁹³ *Gísla saga*, ch. 19.

⁹⁴ On Gísli’s indignation and his relationship with Þórdís, see Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: the Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), 67-8. *Gísla saga*, ch. 19.

(‘And I do not think that I deserve this from her, as I think that it has struck me sometimes that I have not thought better of disgraces towards her than towards myself. At times I have risked my life for her sake, and now she will have me killed by her counsel.’)

Despite her role in Gísli’s death she still voices her grief, and after trying but failing to kill Eyjólfur to avenge Gísli, she divorces Þórkr and seemingly reaches the ‘right’ solution this specific saga presents.⁹⁵

While a wife’s loyalty to her husband is occasionally depicted as above that of her kin, particularly in later sagas more influenced by the Christian there are still several cases of wives prioritising the wishes of their fathers and brothers also after they have been married, including being willing to divorce their husband on the request of their father if the husband’s political alliance is lacking.⁹⁶ Despite this seemingly serious breach of loyalty, this is not necessarily portrayed negatively, as their role within the saga is limited to being a bargaining chip between two men. These differing opinions on whether a wife’s loyalties should be towards her husband and his family, or her family connected by blood once more show the tension between the perceived views depicted and the contemporary society of the author, and how this again can manifest in negative depictions.

An especially vicious example of a wife whetting is shown in *Grænlendinga saga*, where Freyðís Eiríksdóttir, sister of Leifr Eiríksson, travels to Vinland with her husband Þorvalður. After clashing with two brothers who led parts of the venture, she creates a plan to have them killed. To set the scene, she walks barefoot over to the two brothers’ house, giving her cold feet and a dishevelled appearance, only to then lie to her husband that the brothers have struck her and handled her roughly, and then she, aided by this lie, whets him into killing them:

Hon stígr upp í rúmit koldum fótum, ok vaknar hann Þorvarður við ok spyrr, hví at hon væri svá köld ok vát; hon svarar með miklum þjósti: ‘Ek var gengin’, segir hon, ‘til þeira bræðra at fara skip at þeim, ok vilda ek kaupa meira skip; en þeir urðu við þat svá illa, at þeir þorðu mik ok léku sárliga; en þú, vesall maður, munt hvárki vilja reka minnar skammar né þinnar, ok mun ek þat nú finna, at ek em í brottu af Grænlandi, ok mun ek gera skilnað via þik, útan þú hefnir þessa.’ Ok nú stózk hann eigi átölur hennar ok bað menn upp standa sem skjótast ok taka vápn sín, ok svá gera þeir ok fara þegar til skála þeira bræðra ok gengu inn at þeim sofðum ok tóku þá ok færðu í bænd ok leiddu svá út hvern, sem bundinn var; en Freyðís lét drepa hvern, sem út kom.⁹⁷

(She climbed up into the bed and awakened Þorvalður with her cold feet who asks why she was so cold and wet. She answers with great fury: ‘I went to the brothers’, she said, ‘to try to buy their

⁹⁵ ‘Gráta mun ek Gísla bróður minn’, (‘I want to mourn my brother Gísli.’) *Gísla saga*, ch. 37.

⁹⁶ For example, see Þorkatla and Mörðr in *Brennu-Njáls saga* ch. 135.

⁹⁷ *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 7.

ship, for I wish to have a larger ship, but they took it so badly that they struck me and handled me very roughly; but you, poor little wretch, will neither avenge my shame nor your own, and I can see that I am no longer in Greenland, and I shall divorce you, if you do not avenge this. And now he could stand her taunts no longer, and ordered the men to rise at once, and take their weapons, and this they did, and they then went directly to the house of the brothers, and entered it while the folk were asleep, and seized and bound them, and led each one out when he was bound; and as they came out, Freyðís caused each one to be slain.)

This example is not only unique in its level of cold calculation and callousness presented before and after the action, but also in how meticulously she does it. Her making herself appear to be a victim of abuse as a part of her whetting stands out within the saga context.⁹⁸ This could perhaps be categorised as a physical additional component of whetting that was mentioned earlier, where she as a component of the whetting makes herself the physical, albeit not bloodied, dishonoured body that must be avenged.⁹⁹ Freyðís' motivation to accuse the brothers out of some form of hatred or greed despite the brothers' helpfulness towards her on their journey.¹⁰⁰ Instead of the trope of a scorned and hateful would-be lover, she is shown as a cold-blooded murderer and opportunist who does not care for the Old Norse ideals of honour and diplomacy by her hidden deceit, nor of the later Christian ideals of mercy.

Another case here of the dominant and evilly depicted wife who is left unchecked is the infamous Queen Gunnhildr in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, wife of king Eiríkr blóðöx. While she is featured in several *Íslendingasögur*, the *konungasögur*, and other Old Norse sources with certain differences, her general characterisation is that of the ruthless and easily offended ruler who is quick to lash out towards the Icelanders that displease her by killing her men or refusing her offers. While her authority and influence are often her own, in sagas like *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* she is still shown to whet on her husband at multiple occasions when she wants him have Egill killed:

Gunnhildr mælti: 'Hví skal eigi þegar drepa Egil, eða mantu eigi nú, konungr, hvat Egill hefir gört, drepit vini þína ok frændr ok þar á ofan son þinn, en nít sjálfan þik; eða hvar vita men skíku bellt við konungmann?'¹⁰¹

(Then Gunnhildr said: 'Why shall you not kill Egill at once? Or have you forgotten, king, what Egill has done: killed your friends and kin, even your own son, and disgraced even you. And where were there ever known to be such offences done towards a king?')

⁹⁸ For more on depictions of false accusation of rape in Medieval texts, see Elizabeth Harper, 'Teaching the Potiphar's Wife Motif in Marie de France's *Lanval*', in *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom* (ARC, Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

⁹⁹ For more on sexual assault, see chapter 3.

¹⁰⁰ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958.)

¹⁰¹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF 2, ch. 33.

She continues, telling him to have Egill killed, whereupon Egill's dependable friend Arinbjörn retorts: 'Eigi mun konungr láta at eggjask um öll níðingsverk þín; eigi mun hann láta Egil drepa í nótt, því at náttvíg eru morðvíg.' (Surely the king will not let himself be egged into all the sorts of despicable deeds you suggest. Tonight, he will surely not have Egill killed, as night killings are murder.)¹⁰²

Despite the many personal reasons to go through with the killing, the king allows this and instead challenges Egill to create a poem for him before dawn to save his own life, and despite magical intervention from Gunnhildr and thanks to Egill's own poetic prowess, he survives this dangerous meeting. Gunnhildr is here depicted as more of a nemesis of Egill than her king husband despite Egill's offences towards him being just as grave if not worse considering his position. While not the easiest man to deal with, Egill is still presented in a more nuanced and positive light than his nemesis, Gunnhildr, whose anger is depicted negatively and as an extension of the long feud between Egill's family and the Norwegian kings.

*Hallgerðr and Bergþóra*¹⁰³

Another infamous rivalry that causes great harm for those around them is that of the two prominent housewives Hallgerðr and Bergþóra, which has been subjected to a lot of scholarly attention.¹⁰⁴ Both women are perceived as guilty of whetting and of instigating a great feud that both husbands try to avoid with repetitive peaceful settlements at the *Þing*. In total, the women send seven servile and free men to their deaths in six separate scenes spanning several years. In the table below, the man with the higher number kills the one with the lower one (ex. Kol killing Svartr) after being ordered or whetted into doing so by Hallgerðr or Bergþóra.¹⁰⁵ The price is the increasing amount of silver that Njáll and Gunnarr ends up handing back and forth to each other in

¹⁰² Here the definition of *náttvíg* and *morðvíg* correlate to the one of *mórð* (secret murder) being different from a killing. See 'morþ'. A Lexicon of Medieval Nordic Law.

<http://www.dhi.ac.uk/lmnl/nordicheadword/displayPage/3682> (09/23/2021).

¹⁰³ While Hallgerðr and Bergþóra's incitement of their husbands consequently fail and it is instead their servile workers and other relations they end up successfully controlling, the feud they are in is one between their two families, and it is Gunnarr and Njáll who continuously have to deal with it, which is why they are in this category.

¹⁰⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*; Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: a Critical Introduction*; Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls saga* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981); O'Donoghue, 'Women in *Njáls Saga*'; Anderson, 'No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in *Njal's Saga*'; Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?'

¹⁰⁵ The table is taken from Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?', 76.

retribution at the *Alþingi* in order to maintain a vulnerable peace as increasingly close people of the families get trapped in the feud.

Bergþóra	Hallgerðr	Price (silver) ¹⁰⁶
1. Svartr (slave) 3. Atli (freed man?) 5. Þódr (freed slave and foster-father of the Njálssons) 7. Skarpheðinn (kills Sigmundr due to his <i>níð</i> poem encouraged by Hallgerðr)	2. Kol (slave) 4. Brynjolf (free relative of Hallgerðr) 6. Sigmundr (free relative of Gunnarr)	12 oz. 100 oz. 200 oz.

Their similar level of vengefulness and disregard for the deaths they cause in the wake of their revenge is noted in a classic example of Old Norse litotes:

Skarpheðinn mælti: ‘Ekki lætr Hallgerðr verða ellidauða húskarla vára.’ Gunnarr svarar: ‘Svá mun móðir þín til ætla, at ýmsir eigi högg í garði.’ ‘Ærit bragð mun at því’, segir Njáll.¹⁰⁷

(Skarpheðinn said: Hallgerðr certainly does not let our housemen die of old age.’ Gunnarr answered: ‘That will your mother make sure of, that there will be *högg* both here and there.’ ‘That will surely be the case.’ Njáll said.)¹⁰⁸

This dark-humoured exchange of words still does not hide the resignation of the men to the events they are trapped within seemingly without any possible way of ending it themselves, similar to other saga cases of fate. The story evolving around these two whetting women is one of the clearest negative depictions of the dangers of the old ways driven by honour and revenge. Even if Gunnarr personally refuses to be an *eggjanarfífl*, he is unable to stop his wife from whetting his housemen and family. The same thing goes for the otherwise wise and peaceful Njáll. Even if he himself is not whetted due to his old age, when Bergþóra whets their sons he has little more to offer than weak reprimands.¹⁰⁹

Much has been said about *Brennu-Njáls saga*’s regard of women and gender. Several scholars have noted its ‘masculine’ or even misogynistic perspective.¹¹⁰ Einar

¹⁰⁶ The price given in the saga is ounces of silver (aura silfrs).

¹⁰⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 38.

¹⁰⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Jørgen Veisland argues for the women engaging in this feud to be an intended parody of the blood feuds otherwise carried out by men, which could explain the displays of the spectating men’s ironic retorts yet otherwise enabling the events to unfold. Jørgen Veisland, ‘The women of Njal’s Saga: an Ethics of Ambiguity?’, *Sociology and Anthropology* 6, no. 4 (2018), 355.

¹¹⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*; Kress, ‘Manndom og Misogyni’; Dronke, *Sexual Themes in Njáls saga*.

Ól. Sveinsson for one has noted how only one woman in the saga is said to specifically advise against further conflict, while much is said of the women who incite to violence and conflict.¹¹¹ Both Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, together with the previously mentioned Hildigunnr, are described in the saga as *skaphörð* (unyielding, grim, stern.)¹¹² At the point where their conflict begins, they are both married housewives with influence over the household and the people within it. It is also not without reason that the conflict that will dominate the following section of the saga and cause several deaths on both sides starts with two prideful housewives squabbling over seating arrangements.¹¹³

One thing that is noticeable with the depictions of Bergþóra and Hallgerðr is how much of the blame is given to Hallgerðr, to the extent that she is frequently regarded amongst the saga's main villains. Already being said to have 'thief eyes' (*þjófsaugu*) as a child by her uncle Hrótr, she is called evil, as well as very *blanðin* (mixed).¹¹⁴ *Blandin* here also refers to someone bad of temper, character, or manner.¹¹⁵ Zoe Borovsky has also argued that this usage of *blanðin* can be related to its archaic, poetic connotations, related to paganism, trollishness, and Loki.¹¹⁶ Hallgerðr is here someone mixed both by how her actions relates to the honour-bound fury of old, but also by her unruliness as she refuses to abide by her husbands. Once she even sends a slave to commit hidden theft in order to appear as an affluent hostess while also getting

¹¹¹ The character in question is Hróðný, who gives her brother the counsel not to attack Njáll, but she does not advice against animosity against Njáll's enemies. See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 75-6; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 124; See also Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?'

¹¹² Referring to the theories of Julia Kristeva, Jørgen Veisland states: 'The women of the saga, Hallgerd, Bergthora (wife of Njáll), and Queen Gunnhildr, possess a fury to the kind described by Kristeva as a marginal otherness that cannot be sublimated.' Veisland, 'The Women of Njal's Saga: an Ethics of Ambiguity?', 355; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹¹³ While Hallgerðr tends to get most of the blame for the initial conflict here, according to Vestéinn Ólason: 'Bergþóra's icy welcome when Hallgerðr first visits her (which can probably be explained in terms of Hallgerðr's past and Njall's dark suspicions), are just as much links in the fateful chain of events as Hallgerðr's own actions.' Vestéinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998), 156; See also Dronke, *Sexual Themes in Njáls saga*, 20-22. Drama stemming from seating arrangements are also found elsewhere in the sagas, such as Guðrún and Hrefna, albeit here the seating arrangement is decided by Kjartan, Guðrún's past love.

¹¹⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 33; Borovsky also brings up a case in Sturla Þórðarson's *Landnámabók* where the character Helgi is referred to as *blanðinn* for being mixed in his faith as he reverts back to his pagan faith in times of need. 'Blandin mjok', 11; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 8, 33. When refusing to aid Gunnarr, his mother says 'Illa ferr þér, ok mun þín skömm lengi uppi.' (You are evil, and your shame will long be remembered.) *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 77.

¹¹⁵ As Miller calls it: 'the idea being not that she is both good and bad by turns, but that the bad has polluted the good.' Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?', 51; Borovsky, 'Blandin mjok', 1.

¹¹⁶ Borovsky, 'Blandin mjok', 11.

her revenge.¹¹⁷ In comparison, Bergþóra is introduced with the striking description ‘kvenskörungur mikill ok drengur góður ok nökkut skaphörð.’¹¹⁸ (a very skillful and talented good woman, but somewhat hard-hearted.) In comparison to Hallgerðr, Einar Ól. Sveinsson argues that Bergþóra is not presented as *blandin*, and that she is instead ‘pure’ and fair in her actions, and that her vengefulness is natural, in accordance with the morals of old.¹¹⁹ Despite their similar whetting, there is a tendency to regard Bergþóra’s character in a more favourable light despite their similar actions.¹²⁰ This difference in characterisation is then based on other factors than their whetting alone. To return to the matter of loyalty and the regard of women, Hallgerðr and Bergþóra’s relationships with their respective husbands are the biggest difference between them. Hallgerðr’s relationships with her three husbands are stories of conflict, grief, and death, where she survives them all and on at least two occasions plays a role in the husband’s death. She is also given at least part of the blame for Gunnarr’s death, as she refuses him aid by not giving him two strands of her hair to use as new bowstrings to defend himself when attacked.¹²¹ In contrast, besides her whetting, Bergþóra is the image of loyalty, and would ultimately rather stay inside the burning house next to Njáll than leave without him. While Hallgerðr is a prime example of the dangers of the bloodthirsty and unchecked pagan woman of the past who do not necessarily abide by her husbands, Bergþóra is presented as a flawed but ultimately good woman shaped by her time whose loyalty defines her.

Despite the severity of the action and its repercussions, there are few wives that show regret and try to prevent the fight. A rare case is found in *Þórsteinn þáttr stangarhöggs*, the wife Rannveig whets her husband Bjárni with words about how he

¹¹⁷ Theft, as opposed to unconcealed taking or robbery (*rán*), is a severe crime according to *Grágás*, and could be punishable by full outlawry. In this case she is only struck by Gunnarr in public, but this leads to the peak of their animosity. *Grágás* K §227; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 48; While Kinck, Cook, and Miller regard this deed as comeuppance towards Otkell’s dishonour directed at Gunnarr and thus herself, and Cook even calls it ‘a noble one’, Daniela Hahn instead suggests that this was done to disgrace Gunnarr further as punishment for not being on her side during this conflict. Hans E. Kinck, *Sagaenes ånd og skikkelser* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1951), 191; Robert Cook, ‘Gunnarr and Hallgerðr: A Failed Romance’, in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, eds. Johanna Wolf and Kirsten Denzin, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008). Miller, ‘Why is Your Axe Bloody?’; Hahn, ‘Expanding the Repertoire’, 152.

¹¹⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 20.

¹¹⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 79; There are some who have gone more into Hallgerðr’s perspective and questioned the legitimacy of her villainous depiction in accordance with the law, such as Kinck. Her happy marriage with Glúmr does, as others have noted before, show that Hallgerðr could be good when her circumstances were better. For a discussion of women and their marriages in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, see Marina Mundt, ‘Kvinnens forhold til ekteskapet i Njáls saga’, *Edda*, no. 1-2 (1976).

¹²⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 110.

¹²¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 77.

accepts the disgrace of Þórsteinn after his men have failed to kill him. However, the next day as he leaves and he admits that he is going alone, she says: ‘Gerðu eigi þat. [...] at hætta þér einn undir vápni heljarmannsins.’ (Don’t go, don’t risk your life against the weapons of that horrible man.) Bjarni replies: ‘Mun þér nú eigi verða þeira kvenna dæmi, er þat gráta á annari stundu, er eggja á annari? En ek þoli opt lengi frýjuorð bæði þér ok öðrum[...]’¹²² (Are you not being like those women who whet one moment and wail another? I am not going to put up with the incitement of you and others anymore [...]) Bjarni and Þórsteinn still fight, and Rannveig is given the blame for pushing Bjarni into action. However, the depiction of her regret and plea for him not to fight does add a sense of gravity to what would otherwise only be an explanation for his motivation to fight.¹²³

A rare positive depiction of marital whetting is shown in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*. After seeing her old husband Hávarðr bedridden by grief for three years after his son’s murder, Bjargey pushes him into getting his vengeance on the murderer Þorbjörn:

‘Þat er víst’, segir hon, ‘at þetta er allmikil lygi, at þú hafir aldri sofít á þrimr árum, en þó er nú upp at standa ok gera sik sem vaskastan, ef þú vill hefna Óláfs, sonar þíns, því at eigi verðs hans hefni um aldri þinn ef eigi verðr á þessari nótt.’¹²⁴

(‘It is certain’, she said, ‘that it is a very big lie that you have not slept in three years, but yet it is now time to get up and gird up your loins if you wish to avenge Olaf, your son, because he will never be avenged in your lifetime if not tonight.’)¹²⁵

As if by magic, Hávarðr is pulled up from the bed by her words and recites two poems on his grief as he gets dressed and prepares to leave for his revenge. Despite the wretched state he had previously been in, he is now described as appearing fit and no longer walking with a limp, seemingly rejuvenated by her words:

Hann vápnaðisk skjótt ok fimliga; hann bjó ok Þórhall með góðum vápnum. Ok er þeir váru búnir, sneri hann at Bjargeyju ok minntisk við hana, kvað þá eigi sýnt vera, nær þau fyndisk. Hon bað hann vel fara. ‘Þarf eigi at hafa eggjunarorð við þik um hefnd eptir Ólaf, son okkarn, með því at ek veit, at þar fylgir kapp ok hreysti, er þú ert.’¹²⁶

He armed himself quickly and deftly. He also outfitted Thorhall with good weapons. And when they were ready, he turned to Bjargey and kissed her and said it was not certain when they would

¹²² *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, ÍF 11, 74.

¹²³ See also Oren Falk, ‘Did Rannveig Change her Mind? Resolve and Violence in Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005).

¹²⁴ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 9.

¹²⁵ ‘The Saga of Havard of Isafjord’, 5:327.

¹²⁶ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 9.

meet again. She wished him farewell - 'I do not need to goad you to avenge our son Olaf, because I know that courage and manliness will follow you wherever you go.'¹²⁷

Arguably, Bjargey here saying that she does not need to use whetting words get him to avenge their son is mostly because her previous ones already sufficed to rile him up. Despite her putting pressure on Hávarðr here like other whetters, what likely makes Bjargey's actions appear less vicious than other whetting wives is both how she is less verbally harsh on his honour, as well as how her whetting him into taking revenge is done only after first encouraging him into attempting to reach peaceful settlements with Þorbjörn in the past, only to be viciously mocked into a deeper depression. Importantly, the revenge killing of Þorbjörn is here presented as the right thing to do due to the malicious depiction of Þorbjörn, and when the time comes, Hávarðr's revenge is supported not only by family, but he also receives divine aid from a certain foreign god. After he promises his faith to this god if his revenge succeeds, Þorbjörn is shown to drop a large rock intended for Hávarðr on himself, and he is swiftly killed by Hávarðr.¹²⁸ In this case then, Hávarðr's revenge and Bjargey's incitement are both presented positively and shown as necessary for Hávarðr to get his life back from the grief of the loss of his son.

From the examples above of whetting wives and their characterisation, a majority of these women are shown in a negative light. Their whetting is most frequently received with a sense of anger or betrayal, as if she intends to doom not only him but the rest of his kin. Due to the different blood ties, the wives are more likely than other whetters to whet for their own sake rather than their husband's. This is either because of the wife's wish to avenge an offence directed at her, or other personal reasons that her husband is either not privy to or in agreement to, but forced into all the same. The next section will present cases of whetters who have family relations to the whetted man, and how their characterisations differ from other kinds of whetting women due to this relation.

Mothers, sisters, and other relatives

In comparison to whetting wives, there seems to be less condemnation directed at female relatives who whet. Differently from the wives whose dilemma is one of loyalty

¹²⁷ 'The Saga of Havard of Isafjord', 5:328.

¹²⁸ This divine inclusion may be explained by *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* being a late saga dated to the 15th century that contains some parodic or excessive details.

to two families and the following distrust from both sides, the whetting mother instead may appear to represent the heathen and honour bound morals of the previous generation and of their family's expectations, and her whetting is less often refused, questioned, or condemned within the narrative. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the mother Geirríðr whets her son Þórarinn svarti (the Black) into fighting his enemy Þórbjörn digri (the Stout). Þórarinn is here introduced as follows:

‘Hann var mikill maðr og sterkr, ljótr ok hljóðlyndr, vel stilltr hversdaglega. Hann var kallaðr mannasættir. Hann var eigi fémikill ok hafði þó bú gagnsamt. Svo var hann maðr óhlutdeilinn að óvinir hans mæltu að hann hefði eigi síðr kvennaskap en karla.’¹²⁹

(He was a tall and strong man, ugly, a man of few words and always very quiet. He was called the peacemaker. He was not wealthy but still a good host. He was so reserved that his enemies said that he was more womanly than manly.)

It is his peaceful and thus seemingly deemed effeminate nature which Geirríðr refers to when whetting him into action, as peace is no longer a viable solution:

‘Ofsatt er þat er mælt er at meirr hefir þú Þórarinn kvenna skap en karla er þú skalt þola Þorbirni digra hverja skömm ok eigi veit ek því ek skylda eiga slíkan son.’¹³⁰

(It is all far too true, what people say, Þórarinn, that you are more woman than man, that can accept all kinds of shame brought on by Þórbjörn the stout, and I do not know why I have such a son.)

His introduction, together with the following whetting creates the impression that Geirríðr's whetting and the following vengeance doesn't just reclaim Þórarinn's honour, but also improves on this.¹³¹ After having killed Þórbjörn, he describes in a poem how women's (Geirríðr's) taunts drove him to do it:

Varðak mik, þars myrðir
morðfárs vega þorði,
hlaut örn af ná neyta
nýjum, kvenna frýju;
barkak vægð at vígi,
valnaðrs, í styr þaðra,
mælik hól fyr hæli,
hjaldrsgoðs af því sjaldan.¹³²

I - murderous wielder of the death-edge -
defended myself against women's
taunts when I dared to fight;
the eagle was fed fresh corpses.
I didn't spare the sword there
in the stir of slay-adders.
I seldom boast of this
in front of the war-god's worshippers.¹³³

¹²⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15.

¹³⁰ Scott, *Eyrbyggja Saga: The Vellum Tradition*, 18, 50; *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18.

¹³¹ Jennifer Livesay, ‘Women and Narrative Structure in ‘Eyrbyggja Saga’’, *Folklore Forum* 21, no. 2 (1988).

¹³² *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18.

¹³³ ‘The Saga of the People of Eyri’, 5:147.

After describing to his mother how he killed Þórbjörn with another stanza, she curtly says: ‘Tekit hefir þá brýningin [...] ok gangið inn ok bindið sár yður.’¹³⁴ (You have gotten an edge, then. [...] now go inside and bind your wounds.) When Þórarinn later travels to seek support from his relatives for the ensuing court case against his murder of Þórbjörn, as he gives his account of the deed through more poems, both his brother-in-law and sister are concerned about whether he managed to override the words of dishonour, as well as if he had now proven to be a man:

‘Guðný systir hans nam staðar á gólfinu ok mælti: ‘Hefir þú nokkuð varið þik nú frýjuorðinu þeirra út þar? [...] Vermundr mælti: ‘Hvárt vissu þeir nú hvárt þú vart karlmaðr eða kona?’¹³⁵

(Guðný, his sister stepped forward on the floor and said: ‘Have you now protected yourself from their dishonouring words out there?’ [...] Vermundr said: Do they now know whether you are a man or a woman?’)

To these questions he answers in several stanzas in detail about his fight, how he had to avenge the whetting and dishonourable words of women and his foes, and how cowardly and weakly his enemies fought him. Through his violent vengeance and the poems describing it does he earn the masculinity that his surroundings had previously found lacking in him. While the family now faces a great difficulty and he must flee Iceland after being outlawed, neither Þórarinn’s actions nor Geirríðr’s are presented in a negative way, and their actions are presented as necessary and perhaps even just.¹³⁶ One possible reason for this neutral to positive perspective on whetting may be the saga’s early date, which depending on the scholar may have been sometime during the first part of the 13th century, or perhaps closer to the 1260s.¹³⁷

The word *lögeggjan* (lawful whetting) is used once in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where Bergþóra whets her sons into making them avenge the murder of their brother, onto which Skarpheðinn says: ‘Eggjar móðir vár oss nú lögeggjan.’¹³⁸ (Our mother now whets us, and rightfully so.) In this case like in the case of Geirríðr and Þórarinn, Skarpheðinn and his brothers rush into action after acknowledging their mother’s whetting, albeit not negatively so, as they recognise the dishonour they will be left with if they do not act. Another interesting contrast here is the reference to lawfulness, and

¹³⁴ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18.

¹³⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18.

¹³⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 19. His mother, Geirríðr, is also knowledgeable about witchcraft which is also not presented in a negative light in the saga compared to other witches in the saga.

¹³⁷ While the 1220s have been the suggested dating of *Eyrbyggja saga* in ÍF 4, Sigurður Nordal and Bjarni Guðnason have dated it to after the 1250s. Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family sagas’, 115.

¹³⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 98; Fritzner’s description is ‘Tilskyndelse, som er overrensstemmende med Loven’ (Urging, in accordance with the law.)

how depending on it alone fails in the case of standing up for oneself and one's honour. Þórarinn tries to halt the ransacking and harassment of Þorbjörn by referring to the laws and their stance on ransacking someone's house without the required permission, but Þorbjörn just further disgraces him by accusing him of horse theft and calling up witnesses. In this case, being a peaceful man with knowledge of the laws is not enough, and both his mother and his family are motivating him into fighting. The whetting could then have been considered a *lögeggjan*, and her 'old ways' are presented as the correct approach.¹³⁹ In contrast her daughter-in-law Auðr, like Þórarinn, fails to stop the conflict in a peaceful manner which leads to her hand being cut off.

A mother's harsh words are also found in *Laxdæla saga*, when Þórgerðr attempts to goad her sons into killing their foster-brother Bolli, including bringing them directly to his farm. In this particular whetting, she like Geirríðr questions their masculinity for added effect: '[...]ok er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu; ok víst ætla ek yðr til þess betr fellda, at þér værið dætr föður yðvars ok værit giptar.'¹⁴⁰ (and it is terrible to have such useless sons, and I have thought that it would be better if you were your father's daughters and married.) Finally they leave as they cannot stand their mother's whetting any longer, and even then she insists on following them to urge them further until Bolli is dead.¹⁴¹ In contrast to Þórgerðr, their father Óláfr pá (Peacock) had until his death worked for a peaceful settlement, and it first after his death that his wife Þórgerðr decides to whet her sons into action.¹⁴² In these cases the mothers are firmly driven by their need for revenge to the endangerment of their sons, and are quick to question their manhood, but unlike in the cases with the whetting wives, the men's reaction is less that of betrayal or offence, and more dejected, as if they too ultimately feel the need for revenge.

While whetting mothers generally are more neutrally presented in the sagas, cases such as mothers whetting their young sons would perhaps still be expected to get more negative reactions. In these cases, the revenge is usually directed at the murderer of their dead fathers, where one of the sons may even be named after his dead father, such as Bolli Bollason. The mother's whetting can either be done soon after the murder has taken place, or years may pass until the sons are considered old enough to successfully perform said revenge. While sending off boys as young as twelve to kill

¹³⁹ Livesay, 'Narrative Structure', 186; Andersson, 'Heroic Ideal; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*, 238-239.

¹⁴⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 53; See also Þuríðr from *Heiðarvíga saga*'s whetting (ch. 22).

¹⁴¹ 'Því at ek veit górst um yðr sonu mína, at þurfi þér brýningina'. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 54.

¹⁴² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 50.

adult murderers is generally considered unacceptable by modern sensibilities, this too could differ in 10th century Icelanders' eyes according to the 13th century Icelanders describing them.¹⁴³ As previously mentioned, boys between twelve and sixteen years old and over were given certain rights like adults, which also brought additional expectations.¹⁴⁴ Still, even if some exceptional boys appear much more grown up than their age in appearance and actions, this is not the norm.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the depiction of children in the sagas is frequently used as setup for their later deeds and for artistic characterisation, rather than realism. In the cases of mothers whetting their young sons however, their youth and vulnerability appears more pronounced as if to highlight the brutality of the action, although not actually condemning it.

One example is Guðrún from *Laxdæla saga*, where she shows her two sons, Þorleikr and Bolli the old and bloodied shawl from the murder of Bolli, and states that words alone should not move them more than the tokens before them. This is said to greatly upset the two boys, and they try to explain that the reason for their wait has been their young age:

Þeim bræðrum brá mjök við þetta, er Guðrún mælti, en svöruðu þó á þá leið, at þeir hafa verit ungir til hefnda at leita ok forystulausir; kváðusk hvárki kunna ráð gera fyrir sér né öðrum, - 'ok muna mættim vit, hvat vit höfum látit.'¹⁴⁶

(The two brothers were very upset with what Gudrun said but answered her saying that they had been too young to follow up the feud without help or guidance, and that they could make no plans either for themselves or for anyone else. 'But we know quite well what we have lost.')

At this point, Þorleikr is fifteen years old, and Bolli, although described as strong and adult-like in size, is barely twelve. To their retort, Guðrún says that they had more of a mind for horse-fighting and games (hestavíg eða leika), and with this retort, the boys rush outside to join the revenge effort. They are later said to struggle with their sleep, and when questioned by an ally about this they describe their worries:

Þeir segja honum allt tal þeira mæðgina ok þat með, at þeir mega eigi bera lengr harm sinn ok frýju móður sinnar, - 'vilju vér til hefnda leita', sagði Bolli, 'ok höfu vit bræðr nú þann þroska, at menn munu mjök á leita við okkr, ef vit hefjum eigi handa.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ On the topic of Old Norse childhood and their relationships with their family, see for example Else Mundal, 'Forholdet mellom born og foreldre i det norrøne kjeldematerialet', *Collegium medievale* 1 (1988); Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi Tulinius, *Miðaldabörn* (2005); Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

¹⁴⁴ Depending on the laws a child is legally considered an adult at fifteen with varying levels of rights and responsibilities. In *Grágás* K a child below twelve cannot be outlawed. Mundal, 'Born og foreldre', 11n5; Bandlien, *Man or Monster?* 120-1.

¹⁴⁵ Mundal, 'Born og foreldre', 13.

¹⁴⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 60.

¹⁴⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 60.

(They told him all about their talk with their mother, and that they couldn't put up with their own grief and their mother's incitement any longer. 'We want vengeance', said Bolli, 'and us brothers are now old enough so that people may judge us if we do not act.')

Guðrún herself later states that she had waited to do this out of consideration for their young age, but she does not show any signs of regret for now inciting them into taking revenge. However, even with the additional descriptions of the boys' fear and grief and her responsibility for it, Guðrún is not shown to be judged differently by the author nor her surroundings. There is also the poetic justice of the son named after his killed father being the same one to deal the killing blow, something that might have been the plan from the moment he was named, as Þórleikr, the older brother, is not the one described to do so by the saga, nor the other eight people who were following the boys on their revenge mission.¹⁴⁸

A more tragic yet more realistic take on the whetted young son's revenge is shown in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* when Helga jarlsdóttir whets her twelve-year-old son Grimkell into killing his father Hörðr's murderer.¹⁴⁹ After accusing him of being slow to recall his father's death, she tells him to kill Þórðr Kolgrímsson as he was the greatest enemy of his father. Although Grimkell is said to go along with two men to get his revenge, it is stated that everyone on both sides were later found dead. Helga and her younger, surviving son Björn is soon sent back to the home of her family in Gautland to prevent further losses. Björn later returned to Iceland and killed many men to avenge his father, although it is not said here if Helga whetted him into it. Despite her responsibility for Grimkell's death, Helga is not judged negatively for the whetting, and one can hardly accuse Helga for not caring for her sons, as the saga earlier has given a thorough description of her painstakingly saving the two boys' lives from Hörðr's killers.¹⁵⁰ It is instead a tragic tale of loss in the name of necessary vengeance, and of Björn's eventual success.

¹⁴⁸ Several promising boys of high standing are shown to perform impressive adult and masculine feats at the age of twelve. Some examples being Egill and Hörðr being lauded for their strength (*Egils saga*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*), Þóróddr Snorrason's participation in battle in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Óláfr pá and Bolli Bollason's fine attire, as well as Gellir Þorkelsson travelling to Norway in *Laxdæla saga*, and Brodd-Helgi participating at court in *Vopnfirðinga saga*. Chris Callow suggests that the age of twelve is an exceptional age for boys to act as adult men, but that it is the earliest age that they can imagine young men displaying this fully adult behaviour. See Chris Callow, 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society', in *Children, Childhood and Society*, ed. Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007).

¹⁴⁹ *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, ÍF 13, ch. 41.

¹⁵⁰ *Harðar saga*, ch. 38.

Sisters

While also depicted as being concerned with family honour, sisters are less often shown to whet their brothers.¹⁵¹ One example is the case of Guðrún whetting her brothers into avenging the shameful treatment they have received from Kjartan. Unhappy with their lack of drive after he shamed them, she wakes them up early in the morning and lashes out at them:

‘Gott skaplyndi hefði þér fengit, ef þér værið dætr einshvers bónda ok láta hvárki at yðr verða gagn né mein; en slíka svívirðing ok skömm, sem Kjartan hefir yðr gort, þá sofi þér eigi at minna, at hann riði hér hjá garði við annan mann, ok hafa slíkir menn mikit svínsminni; þykki mér ok rekin ván, at þér þorið Kjartan heim at sækja, ef þér þorið eigi at finna hann nú, er hann ferr við annan mann eða þriðja, en þér sitið heima ok látið vænlíga ok eruð æ hólzti margir.’¹⁵²

(‘With your temperament, you'd have made some farmer a good group of daughters, fit to do no one any good or any harm. After all the abuse and shame Kjartan has heaped upon you, you don't let it disturb your sleep while he goes riding by under your very noses, with only one other man to accompany him. Such men have no better memory than a pig. There's not much chance you'll ever dare to make a move against Kjartan at home if you won't even stand up to him now, when he only has one or two others to back him up. The lot of you just sit here at home, making much of yourselves, and one could only wish there were fewer of you.’)¹⁵³

Here her whetting targets their disappointment as sons, their effeminacy in inactivity, and cowardice. Despite these harsh words her brother Óspakr agrees with her, and the brothers all soon take off to take revenge on Kjartan. Despite Bolli being the one to strike the final blow, Kjartan voices what the reader knows, that it is not him, but rather the Ósvífrssons pushed forward by Guðrún who are to blame.¹⁵⁴ Despite the tragedy of Kjartan's death and Bolli's regret, Guðrún is not truly villainised for her whetting. Only Bolli and her brothers are punished, as he is later killed and the Ósvífrssons are outlawed from Iceland for life.¹⁵⁵ The latter does not seem to be of great grief to Guðrún, and their role seems to have been fulfilled as they soon are banished from Iceland for life. However, as Loren Auerbach argues, the saga author's characterisation

¹⁵¹ As seen with Guðný questioning Þórarinn about his revenge in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and Þordís attempting to kill Eyjólfur in revenge for Gísli. See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘“Egils saga” and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family’, *Scandinavian Studies* 80, no. 1 (2008), 12-13; For a comparison between Norse and other European depictions of sibling relationships, see Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (York: York Medieval Press, 2015).

¹⁵² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 48.

¹⁵³ ‘The Saga of the People of Laxardal’ 5:77.

¹⁵⁴ ‘Eigi mun Bolli, frændi minn, slá banaráðum við mik; en ef þeir Ósvífrssynir sitja fyrir mér [...]’ (My cousin Bolli would not kill me, but if the Ósvífrssons were to ambush me [...]) *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 48. Previously noted by Helga Kress, ‘Meget samstævet má det tykkes deg. Om kvinneopprør og genretvang i Sagaen om Laksdølene’, *Historisk tidsskrift* (1980), 271; Robert Cook, ‘Women and men in Laxdæla saga’, *Skáldskaparmál* (1992), 41.

¹⁵⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 51.

of Guðrún instead reflects her squandered potential and suppression of will which had led her to the marriage with Bolli, and how this changes Guðrún for the worse:

Whereas she had been described regularly by words such as *vitr*, ‘wise’, *örlynd*, ‘generous, open-handed’ and *málsnjöll*, ‘eloquent’, we see her become petty and hurtful in her bitter frustration; but above all we see the terrible consequences of such an act of suppression: the loss to the community and the terrible price to pay. It is not until after Bolli is dead that Guðrún is again referred to in a way that reflects the earlier descriptions of her.¹⁵⁶

While Guðrún remains favoured by the narrative for the majority of the saga, it is easy to imagine how she would have been judged much more harshly if her story was penned by another saga author like that of *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In fact, one may not need to look further than Hallgerðr in *Brennu-Njáls saga* who she shares many traits with. Instead of being condemned and later forgotten from the narrative like Hallgerðr after causing the deaths of the saga heroes, she is instead shown to get her revenge for Bolli, respect from her peers, as well as the admirable trait of Christian piety. As Snorri goði later says of her: ‘er þat ok ekki ofmæli, at Guðrún er mjök fyrir öðrum konum um allan skörungsskap’ (It is not an exaggeration, that Guðrún far exceeds other women in all forms of talent and character).¹⁵⁷

While rarely being shown to whet their brothers, sisters are shown to whet and speak up in order to avenge their brothers. One of the closer brother-and-sister relationships depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* is that of *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*. After Hörðr’s death, Þorbjörg not only helps shelter his family from their pursuers, but she is also praised for causing the most deaths to avenge Hörðr’s death: ‘Fjórir men ok tuttugu váru drepnir í hefnd eptir Hörð; [...] flestir allir váru drepnir með ráði Þorbjargar Grímkelsdóttur; þykkir hon mikill kvenskörungur verit hafa.’¹⁵⁸ (Twenty-four men were killed to avenge Hörðr [...] most of them were killed by the counsel of Þorbjörg Grímkelsdóttir. She must have been a magnificent woman.) It is not said in detail what form of counsel Þorbjörg used to have these killings done, but influencing the majority of 24 murders is still apparently considered justified here.

From examples such as these, mothers and sisters are rarely presented in a villainous light due to their whetting. First and foremost, they appear to act according to their family’s honour and thus in their best interest.¹⁵⁹ To a lesser degree than in the

¹⁵⁶ Auerbach, ‘Female Experience’, 40. For discussion of the depiction of women in *Laxdæla saga*, see Kress, ‘Meget samstævet’; Cook, ‘Women and men in *Laxdæla saga*.’

¹⁵⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 48.

¹⁵⁸ *Harðar saga*, ch. 41.

¹⁵⁹ As Mundal has noted, a mother’s love would have to be put after the demands of society. Mundal, ‘Born og foreldre’, 19.

cases of wives, their personal feuds and intrigues are shown to be the reason for the whetting, as they most usually whet to avenge the murder of their dead husband, or to avenge an offence directed at the family. This is not to say that they cannot whet due to egoistical motivations, such as Queen Kormloð, or to some extent Guðrún due to her personal conflict with Kjartan.¹⁶⁰ The whetting can also differ in the manner they do it. While grown up sons and brothers are taunted by their lack of masculinity or femininity, uselessness, and how they are a shame upon the family, young boys may instead be chastised for still being childish, as well as possibly having their feelings played more openly upon, such as forgetting to avenge their father.

Servile women

As previously discussed in this chapter, the whetting servant and slave woman figure is seemingly used several times to explain why men join fights. This role stands out amongst other female whetters with their lack of background and apparent motivation. Unlike wives, mothers, and sisters, they are not connected to the whetted man through kinship nor or marital bonds which would give them the primary motivation of re-establishing their shared honour.¹⁶¹ Several times, these servile women are shown to voice their opinion on the honour that the *húsbónði* (house master, paterfamilias) possesses, or lack thereof. They also often compare him and his masculinity to that of his enemy, something that rarely fails to incite them into taking action to prove his honour. Despite these displays of taunts directed at their master, the servants are rarely shown to be in conflict with the *húsbónði* or the *húsfreyja* (materfamilias), and while they might receive a scolding for voicing their opinions, they are not shown to otherwise be judged negatively or punished for this.¹⁶² Instead, sometimes, as is shown in *Gunnarr þáttur Þidrandibana*, they may whet in order to get vengeance for their *húsbónði*:

Heimakona hljóp inn ok sagði þat Gunnari ok Þormóði, ok vissu þeir ekki af þessum tíðendum, er svá skjótt hafði at borizk. Hon mælti: ‘Undarligir men eru þit, er þit sitið hér, en bóndi sé drepinn úti ok nökkurir men með honum, ok mun aldri ðáð í ykk.’ Gunnarr kvað hana taka

¹⁶⁰ In the case of Kormloð, her role appears to be more of an outlier, as it is inspired by an outside source, as well as being used as an Outsider scapegoat used to explain why the battle of Clontarf would take place, something proved by how other sources detailing the events does not mention this particular scene.

¹⁶¹ This also raises the question on whether a slave or servant would share the honour of their master or employer, possibly as they had little on their own.

¹⁶² One exception where the female servant fights a master is the *húsfreyja* Jórunn and the concubine. See *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 14. See chapter 3.

mikinn af ok kvað þess litla þörf, -- ‘eða hvern er sá í þeira liði, er mestr skaði er at?’ ‘Þat er hann Þiðrandi’, segir hon, inn auma kona, ‘ok kemr þá nokkut fyrir bónda várn, ef þú drepr hann.’¹⁶³

(The servant woman ran inside and told Gunnarr and Þormóðr of it all, as they hadn’t known due to how quickly it had happened. She said: ‘You are odd men to sit here while the *bóndi* and some other men are being killed outside.¹⁶⁴ You will never be good for anything.’ Gunnarr said that she was making too much out of it for little reason, ‘and which one of them would be the greatest loss?’ ‘That would be Þiðrandi’, said the miserable woman, ‘and killing him would help some for making up for our *bónði*.’

This nameless, ‘miserable’ servant woman’s whetting is key for the *þáttr* as it pushes Gunnarr into killing Þiðrandi, something which gets him both outlawed and named for it (Gunnarr Þiðrandibani). Her brief characterisation, *auma kona* (poor woman) appears to be one of pity rather than disgust.¹⁶⁵ Like other whetting servants, she too disappears out of the saga after this scene, and she is not blamed for the ensuing events.¹⁶⁶

The slaves themselves at times voice the prevailing sentiments on their lesser status, and even use it against free men. In *Svarfdæla saga* a female slave (*ambátt*) sees the ten-year-old Klaufi wrestle the male slave Þórðr fangari (wrestler) in a stalemate, and taunts them by comparing their fight to that of an ‘*ambáttafång*’ (slave woman fight): ‘Þeir takast fangbrögðum ok glíma lengi, þartil ambátt ein kom í stofudyrnar, ok kallar þetta ambáttafång, er hvorgi fell, ok það þá kyssast ok hætta síðan. Klaufi reiddist við þetta.’¹⁶⁷ (They took positions and wrestled for a long time, until a slave woman entered through the living room door and called [their fighting] slave woman wrestling as nobody fell, and told them to kiss and make up.) This is after Þórðr has come with *argr* accusations towards Klaufi to incite him into fighting. In the typical saga fashion, Klaufi is enraged by the slave woman’s provocation, and is thus energised into violently beating up Þórðr and ultimately killing him with an axe. As he is too young to take responsibility for the murder himself, his caretaker Griss has to pay for the death of Þórðr. Ironically, before the described event Griss had said that he intended to subdue the young Klaufi like a slave (*þrælka Klaufa*), only for the saga to not only show Klaufi be anything but subdued, but also show both the female and male slaves’ dishonouring actions and lack of submission. This subversion could then point to the regard of the

¹⁶³ *Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana*, ÍF 11, ch. 3.

¹⁶⁴ *Bónða* referring to the *húsbónði*.

¹⁶⁵ *Aumr* (poor, wretched) appears to be used more sympathetically, as opposed to the related *armr* (wicked, wretched). For example, ‘*kvinna örmust*’ (the most wretched woman) is used in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 8.

¹⁶⁶ Two similar cases are found in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, together with one in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the previously mentioned case *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* to mention some.

¹⁶⁷ *Svarfdæla saga*, ÍF 9, ch. 13.

slaves being depicted as unruly and disrespectful, but while this can be a deadly offence in the case of Þórðr *fangari*, a man named for his prowess in these kind of fights versus an exceptional ten-year-old boy, the whetting *ámbatt* is not punished for her similarly damning words.¹⁶⁸

As will be shown later in this chapter, unlike taunting or whetting servile women, servile male whetters do not always get away as unscathed. The reason why servile women do is likely due to a combination of their plot device status, their servile social position, and their gender. This intersectionality of the combined identities here makes them appear more harmless, and thus they are seldom shown being punished for their whetting or other derogatory language. This is not to say that female slaves did not experience hardships, but rather that that this was rarely included as their well-being was usually of little consequence for the saga narrative.

Male whetters – the weak coward’s weapon?

This next part of the chapter examines the cases of male whetters and how their characterisations hang together with the depictions of their whetting. Similarly to the previous section, the examples are sorted by men’s roles and relations to the man whetted. Unlike the different types of whetting women that have been studied so far in this chapter, male whetters have not been given the same attention as female whetters have within scholarship. The men’s whetting scenes are also not as detailed in the sagas and tend to lack displays of intricate scheming or mourning laments. Instead, the whetting is often less detailed, even if the saga authors may state outright that the man is whetting another by using words referring to whetting. Men are expected to fight their own fights. Men who are capable of fighting, but instead choose to manipulate others into fighting due to their cowardice or maliciousness, are harshly judged. This view is voiced by the esteemed Hallr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*:

‘Nú er svá orðit, sem mælt er, at skamma stund verðr hönd höggvi fegin. Ok er sá nú allr einn í þínu föruneyti, er nú hefir eigi höfuðs, ok hinn, er þá fyrsti ins verra. En liðveizlu mína em ek skyldr at legja til, alla slíka sem ek má.’¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ For more on whetting servile women, see also Sigrun Borgen Wik, ‘The Voice of Reason or Unintended Protest? Whetting by Servile Women in the *Íslendingasögur*’, in *Gender and Protest: On the Historical and Contemporary Interrelation of Two Social Phenomena*, ed. Frank Jacob and Jowan A. Mohammed (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2023).

¹⁶⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 134.

(‘It’s turned out just as the saying goes, that the hand’s pleasure in the blow is brief. Now the same men in your following who were eager to do wrong are afraid to hold their heads high. But I’m bound to lend you my support in any way I can.’)¹⁷⁰

Here the power of the demands of honour is shown once more, as even reasonable men like Hallr feel obligated to fight even if the others’ honour is lacking, and this is a recurring sentiment found in the instances of whetting men.

Old men and fathers

This first category, that of old men and fathers, can be separated from the other male whetters in two ways: first, their advanced age and the limitations this brings to their ability to avenge themselves, and second the effect the paternal relation has on the man being whetted. In the old Norse sagas, old age was not regarded as an age of distinction, as aging men in the sagas are shown to be emasculated and occasionally viewed as a nuisance to take care of rather than an aging protector.¹⁷¹ Clover suggests that men limited by their old age are socially moved into the category of the emasculated, the soft and weak group that Clover calls the *blauðr*, otherwise inhabited by most women, children, the disabled, slaves, and the old.¹⁷² The notion that the old men, despite their previous *drengskapr* (masculinity, prowess) could lose this and become old and feeble is thematised in several sagas, most famously in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. Old men are multiple times in the sagas shown to have to accept more offences and make compromises, as well as help with consolidations and diplomacy. As a weakened Egill is told: ‘Women made less fun of us before when we were younger.’¹⁷³ Because of this, an old man would be expected to behave differently, and not doing so would be noted: ‘Hann var eigi dældarmaðr, þótt hann væri gamall.’¹⁷⁴ (He was not a man it was easy to deal with, despite being old.). Occasionally, whetting and the need for vengeance are shown able to seemingly rejuvenate the old, wounded, or disabled men into getting their

¹⁷⁰ ‘Njal’s Saga’, 3:165.

¹⁷¹ For more on depictions of old age in the sagas, see Per Kristian Haugen and Lars Nygård. ‘“..... Alder held meg, men ungdom deg.....”’ *Gamle i saga og på folkemunne*, (Oslo: Norsk gerontologisk institutt, 1984); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The specter of old age: Nasty old men in the sagas of Icelanders’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 3 (2005); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Becoming ‘old’, ageism and taking care of the elderly in Iceland c. 900–1300’, in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). For a medieval comparison, see Shulamith Shahar, *Growing old in the Middle Ages: ‘winter clothes us in shadow and pain’* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁷² Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex’; See also the criticism of this theory in Mikael Males, ‘Den avhängiga: Kvinnoförakt som förutsättning för ett enda genus på 1200-talets Island?’, *Collegium medievale* 19 (2006).

¹⁷³ *Egils saga*, ch. 88.

¹⁷⁴ *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, 69; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Specter of Old Age’, 308.

revenge, such as Hávarðr in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*.¹⁷⁵ However, old men are usually not considered capable of avenging offences directed at themselves and their kin's honour, and they must then instead make use of whetting to get their much-needed vengeance to re-establish their honour.

A unique aspect for fathers' whetting is comparing their own past strength, will, and honour with their sons', and declaring it to be lacking unless they prove their worth by going through with the vengeance. Furthermore, they like the mothers and sisters may emasculate their sons by accusing them of being more like daughters than sons in behaviour or worth. One example of this is found in *Vatnsdæla saga*.¹⁷⁶ Here Ketill raumr (of Raumsdal) faces hardships in his dominion in Norway, as he is not able to stop a giant that has been endangering the people nearby. The people around are said to find Ketill unmanly as he is seemingly not able to do something with these evil deeds, and it is talked about how very old he has become.¹⁷⁷ While this by itself is not whetting, this public disregard for his now diminished masculinity drives him into pushing this responsibility onto his son Þorsteinn by whetting him into doing what he cannot do himself. Seemingly trying to rebuild his own honour and masculinity through bringing up his own legacy, while also comparing his son unfavourably to his own and his fellow man's standards, he says:

‘Önnur gerist nú atferð ungra manna enn þá er ek var ungr, þá girntust men á nokkur framaverk, annattveggja at ráðast í hernað, eðr afla fjár ok sóma með einhverjum atferðum þeim er nokkur mannhætta var í, enn nú vilja ungir men gerast hemaelskir ok sitja við bakelda ok kýla vömb sína á miði ok mungáti, ok þverr því karlmenska ok harðfengi, enn ek hefir því fjár aflat ok virðingar, at ek þorða at leggja mik í hættu ok hörð einvígi. Nú hefir þú, Þorsteinn, lítinn krapt hlotit afls ok vaxtar; er þat ok líkast, at þú fylgir þar eptir þinni athöfn ok fari þar eljun eptir ok öll tilræði, því at eigi villtu víkjask eptir atferðum inna fyrri frænda þinna ok sýnir þik eptir því, sem þú ert ásýndum, ok mun hugr fylja vexti.’¹⁷⁸

(‘The behaviour of young men today is not what it was when I was young. In those days men hankered after deeds of derring-do, either by going raiding or by winning wealth and honour through exploits in which there was some element of danger. But nowadays young men want to be stay-at-homes, and sit by the fire, and stuff their stomachs with mead and ale; and so it is that manliness and bravery are on the wane. I have won wealth and honour because I dared to face danger and tough single combats. You, Thorstein, have been blessed with little in the way of strength and size. It is more than likely that your deeds will follow suit, and that your courage and daring will match your size, because you have no desire to emulate the exploits of your ancestors; you reveal yourself to be just as you look, with your spirit matching your size.’)¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 9.

¹⁷⁶ *Vatnsdæla saga* has been suggested to be from the 1270s or 1280s. Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family Sagas’, 115.

¹⁷⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ÍF 8, ch. 1.

¹⁷⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 2.

¹⁷⁹ ‘The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal’, trans. Andrew Wawn in *Complete Sagas*, 4:2.

He continues to speak in detail about how powerful men, kings and jarls, who he considers his equals, would raid and plunder to gain honour and treasure, and how the sons of these men should not expect to receive this as inheritance, as it should be won by oneself, something he calls the ‘hermanna lög’ (raider’s law), something he thinks he has to teach Þórsteinn. Greatly angered, Þórsteinn acknowledges the whetting: ‘Eggjat væri nú ef nökkut tjóaði.’¹⁸⁰ (I am now whetted, if there is anything to gain from it.) He leaves soon after as he would rather depend on his father’s luck and rather risk his life than hear more insulting words (*atyrðum*). Further descriptions of supposedly the same scene are given while Þórsteinn is hiding from the man Jökull unsure if he should risk trying to kill him in his sleep. As he hesitates, he is said to recall his father’s whetting (honum kom nú ok í hug eggjan feðr síns), and he further recalls that his father had said that he was no more capable with a sword than a daughter or another woman, and that it would have been more honourable for his family if there had been a gap in the family tree than them having him there (at faðir hans segði hann eigi betra til vápns en dóttur eðr aðra konu, ok meiri sæmð væri frændum, at skarð væri í ætt þeira en þar sem hann var.)¹⁸¹ These words together with the notion of getting vengeance for many deaths at once, drive him into action, even if it is also said that Þórsteinn regretted having to kill the man.¹⁸² Later on, when he at last faces Jökull and he has given him a deadly blow, Jökull says:

‘Ok allmjök muntu eggjaðr verit hafa þessa verks af feðr þínum, enda hafa mik nú at fullu bitit hans ráð ok sé ek, at þér líkar, þótt vit deyjum báðir, en meiri forlaga mun þér auðit vera.’¹⁸³

(‘but you must have been sorely provoked into this by your father, and his plan has touched me to the quick, and I see that you would be quite content even if both of us were to die, but a greater future is in store for you.’)¹⁸⁴

Here Ketill’s whetting is central to the subsequent events, and they both hurt and help Þórsteinn accomplish his feat even if it goes against his own wishes. However, when Ketill reunites with his son who he had thought had died, he readily admits he regrets his whetting: ‘ok iðrumst ek þegar eftir þeira orða er ek mælti við þik til frýju eðr áleitni.’¹⁸⁵ (‘and afterwards I immediately regretted the words that I said to you to whet

¹⁸⁰ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 3.

¹⁸¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 3.

¹⁸² *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 3-4. *Eggjan*, *hvatti*, and *frýju* are all used when referring to the whetting.

¹⁸³ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 3.

¹⁸⁴ ‘The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal’, 4:5.

¹⁸⁵ To further express Ketill’s regret and fear for his son’s life, it is said that him and many of his men had been out looking for Þórsteinn. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 4.

and offend you.’) This heartfelt admission is very rare, and its inclusion depicts a rarely shown emotional aspect to the act of whetting its repercussions.¹⁸⁶ It is also notable how this rare case is voiced by a father. Possibly, this regret is shown as Ketill is an aged man who himself would know the struggles and dangers of trying to maintain one’s masculinity. This changes Ketill’s whetting from what could have been a damning whetting to one of the more sympathetic depictions of whetters. This is also shown by how father and son soon reconcile, and how Þorsteinn gains much honour from his deed.¹⁸⁷

Despite the danger their parents put them in, Þorsteinn like Þórarinn, Geirríðr’s son, gains respect in the eyes of his family and peers through his revenge due to his parent’s whetting.¹⁸⁸ Neither are shown to feel prolonged anger at their whetter afterwards. In Þorsteinn’s case it is even an improvement for the surroundings as the dangerous Jökull who has terrorised the local people has been slain, and Þorsteinn also gains riches in the aftermath. Ketill’s whetting stands out as less villainous than several other cases of whetting despite his gender and position, due to his age and display of regret.

A less apologetic old father who whets his son on multiple times is Þórarinn from the latter half 13th century þáttir *Þorsteins þáttar stangarhögg*s. His son, the titular Þorsteinn stangarhögg (Staff-struck), gets beaten bloody on his forehead with a staff during a scheduled horse fight with another man. Despite this dishonour, Þorsteinn pretends that it was an accident to avoid trouble and asks people to hide this from his father. Soon enough, his former warrior but now bedridden father knows of the incident:

‘Er þér ekki ilt í höfuðbeinunum, sonr?’ kvað Þórarinn karl. ‘Eigi kenni ek þess’, sagði Þorsteinn. ‘Hvat segir þú mér, sonr, af hestaþinginu því er í fyrra sumar var? Vartu ekki lostinn í svima, frændi, sem hundr?’ ‘Engi þykkir mér virðing í vera’, sagði Þorsteinn, ‘at kalla þat heldr högg en atburð.’ Þórarinn mælti: ‘Ekki mundi mik þess vara, at ek munda ragan son eiga.’ ‘Mæl þú þat eitt um nú, faðir’, sagði Þorsteinn. ‘er þér þykkir eigi ofmælt síðar.’ ‘Ekki mun ek hér svá mikit um mæla’, sagði Þorsteinn, ‘sem mér er at skapi.’¹⁸⁹

‘Don’t you have a headache, son?’ asked old Thorarin. ‘Not that I am aware of’, said Thorstein. ‘What can you tell me, son, about the horse-fight that took place last summer? Weren’t you knocked unconscious, kinsman, like a dog?’ ‘I do not see the honour’, said Thorstein, ‘in calling it an attack rather than an accident.’ Thorarin said, ‘I would not have thought that I had a [wretched] coward for a son.’ ‘Do not say anything now, father’, said Thorstein, ‘that you will

¹⁸⁶ The closest thing to a wife’s regret of whetting is the wife Rannveig’s whetting of Bjárni in *Þorsteinn þáttar stangarhögg*s.

¹⁸⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 4.

¹⁸⁹ *Þorsteins þáttar stangarhögg*s, ÍF 11, p. 70.

later learn is an exaggeration.’ ‘I will not say as much now’, said Thorarin, ‘as I have a mind to.’¹⁹⁰

Riled up, Þórsteinn kills the man who had hit him after being refused compensation from him, and he is made an outlaw. This is however just the beginning of his fighting and his father’s whetting. When the *goði* Bjárni wants to fight Þórsteinn for killing three of his servants, his father once more whets him in no uncertain terms:

‘[...]ok kann ek því ekki at sýta þik, at mér þykkir þú mikit til hafa gört. Tak nú vápn þín ok ver þik sem skörugligast, því at þar mundi hafa verit minnar ævi, at ekki munda ek bograt hafa fyrir slikum, sem Bjarni er. Er Bjarni, þó inn mesti kappi. Þykki mér ok betra at missa þín en eiga ragan son.’¹⁹¹

([...]) ‘I don’t feel sorry for you because I think you’ve brought this on yourself. Now take your weapons and defend yourself bravely, for I would never have stooped before a man like Bjarni in my day, even though he is a great champion. Still, I would rather lose you than have a [wretched] coward for a son.’¹⁹²

Here Þórarinn like Ketill uses his past as a comparison to further pressure his son into taking revenge. Additionally, both fathers voice how their sons’ death or nonexistence would be preferable to them living with their disgrace unavenged. While Þórarinn appears to be callous by forcing his unwilling son into further conflicts with Bjárni, the two men after a long day of fighting at last settle their differences in a peaceful manner. An interesting inclusion then for the characterisation of Þórarinn is shown when Bjárni goes to give Þórarinn the fake news of Þórsteinn’s death. As Þórarinn tries to lure him closer to the bed lies in, Bjárni catches him fumbling after a short sword to strike him in vengeance for his son, which only earns Þórarinn a reminder of his weakened state (‘You miserable old fart!’)¹⁹³ While trying to live up to the old ways of honour and his former glory, Þórarinn ultimately fails to go through with it. He, like several other whetting parents shown in the sagas, represents the old and unforgiving ways of vengeance, an ideal that the younger generation at times do not fulfil until whetted into action. However, in this *þáttr* the two men of the younger generation realise the futility of their fighting brought upon them by others, and together they make peace with each

¹⁹⁰ ‘The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck’, trans. Anthony Maxwell, in *Complete Sagas*, 4:336. While Maxwell translates *ragan* as ‘coward’, the modern use alone does not necessarily give the same thoroughly negative impression *ragan* would have. To keep both the context and intent I have changed it to ‘wretched coward.’

¹⁹¹ *Þórsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, 75.

¹⁹² ‘The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck’, 4:338. Maxwell’s translation has Þórarinn blaming Þórsteinn for his actions. In contrast, the Norwegian translation by Børge Nordbø has Þórarinn instead state that he cannot grieve his son as he believes him to have done the right thing. ‘Tåtten om Torstein Stangarhogg’, in *Islandingsagaene*, 4:422.

¹⁹³ ‘Allra fretkarla armastr!’ *Þórsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, 77; ‘The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck’, 4:340.

other while proving that there is an alternative to Þórarinn's old ways.¹⁹⁴ Compared to Ketill, Þórarinn's whetting is more destructive, and even if a settlement is eventually found, this is not by the making of Þórarinn, who is both too stuck in his old ways, and too weakened to be able to fulfil his old role as a warrior.

From examples such as these, fathers make for both effective and complicated whetters. Besides questioning their sons' masculinity, they are more often shown to support their whetting by referencing their own impressive pasts not only rile up their sons, but perhaps also to justify themselves as they must now depend on their sons to get vengeance.¹⁹⁵ Despite the harsh words, this appears to be forgiven by either the narrative or the whetted son himself.¹⁹⁶ Fathers and older men can also be admired for their wisdom and social knowledge, such as the wise and considerate Njáll, but can also appear more like the sly and capricious type, such as Ófeigr from *Bandamanna saga*, who while pretending to be weak is able to trick a group full of young and ambitious *goðar* into losing to his son. In comparison to the able-bodied male whetters who are shamed and vilified for their cowardice, weakness, and unwillingness to fight themselves, the whetting of old men and fathers are the closest to female and motherly whetting. This is because their physical condition places them closer to the category of whetting women, as they are perceived as not being able to avenge their relatives themselves and thus must depend on their sons. In contrast, male siblings are hardly ever shown whetting, which is likely because it would be more difficult to do so without facing dishonour and rejection with the proximity in age and position.

Friends, kin, and acquaintances of similar status

Besides fathers and old men, a group of male whetters are those of friends and general acquaintances who attempt to make other men fight, and then usually in their stead.¹⁹⁷ Unlike the old men these are not regarded as prevented physically from acting out

¹⁹⁴ For a similar but worse father-son relationship, see Arnkell and Þórgólfur bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

¹⁹⁵ See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age', 308-310.

¹⁹⁶ Old men are less often shown to be targets of violence, although they were not necessarily protected by principles. See William Ian Miller, 'Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources', *Mercer L. Rev.* 39, no. 3 (1988), 757. This is even shown in the contemporary saga *Þorðar saga kakala*, when two old men mistake their old age as a reason for immunity against violence which stops them from fleeing, and in turn their legs are cut off. 'Þorðar saga kakala', ch. 15.

¹⁹⁷ This kind of male whetting is also found in older sources. In the *skáld* Eilífr Goðrúnarson's 11th century poem *Þórdrápa* in *Codex Regius*, Lóki whets (*hvetja*) Þórr into dealing with the giant Geirröðr, whereupon Lóki is called a mighty liar (*drúgr var Loptr* [Lóki] at ljúga') and Þórr is said to not need to be asked often by the 'vulture-path' (*gammleið*) Lóki.

expected acts of violence, but still choose to whet other men instead. In these cases, whetting-adjacent speech acts and general taunts may take similar forms. However, what sets the whetting apart is how this is directed at would-be allies and kin.¹⁹⁸ To return to the example in the beginning of this chapter, there is the scene that takes place in the end of *Gísli saga Súrssonar* when Eyjólfur Þórðarson inn grái (the Grey) has brought Scout-Helgi and his other companions to kill Gísli.¹⁹⁹ In this example all three of these men use the concept of honour to try to force an action:

‘Þat var ok líkara’, segir Gísli, ‘at grey þitt mundi eigi þora við mik vápnum at skipta.’ Eyjólfur mælti þá til Njósna-Helga: ‘Þat væri nú frægð mikil, at þú reðir fyrstr upp á kleifarnar at Gísla, ok mundi þat ágæti lengi uppi vera.’ ‘Opt hefi ek þat reynt’, segir Helgi, ‘at þú villt aðra hafa fyrir þér optast þar er nokkur raun er at, en fyrir því at þú eggjar svá ákafliga, þá skal ek til ráða, en þú fylg mér drengiliga ok gakk næst mér, ef þú ert eigi með öllu blauðr.’²⁰⁰

(‘It was as expected’, Gísli said, ‘that you, you bitch, would not dare exchange weapon-blows with me.’ Eyjólf then spoke to Scout-Helgi: ‘It would now have been a great honour if you went first up the cliffs towards Gísli. That honourable feat would long be remembered.’ ‘I have often felt’, Helgi said, ‘that you would have others before you when there are any dangers. But since you are whetting me so much I will go forward, but follow me like a man if you are not a total coward.’

Out of the three, only Scout-Helgi’s whetting has him giving Eyjólf the ultimatum between following him or being viewed as a coward by Helgi and the other men. However, Eyjólfur also attempts to talk someone else into doing an action in his place seemingly out of fear. If Scout-Helgi had said no, this would reflect negatively on him in front of everyone else, thereby not giving him much of a choice despite the lack of actual libel speech. This would within the context make Eyjólfur’s whetting the most despicable of them, as he is the one who initiates this challenge of violence and risk taking, while also not daring to do so himself. This is despite him being given the task to catch and kill Gísli, as assigned to him by his friend Börkr goði: ‘[...] beiðir, at hann leiti eptir Gísla ok drepi hann i sekðinni, ok kvezk mundu gefa honum til þrjú hundruð silfrs, þess at allgott sé, at hann leggi á alla stund at leita eptir honum. Hann tekr við fēnu ok heitr sinni umsýslu.’²⁰¹ ([...] asked him to go search for the outlaw Gísli and

¹⁹⁸ For a rare case of male whetting done by one man towards his brother, see Kolr and Þorsteinn in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*. While Kolr’s whetting is at first ignored, Þorsteinn eventually kills the man who had dishonoured him. In addition to his brother, Þorsteinn is also encouraged and has his axes handed to him by his dead mother Jóreiðr in a dream. *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 5.

¹⁹⁹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 34; *Brennu-Njáls saga*’s Valgarðr shares the *inn grái* by-name. Interestingly, this name has an association to outlaws and wolves as *vargr* can mean both outlaw and wolf. Considering how Eyjólfur’s role in the saga is to catch and kill the outlaw rather than be one himself, this too feeds into his lawful yet negative characterisation.

²⁰⁰ *Gísla saga*, ch. 34.

²⁰¹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 22.

kill him, offering him sixty pieces of silver to do all in his power to find the man. Eyjolf took the money and promised to take care of the matter.)²⁰² This characterisation of Eyjólfr as a bounty hunter who tries to hunt down Gísli on the behalf of Börkr is thus established, and the way that he is not personally involved in the hunt may be part of his negative depiction.

It is also of note how Eyjólfr's characterisation is consistently negative while being commissioned by the local *goði* to act out the will of society by hunting down Gísli, which in turn makes Gísli appear like the one in the right as the saga protagonist.²⁰³ While Börkr's prosecution of Gísli's outlawry is driven by his own personal vengeance, Gísli has also been officially outlawed by the Þing as he has been deemed an enemy of the local society.²⁰⁴ Despite at last standing victorious against Gísli, this is achieved only after bringing fourteen men with him. Of these, many die or are wounded by Gísli while Eyjólfr himself gets struck by Auðr.²⁰⁵ He is once more said to whet these men into fighting Gísli, seemingly still afraid of facing him alone head-on, and here uses any means to encourage them: 'Þá eggjar Eyjólfr menn sína allfast ok heitr þeim miklum fríðenum, ef þeir næði Gísla.'²⁰⁶ (Then Eyjólfr whetted the men strongly and promised them great gifts if they could get Gísli.) The shaming of Eyjólfr and Börkr continues after Gísli is finally dead, as Þórdís attempts to kill Eyjólfr and then publicly divorces Börkr. Looking at his characterisation, there is something not only loathsome and opportunistic about Eyjólfr, but also something pitiful in the way he hunts for Gísli for so many years with little to show for it besides a sword wound dealt by a woman, over half of his companions killed, and a pouch of silver that he was previously struck with.

²⁰² 'Gísli Sursson's Saga', 2:26.

²⁰³ Mundal has described the saga as that of a biography of Gísli with a clearly shown protagonist, where there are two distinctly separated groups of characters: the group surrounding and supporting Gísli, and the opposing group of characters that fights against him, and who automatically are regarded more negatively for opposing him. Mundal determines the morals of the saga to be similarly clear, where good characteristics and endings are given to the good characters, the bad, opposing characters are given their due punishment. Else Mundal, 'Sagalitteraturen og Soga om Gisle Sursson', in Jan Ragnar Hagland, *Soga om Gisle Sursson* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1990), 105-106; Meulengracht Sørensen has also commented on Eyjólfr's depiction as someone who keeps formally within the law while behaving in a way that 'morally speaking' would bring him closer to being a *níðingr*. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 75-6.

²⁰⁴ Taylor Culbert, 'The Construction of the "Gísla saga"', *Scandinavian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1959), 157; See also legal argumentation speaking in favour for the killing of outlaws and how it was rewarded and shown as a collective interest in Ahola, 'Outlawry', 102-3.

²⁰⁵ Eyjólfr is struck twice by Gísli's wife, Auðr, and this furthers his shame. See chapter 3. Eyjólfr is defamed in in *Ölkofra þáttur*, when Broddi accuses him of stealing oxes and of turning into a mare in fear when he was pursued for the theft. *Ölkofra þáttur* ch. 3.

²⁰⁶ *Gísla saga*, ch. 35.

Fittingly, the last that is said of Eyjólfur sums up his role: ‘En Eyjólfur ferr heim ok unir illa við sína ferð.’²⁰⁷ (Eyjólfur went home and thought ill of his journey.)

Mörðr Valgarðsson

One of the most infamous men in saga literature is Mörðr Valgarðsson from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a character characterised by his treachery, greed, and shrewdness, and whose actions are pivotal to the events of the saga.²⁰⁸ Several scholars have noted his outstanding villainy, as well as the evil nature of his actions.²⁰⁹ This is not only noticeable by his actions, but also in the saga author’s descriptions of him. The text is generous with the negative descriptions, such as calling him ‘sly by nature’ (slægr mar í skapferðum), and ‘malicious in counsel’ (illgjarn í ráðum), similarly to women’s cold counsel and their unpredictable and treacherous nature.²¹⁰ Furthermore, as is unusual for the saga genre, instead of implicit signs within the story, Mörðr is clearly stated to be jealous of Gunnarr (‘Hann öfundaði mjök Gunnar frá Hlíðarenda.’)²¹¹ He is also shown to be a coward as he does not dare to risk fighting Gunnarr despite scheming to get him killed at multiple occasions, and whenever his life is threatened he asks for *grið* instead of fighting like the others. Once, Mörðr is alerted by a servile woman that Gunnarr is fighting Skammkell and Otkell, Mörðr’s friends, but despite his obligations towards both sides, he is said to stay inside his home as they fight after stating: ‘Þeir einir munu vera’, segir hann, at ek hirði aldri, þó at drepisk.’²¹² (‘It’s just men who, for all I care’,

²⁰⁷ *Gísla saga*, ch. 37.

²⁰⁸ Concerning his actions there are conflicting views of Mörðr’s character. Peter Hallberg calls him ‘the real villain of the drama’, while Einar Ól. Sveinsson calls him one of the main villains along with Þjóstólfr, Hrapp and Skammkell who all lack moral inhibitions. Richard F. Allen goes as far as to call Mörð ‘an embodiment of an evil-seeking agency, evil whether considered in terms of Loki and pagan malice or of the devil and Christian envy.’ Miller however disagrees on this flat reading of Mörðr, who instead highlights his politically sound motivations and instead reads him as a lesser Snorri goði. See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 69; Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, vol. 136 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 78; Richard F. Allen, *Fire and iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 106; Miller, ‘Why Is Your Axe Bloody?’, 270. See also Jamie Cochrane, ‘...svá slægr maðr sem þú ert kallaðr’: Mörðr Valgarðsson, A Monster and his Critics’, in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*.

²⁰⁹ Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*. 87-8; See also Cochrane, ‘A Monster and his Critics.’

²¹⁰ Other damning descriptions are ‘fleirum þykki mér sem illt leiði af honum en gott.’ (it seems to me that more bad comes from him than good.), ‘allt illt við Mörð at eiga’ (dealing with Mörð is bad all around), and, said by his own cousin Runólfur Ulfsson: ‘fleiri hljóta af honum ill ten gott.’ (more bad comes from him than good). *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 112, 119, 115.

²¹¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 25, 46.

²¹² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 54.

he said, ‘can kill each other.’)²¹³ He is also shown to be greedy, and willing to receive gifts and goods for his assistance and evil counsel. On two occasions he receives goods from Gunnarr’s enemies to advise them on how to harm him.

Vilhjálmur Árnason has compared Mörðr to Njáll in how he uses his social intelligence and wisdom like Njáll to give counsel, and how in contrast to Njáll he fits the role of an antisocial villain who, while skilled with social rules and the Icelandic laws, uses this knowledge without prudence or honour in his own interest which often hurts his supposed kin. While Njáll is said to have the virtue of *góðgirnd* (benevolence), and is said to give good advice (*góðgjarn*), Mörðr is instead said to give cruel counsel (*illgjarn í ráðum*).²¹⁴ While Njáll with his lacking physique and old age is deemed unmanly by many within the saga, he is still stated by the saga author to be manly in actions such as in his last moments before he is burned in his house.²¹⁵ Mörðr on the other hand, is much younger than both Gunnarr and Njáll, but still refuses to face them directly and instead conspires with their enemies and what seems to be his well-organised network of beggar women spies.²¹⁶ He thus has no excuse for his use of these non-honourable and masculine tools of getting his will across.

As for Mörðr’s actual cases of whetting, his acts of whetting are not described in detail, but are instead part of his overall manipulations and instigations of conflict. Instead of making open displays of whetting, it is done in smaller groups where seemingly only the recipients are in attendance. For one, he attempts to make Þorgeirr Starkaðarson bring up a case against Gunnarr: ‘Mörðr eggjar Þorgeir á um málatilbúnað við Gunnarr. Þorgeirr fór at finna Ömund, biðr hann nú búa til vígsmálit Egils, bróður síns, ok sona hans.’ (Mörðr whetted Þorgeirr into starting a lawsuit against Gunnarr, and Þorgeirr went to find Ömund.)²¹⁷ While he in this case is whetting another man into raising a court case, he is still forcing discord that would ultimately result in Gunnarr’s death together with the men he uses as sacrificial pawns. He advises, by request, the

²¹³ Here too the nameless (servile) woman may represent the general public opinion, as she runs home to alert Mörðr about the fight to make him break it up, and when he first refuses, she is shocked to hear that he would refuse to help his kinsman and friend. ‘Njal’s saga’, 3:146.

²¹⁴ Fittingly, at a later occasion when at the Alþing, Njáll in vain tries to argue for another settlement, and when it fails, he says ‘An evil root has spawned from this case’ (‘af illum rótum hefir upp runnit’). *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 122. The evil here could have been spawned by Mörðr. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 117; Vilhjálmur Árnason, ‘Ethos in Transformation’, 234; Miller also notes the shared characteristics between Njáll and Mörðr, see Miller, ‘Why is Your Axe Bloody?’.

²¹⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 38; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 129.

²¹⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 71-2.

²¹⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 65.

man Þorgeirr Starkaðarson on how to get Gunnarr killed.²¹⁸ Two other times Mörðr orchestrates armed attacks on Gunnarr's life, either meant as actual threats for his life, or simply to instigate chances for Njáll's prophecy to come true through the murder of Þorgeirr.²¹⁹ More deplorable, he suggests on multiple occasions that they can kill Gunnarr by burning his house instead of having to face him in direct combat.²²⁰ This is instantly rebuffed by his fellow attackers due to their sense of honour, something that both they and the author knows that Mörðr lacks. In turn, Gizurr taunts him back by showcasing their difference in honour and says that someone as smart as Mörðr should come up with a plan that works. This by itself would not be defined as whetting as it is simply a suggestion, but similar to some cases of rejected whetting done by men, his dishonourable suggestion is rejected in no uncertain terms, and the difference in the two men's concept of honour is made very apparent, especially Mörðr's cowardice and lack of honour.

The second example of his whetting is much later in the saga when Gunnarr at last is dead, and he is instead working on manipulating the Njálssons into killing Höskuldr Hvitanesgóði, Njáll's foster son and the son of Þráinn Sigfusson, a relative of Gunnarr whom Skarpheðinn had previously killed: 'Mörðr rægir Höskuld at vanða ok hefir þá enn margar nýjar sögur ok eggjar einart Skarpheðin ok þá at drepa Höskuld ok kvað hann mundu verða skjótara, ef þeir færi eigi þegar at honum.'²²¹ (Mörðr slandered Höskuldr as was usual, and now he had even more new stories. He whetted Skarpheðinn and the others to kill Höskuldr and said that he would flee if they did not go after him.) Skarpheðinn now agrees to do it if Mörðr promises to join them and participate, and they all promise to do it. Instigating the murder of Höskuldr, who is almost martyr-like in his behaviour and death, is unquestionably a bad deed. Despite his instigation and participation in the murder, Mörðr is not punished judicially for his misdeeds, and even when a man called Ketill first says that more bad than good had come from him ('því at fleirum þykki mér sem illt leiði af honum en gott'), it is later said that he like the others got the impression that Mörðr was someone he could trust (En þegar er Mörðr talaði við

²¹⁸ Mörðr knowingly has Þorgeirr involve the son of Otkell that Gunnarr has previously killed, after Njáll has warned Gunnarr not to kill twice in the same bloodline if he wants to keep his life.

²¹⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 69, 72. As Jamie Cochrane notes, it is not stated how Mörðr obtains his knowledge of Njáll's prophecy, and it is unknown whether it is picked up by his network of spies, a sign of his equally remarkable social wisdom to Njáll, or if there is some more insidious supernatural explanation. Cochrane, 'Monster and his Critics', 130-1.

²²⁰ 'Mörðr mælti: 'Brennu vér hann inni.' *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 77.

²²¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch 110.

Ketil, þá fór honum sem öðrum, at svá þótti sem Mörðr mundi honum trúr.)²²² At this point, only the reader, together with Njáll, truly sees through him.

Despite his hidden manipulation and cowardice, Mörðr's masculinity is not as questioned as one could expect. The only one to call his actions unmanly are his own father, Valgarðr inn grái (the Grey), a callous pagan viking of the old ways. In fact, no concrete physical descriptions are given of Mörðr, and unlike heroes like Gunnarr whose physical strength and beauty are brought up in detail, it is Mörðr's scheming and evil nature that is frequently described. He is also negatively judged because of his relation to his father.²²³ Valgarðr's byname *inn grái* by has negative connotations, and Ólafur Hansson and Kirsten Wolf have in their research on the colour grey in Old Norse literature found it to be associated with deviousness (*grályndr*) and hostility, something that suits Valgarðr's characterisation.²²⁴ His evil counsel leads to one of the worst and most damning events in the saga: the Njálssons' murder of their foster brother Höskuldr Hvítanesgoði.²²⁵ After seeing that Mörðr has lost *þingmenn* and influence over his *góðorð* to Höskuldr, something that Valgarðr had handed him while he was outside of Iceland, he criticises how 'unmanly' he has handled things. Valgarðr then whets him into manipulating Höskuldr and the Njálssons into killing each other so that he can regain what he has lost:

‘Illa hefir þú launat mér goðorðit, er ek fekk þér í hender, at fara svá ómannliga með. Vil ek nú, at þú launir þeim því, at þeim dragi öllum til bana.’²²⁶

(You have paid me back badly for the *góðorð* that I handed over to you when you handled it such an unmanly way. Now I want you to reward them so that it will be the death of them all.)

Here Mörðr's passivity and loss of influence are deemed unmanly, and only by bringing forth the deaths of Höskuldr and the Njálssons can he improve his standing in his father's eyes.²²⁷ As an outsider viking who only cares about power and riches, Valgarðr

²²² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 112.

²²³ Considering the Old Norse belief of inherited traits, the qualms Gunnarr and Njáll had for Unnr and Valgarðr's marriage, together with his malevolent counsel that is given to Mörðr, Valgarðr may be considered the root of Mörðr's evil. For information on Old Norse beliefs of inherited traits, see Else Mundal, 'Kvinnesynet og forståinga av biologisk arv i den norrøne kulturen' in *Atlantisk dād og dröm*, ed. Asbjørn Aarnes (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998).

²²⁴ This byname is as previously mentioned also given to Eyjólfur inn grái (*Gísla saga*) and Þorgrímr inn grái (*Svarfdæla saga*), who share a similar negative reception. *Grár* can also be associated with wolves, who again are associated with outlaws. Kirsten Wolf, 'The Color Grey in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 2 (2009).

²²⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson also calls Valgarðr's speech act a whetting. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 73.

²²⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 107.

²²⁷ Despite Valgarðr deeming Mörðr unmanly, both father and son are shown to be willing to manipulate and cause harm through malevolent counselling and secret scheming.

seemingly have even fewer moral qualms about manipulating his peers than Mörðr himself. This despicable nature of Valgarðr is once more underlined when Mörðr attempts to convert his father to Christianity.²²⁸ Valgarðr rebukes him telling him to return to his old faith instead and proceeds to break the crosses and religious artifacts in Mörðr's home only to soon get ill and die, seemingly from divine retribution.²²⁹ It is also of note how despite Mörðr's many other bad deeds, the plot to manipulate the Njálssons into killing Höskuldr is seemingly simply too callous to be plotted by him alone and is instead pushed forward by his father who in all ways represents the most negative ideals of the pagan past.²³⁰

Mörðr's similarities to Hallgerðr can also be brought up, as the two of them are some of the most despised characters within the saga, who ultimately share some blame for Gunnarr's demise. Both of them have family ties to Gunnarr but nonetheless plot against and betray him out of their own sense of spite while using the similar kind of social tools available to them.²³¹ They are both given descriptions of their negative nature by the narrator and their surroundings before they have performed any character-defining actions within the narrative, meaning that the author wishes to direct the reader to have this specific view of them from the start. In the same way that Hallgerðr's infamous 'thief eyes' are brought up by her uncle Hrútr when she is a child, Mörðr's maliciousness is introduced as soon as he is first mentioned as well as his unpopularity amongst his peers.²³² Both of their negative characteristics are also seemingly inherited

²²⁸ At first Mörðr also refuses to take the faith when Þangbrandr travels around to convert them, in contrast to Njáll (ch. 102). His later change of mind and attempt at converting Valgarðr is likely more to display Valgarðr's wickedness rather than his own newfound virtues. See also Ian R. Maxwell, 'Pattern in Njáls saga', *Saga-Book* 15 (1957), 39.

²²⁹ As Susanne M. Arthur details, 15th century scribes have seemingly had strong feelings about Valgarðr. Besides saying that he fell sick and died and was buried in a mound, in a few of the remaining manuscripts of *Brennu-Njáls saga* scribes have added remarks such as 'ok fari bannsetr' ('and may he be damned.'), and 'ok var hann þar heigðr hundheiðinn ok þrifist hann alldrei. Bannsettur!' (and he was buried in a mound, the despicable heathen, and he will never thrive. Damned one!) For more details, see Susanne M. Arthur, 'The Devil in Disguise? Scribal Remarks on Valgarðr inn grái in Njáls saga', *Leeds Studies in English* 43 (2012), 4-5. Translations by Arthur. See also Maxwell, 'Pattern in Njáls saga', 39.

²³⁰ Miller has discussed the killing of Höskuldr, and how ultimately Mörðr's counsel was not necessary for the murder to take place. Furthermore, how nobody blames Mörðr for this murder. See William Ian Miller, 'Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics In The Icelandic Bloodfeud', *Scandinavian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1983). See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Kunstverket*, 98-107.

²³¹ They both become Gunnarr's family through marriages that are unwanted or negatively received by others. Unnr, Mörðr's mother and Gunnarr's relative marries Valgarðr without her family's approval, something Njáll, Gunnarr comment negatively upon. When it comes to Hallgerðr's marriage, Hrútr warns Gunnarr of her mixed character to no avail. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 25, 33.

²³² Cochrane, 'A Monster and his Critics', 127-8; Hallgerðr's villainy has also been underlined both within the narrative and in studies of the saga, but whereas there have been some more positive or otherwise mixed opinions on Hallgerðr's character, Mörðr's reception has remained mostly negative.

from despised and violent pagan men within the saga, as he gets it from Valgarðr inn grái, and Hallgerðr's hard-heartedness is further developed by her foster father Þjóstólfr's negative influence. As for their main difference, as Ian Maxwell has stated: 'Mörðr takes advantage of openings created by others, [...] but Hallgerðr creates the situation to which the others contribute, makes and fosters division, and may be regarded as the first and continuing impulse behind the main sequence of events.'²³³

Another man whose scheming is a major feature of his negative characterisation is Þrándr í Götu from *Færeyinga saga*.²³⁴ After falsely promising to trade his support to the man Hafgrímr during a fight for payment, he instead simply watches as Hafgrímr fights, and when asked about why he is not doing as promised, he replies:

‘Þú ert skauð at meiri, at þú getr eigi sótt tvá menn við tvennar tylftir manna, ok er þat hátt þinn, at hafa jafnan aðra á skotspæni fyrir þér, ok þorir litt í nánd at koma, þegar nokkur er mannraun í; væri þat ráð ef nokkur dáð er í þér, at ráðast fyrstr upp at Bresti, en aðrir fylgði þér eptir; ella sé ek þat, at þú ert engu nýtr.’ ok eggjar nú sem ákafligast. Ok eptir þetta hleypr Hafgrímr upp í klettinn at Bresti ok leggir til hans með spjóti ok rekr á honum miðjum ok gegum hann.²³⁵

(‘You are the greater dastard, in that you are unable to defeat two men with two dozen men, and it is your way always to get others to shield you, and you hardly dare to come close when there is any danger around. The thing to do, if there is any pluck in you, would be for you to be the first to rush up at Brestir, and let others follow behind you; otherwise it seems to me you are worth nothing.’ and he egged him on now as hard as he could And after this Hafgrímr leaps up onto the rock against Brestir and lunges at him with his spear and drives it at his middle and through him.)²³⁶

This in-depth whetting and taunt appear to be particularly damning considering how Þrándr had already gotten paid for his promised aid, and how he seemingly attempts to turn it into falsely encouraging advice for the improvement of Hafgrímr's honour. This rings all the more hollow as Hafgrímr is soon killed by his enemy with little honour to show for it. Afterwards, Þórðr is seen trying to advocate for the murder of the two young sons of their now dead enemies, before quickly pretending that it was a joke when the other men are distraught at the suggestion.²³⁷ His wickedness does not stop there, as he attempts to sell the boys as slaves, although this too is ultimately prevented. Furthermore, Þrándr is also guilty of stealing a good deal of silver, adding hidden theft

Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, ‘Note on the Translation’, *Njal's Saga* (1960), 30-1; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 155-6; Helga Kress, ‘Saga mín er sönn en smá. Um ævikvæði kvenna’, *Són* 6 (2008).

²³³ Maxwell, ‘Pattern in *Njáls saga*’, 31.

²³⁴ *Færeyinga saga* has not been passed down as a separate manuscript but is instead found in sections in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*, and is likely written down around 1220.

²³⁵ *Færeyinga saga*, in ‘Soga um Sigmund Bresteson’, ed. and trans. Jørg Reitan (Oslo: Samlaget, 1908), ch. 7.

²³⁶ *Færeyinga saga*, ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes (Dundee: Thorisdal, 2016), 12.

²³⁷ *Færeyinga saga*, ch. 7.

to the list of despicable acts done by him.²³⁸ Despite this, and as proof of how characterisation and sympathy can change with the times and depending on social and cultural values, Þrándr í Götu is today considered a national hero of the Faroe Islands, unlike his opponent Sigmundur who is the Norwegian king's man.²³⁹

When men on equal footing with the whettee whet them, they often take the form of deceptive allies, enemies of the protagonist, or the protagonist himself. As men, they stand out by how they tend to remain more central in the sagas and participate in conflicts in more ways than simply the whetting. This makes them more complex characters than the regular plot device whetter, but it also reflects more negatively upon their character. While the whetting may be a one-off thing, it still lessens their moral stature. In the rare instances where they are not judged for it, their following actions are able to justify their whetting, and in these cases it is up for discussion whether this whetting is truly comparable with the villainous and cowardly whetting found elsewhere. This is for example the case with well-known men such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Snorri goði, who are said to *eggja* someone else in the sagas. For example, in the case of Egill, he does it to rile on men to fight: ‘hann eggjar þá liðit mjök til framgöngu; var hann fremstr í brjóstinu.’²⁴⁰ (He strongly egged the people to go forward, and he was standing in the forefront.) Here, the context is that Egill is urging the fighters in the midst of battle, and the author makes sure to quickly add that Egill himself was not hiding from the battle but instead in the forefront.²⁴¹

Servile men

Unlike the servile women's apparent freedom to speak up with little to no repercussions, the same is not necessarily the case for servile men. In rare cases, they are shown to whet the whetted man for unknown reasons, and things tend to fare worse

²³⁸ *Færeyinga saga*, in ‘Sigmundur Bresteson’, ch. 2, 3; Another man who is both guilty of hidden theft, killing man and livestock, as well as being said to whet is Óspakr Glúmsson from *Bandamanna saga*. Óspakr is described as a very difficult man (*ódældarmaðr mikill*), and ‘mikill maðr vexti ok sterk, ódæll ok uppivözlumikill’²³⁸ (a big man of size and strong, difficult, and very boisterous.) It is also noticeable how the saga author describes him being found dead with a washing bowl filled with blood dark as tar, supposedly as symbolism for his character. *Bandamanna saga*, ch. 12.

²³⁹ For more on the characterisation in *Færeyinga saga*, see Andreas Schmidt, “‘hin verstí maðr á þöllum norðrlöndum”, or House of Cards in the Faroe Islands: Conceptualising the “Bad Guys” in *Færeyinga saga*’, in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*.

²⁴⁰ ‘Egils saga’, ch. 54.

²⁴¹ In Snorri's case, he is said to whet the men seeking his aid extensively (Fannsk þat á, at hann hvatti þá heldr fram), but here supposedly his other counsel is deemed valuable enough to make up for it, and he only receives praise from the *goði* Gissur hvíti. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 139.

for them than their female equals. A particularly damning example is that of the worker Narfi from *Kormáks saga*, whose main purpose throughout the saga is to come up with dastardly plots against the saga protagonist Kormákr. Already from his introduction, the saga author makes no attempt at trying to hide the negative view of him: ‘Narfi hét maðr; hann var með þorkatli; hann var hávaðamaðr ok skapheimskr, hælinn ok þó lítilmenni.’²⁴² (A man called Narfi lived with Þorkell. He was a noisy and foolish, boastful, and not much of a man.) On two occasions he is shown to whet others into doing things that will harm or otherwise affect Kormákr. The first time is when he nudges the well-known duellist Hólm-Bersi into marrying Steingerðr, Kormákr’s love interest. Despite Hólm-Bersi’s reversions against it, Narfi whets him by saying: ‘Ef men hræðast Kormák, þurfu þeir þess eigi, því at vandlega er hann horfinn þessu máli.’²⁴³ (‘If people fear Kormak, they don’t need to, because he’s made a point of dissociating himself from this affair.’)²⁴⁴ The taunt of suggesting that a *vigamaðr* and *hólmgöngumaðr* (killer and duellist) such as Hólm-Bersi would be afraid of anything by itself functions as a whetting, and this is made worse as Narfi’s motivation is to get the strong and dependable Hólm-Bersi into his conflict with Kormákr. He thus intentionally uses this whetting as a step of a plan of allying with a strong fighter that he could later have fight Kormákr, instead of having to fight him in person. The second of Narfi’s whettings comes soon after in the same chapter when he has brought Kormákr the news of Steingerðr’s marriage. Here he mocks Kormákr’s previous behaviour and challenges him to face Bersi: ‘[...] ok kveðr Kormáki munu þykkja auðverdra at blistra i spor Steingerðar ok gera farar sina hraklegar enn berjast við Bersa.’²⁴⁵ (‘and he says that Kormákr would likely think it easier to whistle after Steingerðr and do his shameful errands than fight Bersi.’)²⁴⁶ This angers Kormákr greatly and he threatens him, but ultimately he leaves to fight Bersi, and thus Narfi has succeeded in crafting their feud through whetting.

While Kormákr himself is not presented as a lawful or strictly heroic character within the saga and instead is shown to threaten Steingerðr’s family’s honour, Narfi, a servant of Steingerðr’s father, is not shown to be on the lawful good side either. In a

²⁴² *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4.

²⁴³ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7.

²⁴⁴ ‘Kormak’s saga’ trans. Rory McTurk, in *Complete Sagas*, 1:189.

²⁴⁵ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7.

²⁴⁶ Narfi here refers to how Kormákr had pursued Steingerðr without her family’s approval, and ultimately left her at the altar.

similar manner to Eyjólfur from *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, he is an external force pulled into the conflict that attempts to threaten the saga's hero, instead of the person hiring them doing so himself. Perhaps because of these two men being made to do this instead of the offended individual himself, these agents who act on the behalf of order are presented negatively both as more cowardly than their heroic opponent, as well as more despicable. They do not act out due to a personal need for revenge, but either due to an order or personal motivations based on economic gain or spite.²⁴⁷ In Narfi's case, his motivation is never explained beyond his working for Þorkell, Steingerðr's father. Considering his lack of other motivation despite his many misdeeds, it has been argued that his actions are more designed to drive forward the saga events rather than depicting a realistic figure.²⁴⁸

Besides whetting, Narfi taunts Kormákr in verse form, and in return Kormákr hits him with the hammer side of his axe and proceeds to insult Narfi back by calling out Narfi's low status as a servant, as well as comparing him to both a slave and a bitch (tíkr ørendi hafði.)²⁴⁹ Narfi's previous negative descriptions as a noisy and foolish *litilmenni* is here combined with Kormákr's insults are directed at his lower status: he is a simple field hand and cook, and the most damning, someone who sows manure in the fields, a job for slaves. He has been put back in his place, but a character like Narfi does not let this stop him, as he later organises a dishonourable *mansöngur* to be composed to Steingerðr and falsely attributed to Kormákr. The *mansöngur* in question pictures Steingerðr as an old mare and Kormákr as a stallion mounting her, and as planned, this causes further discord.²⁵⁰ Jenny Jochens' deems *mansöngur* to be erotic libel close to *níð* rather than the previous perception of it being a love song, due to the presumed intention and effect the poem has on the targeted woman's family's honour.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Similar leniency is shown to other skald protagonists to different degrees, as well as outlaw protagonists. They also tend to not end up with the woman they have attempted to court, nor live long. On Kormákr's social uncouthness, see John Stephens, 'The Unwelcome Suitor: Patriarchal Norms, Masculine Inefficiency, and Negative Modelling in the Old Icelandic Kormáks Saga', *Parergon* 10, no. 2 (1992).

²⁴⁸ Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 46.

²⁴⁹ As Bjarni Einarsson points out, Kormákr's reaction here appears to be a result of something missing from the manuscript, as Kormákr's reaction seems to be out of place based on Narfi's behaviour, as Kormákr is not shown to be made aware of Narfi and Þorkell's agreement of keeping Kormákr away from Steingerðr. Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer*. 46; The errand mentioned refers to the beating he just got with the hammer, further disgracing Narfi for being punished like a dog. *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4.

²⁵⁰ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19.

²⁵¹ Jenny Jochens, 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 2: Gender Relations', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Gilbert Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 318-9.

Supported by this is how in *Grágás* §238 it is stated that *mansöng*, similarly to other *níð* speech, is punishable with full outlawry.²⁵² Jochens' argument is thus: 'By suggesting his sexual use of a woman to whom the poet had no legal right or by describing her in voyeuristic terms, he insulted the man who controlled her. *Mansöng* was part of a larger complex of verbal insults and libels that aroused anger and produced violence which society needed to control.'²⁵³ This is also seemingly Narfi's intention, as it is the following conflict between Kormákr and Steingerðr ensues, and in the end Kormákr kills Narfi for it without repercussions. Narfi is here presented as a lowly character both in his position within society as a servant made to do a slave's job, as well as someone who further disgraces himself with his misdeeds. He is also shown to be cowardly, as he is unwilling to fight Kormákr directly like his other foes, and instead depends on manipulative tactics.²⁵⁴ In the end he is killed by Kormákr for his antagonism without any repercussions being mentioned.

Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu offers a rare case where the servile man's whetting is received better. Here Steingrímur is feuding with the man Vemundr who had dishonoured him two years prior by being behind a plot that involved another man hitting Steingrímur with a sheep head at the þing.²⁵⁵ As Steingrímur is delegating work to Hrafn, Hrafn reminds Steingrímur that he has not delegated the most important work to anyone, that being to get revenge for the hit:

Hrafn segir, at þat var tveggja vikna verk, ok sagði, at hann lét eigi vinna þat, er meira lá við en riga at slíku. Steingrímur spyrr, hvat þat er. Hrafn svarar: 'At hefna sauðarhöfuðhöggssins, er þú vart lostinn á leið um sumarit fyrir tveim vetrum af Þorgeiri smjörhring.' Steingrímur kvað hann eigi mega meiri fyrir gjalda en lífit. Hrafn kvað þá eigi ómakligri at kenna af nökkurs, er Þorgeir höfðu þess eggjat, ok kvað hann ekki þat af sjálfum sér hafa tekit. Steingrímur kvazk eigi þat vita, – 'en þó hefi ek annat hugat þér verkit en ek sagða þér.'²⁵⁶

(Hrafn said Steingrim had not given orders for work that was more important than fussing with something like this. Steingrim asked what that was. Hrafn answered, 'Avenging the blow with the sheep's head that you were struck by Thorgeir Butter-ring at the assembly two years ago.' Steingrim said Thorgeir could not pay more for that than his life but Hrafn said it would not be inappropriate to make those smart for it who had egged Thorgeir on and said he had not acted on his own. Steingrim said he did not know that, 'but nevertheless I have thought of another job for you rather than the one I just mentioned.'²⁵⁷)

²⁵² *Grágás* K §238; See also Marold, 'Mansöng—a Phantom Genre?.'

²⁵³ Jochens, 'Gender Relations', 319.

²⁵⁴ He is said to sneak around during Kormákr's fight with the two brothers that Narfi is allied with, instead of aiding them in any way (Narfi skjáði um it ytra.) *Kormáks saga*, ch. 5.

²⁵⁵ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, IF 10, ch. 13.

²⁵⁶ *Reykðæla saga*, ch. 13.

²⁵⁷ 'The Saga of the People of Reykjadal and of Killer-Skuta', trans. George Clark, in *Complete Sagas*, 4:273.

While not directly challenging Steingrímur's honour as a part of his incitement, Hrafn still questions Steingrímur's lack of revenge against the real culprit who dishonoured him. Considering Steingrímur's hesitation and the time spent since the event, one can also assume that it is Hrafn's involvement which drives him into action. Still, this is not presented negatively, as it is instead the manipulative Vemundr and the foolish Þorgeirr who struck Steingrímur who are presented as disruptive and villainous.

Based on just these examples, in these sagas male servile whetters may function more similarly to free equal male whetters or servile women whetters, and in turn their whetting may be received more or less negatively. These depictions also suggest that the more involved the servile male whetter is in the feud itself, the more negatively he is presented.

Chapter conclusions

The concept of whetting is first and foremost a literary motif utilised to explain narrative plot points, motivations, and acts of violence in the *Íslendingasögur*. However, the unified way saga authors have depicted men of the past as being uniquely vulnerable to manipulation captures the importance of honour found depicted elsewhere in the Old Norse society. Furthermore, it captures the fear of women and wicked men manipulating this weakness. In addition to the formulaic detailed type-scene of whetting in the sagas, the act is done by different kinds of characters, both male and female, and it is not limited to specific social standings, ages, or social relation to the whetted man. While the female whetters and in particular the wives may perform structured whettings with bloodied tokens and an audience, the right inciting words in a private conversation may prove just as effective when it comes to the whetter getting their will across.

Whetting and its way of weaponising honour can vilify in three ways: Firstly, there is the social fear of actions causing disorder, destruction, and rebellion against peace and the status quo, here in the form of manipulating and misusing obligations of family and friendships. Secondly, there is also the societal fear of those in control, the men of status, being manipulated by women, the weak, and the Other. Thirdly, there is the gendering of whetting itself. For men whetting is emasculating and shameful unless he is visibly too old or weak to fight himself. On the other hand, a woman can be considered cruel and even beastly or trollish, which is likely due to their demands and

their consequences being considered inhuman or uncivilised. Beyond this, whetting is presented the most negatively when it is egoistically motivated, destructive, and cowardly. Here wives acting in their own and their own kin's interest stand out negatively, especially when this interest goes against that of her husband and his kin, and more than other women they are chided for this. Unlike men, however, they hardly face further repercussion for their whetting. For men, the most negatively depicted whetters are free men who due to their unwillingness, cowardice, inability, or other unacceptable inhibitions choose to whet other men of a similar position into action, in lieu of doing it themselves.

Of male and female whetters, the least negatively depicted ones are parents whetting their adult sons. This is particularly the case with mothers. While there are instances where these mothers' urge for aggression directed at their young sons can be questioned, this is hardly shown to be presented as negatively as a more modern audience would regard it as, and in the cases of adult sons this kind of whetting can even be presented as the right or necessary action within the context of responding to offence. Similarly, fathers and old men are the least negatively depicted male whetters, even if this too is situational. While these men can be subject to judgement by their sons or by their surroundings, this is less condemning as these whetting fathers are shown to be excused by their old age preventing them from taking direct action themselves. Besides the whetting parents, there is the position of the servile women's whetting, which through their anonymity as well as their more obvious status as a plot device are able to transgressively speak up and taunt their masters and other free men with few to none repercussions. This is furthermore a position that they do not share with their male counterparts, who occasionally are punished severely for their words.

Despite the acts of whetting often having these negative results, there is still leeway and nuance in the results, which suggests diversity in the morals of the different anonymous saga authors, as well as the uncertain border between the ideals that may belong to the time being depicted that has remained intact to be written down, and the author's version. In general, the further away the whetter is from the ideal of the free man who is capable of doing his own fighting, the more justifiable and accepted the whetting appears to be. This includes whetters considered weaker due to age, physical health, social status, or gender. The intersections of these 'softening' facets of the whetter's identity are shown to generally influence both their success with the whetting, as well as both their characterisation and the reception of said whetting. This is not to

say that the male whetter is necessarily regarded as more villainous than the female whetter, and there are both positive to neutral, and negative depictions and receptions to both male and female cases of whetting. Still, while the male whetter places himself in danger and judgement by challenging or using words of *níð* against another man, the saga women are not subjected to the same ramifications as men due to their gender.

Chapter 2: Magic and Magical Violence

Þórðr kom til bæjar Kotkels með tíunda mann; synir þeira Kotkels váru eigi heima. Síðan stefndi hann þeim Kotkatli ok Grímu ok sonum þeira um þjófnæð ok fjölkynngi ok lét varða skóggang; hann stefndi sökum þeim til alþingis ok fór til skips eptir þat. [...] sagði Kotkell þá sonum sínum, hvat þar hafði í görzk. Þeir bræðr urðu óðir við þetta ok kváðu menn ekki hafa fyrr gengit í berhogg við þau um svá mikinn fjándskap. Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp ǫll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat váru galdrar. Því næst laust á hrið mikilli. Þat fann Þórðr Ingunnarson ok hans forunautar, þar sem hann var á sæ staddr, ok til hans var gort veðrit. Keyrir skipit vestr fyrir Skálmarnes. [...] Síðan reis boði skammt frá landi, sá er engi maðr mundi, at fyrr hefði uppi verit, ok laust skipit svá at þegar horfði upp skjöltrinn. Þar drukknæði Þórðr ok allt foruneyti hans, en skipit braut í spán, [...] Þessi tíðendi spyrjask víða ok mælask illa fyrir; þóttu þat ólífismenn, er slíka fjölkynngi frömdu, sem þau Kotkell höfðu þá lýst.¹

(Thord rode to Kotkel's farm with nine other men. Kotkel's two sons were not at home. Before witnesses, Thord charged Kotkel and his wife and sons with theft and sorcery, an offence punishable by outlawry for life. They would have to answer the charges at the Althing. This accomplished he returned to the boat. [...] Kotkel told his sons what had happened. The two brothers were furious and claimed none of their enemies had ever dared treat them like this. Kotkel then prepared a high platform for witchcraft which they all mounted. Then they chanted powerful incantations; they were sorcery. A great blizzard came up. Thord Ingunnarson and his companions at sea felt how the force of the weather was directed at them and steered the ship west beyond the headland at Skalmarnes. [...] all of a sudden a breaker rose where no one could ever recall having seen a skerry and rammed the ship so that it capsized at once. Thord and all his companions were drowned and the ship smashed into small pieces, [...] The news of these events spread and was condemned; men capable of such sorcery as Kotkel and his family had performed were considered truly evil.)²

During one of the events in *Laxdæla saga*, the local community of Laxárdal is turned on its head as a family of Hebrideans settle down and drive out the neighbours with theft and witchcraft. The members of the family, consisting of Kotkell, his wife Gríma, and their two sons Hallbjörn Slíkisteinsauga (Sleekstone-Eye) and Stígandi, are said to be skilled magicians (Ǫll váru þau mjök fjölkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn), and that they were disliked by their neighbours.³ This animosity between the family and the local community increases, and they are sued for their crimes, with the penalty being that of full outlawry. Following their magically powered murders of several of the local community, including a twelve-year-old boy, they are hunted down and killed one after another. Kotkell and Gríma are stoned to death, while their two sons Hallbjörn and

¹ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35, 36.

² 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', trans. Keneva Kunz, in *Complete Sagas*, 5:50.

³ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35.

Stígandi are both killed while on the run, with bags over their heads to stop them from using the destructive magic of their ‘evil eyes’ against their hunters.⁴

Kotkell’s family is at multiple points said to be disliked by the local community. This is mainly due to how they terrorise it with their evil magic and theft, and the need to stop them is voiced at several points, underlining them as a threat. The narrative justifies their fears by the lives that the family takes. Additionally, they are said to be envied, as they do not need to do much work while not having to buy hay or food for the winter, something that is possibly due to their magic.⁵ The family is in all ways outsiders, invading the community of Laxárdal as well as Iceland itself from the Hebrides, and their actions are both supernatural and loathsome, not following the laws nor norms of the local society, for which they are consequently killed.⁶

With this example in mind, this chapter will be looking at how the saga authors in the *Íslendingasögur* depict those that use magic, if it is presented as negative, and what role their gender plays in this negative depiction. The focus will be on magical violence, magical trickery, and other invasive or intrusive acts of magic that cause harm and disorder within the local communities depicted within the sagas. Magical violence will here refer to forms of magic that inflict direct physical harm upon other people. In addition to causing direct physical harm with magic, a witch’s magic is also frequently shown to aid or facilitate the harm caused by someone else, and will thus also be included. First, the concept of magic, *trolldómr*, and similar terms will be discussed, what place it had in the sagas, as well as in the Christian Old Norse world, including in the laws of the 13th century. Afterwards, the chapter will go into further depth by analysing depictions of magic and magical violence, and how these depictions differ in characterisation, such as the gender and role of the one performing the magic.

Before getting into the topic of magic, it must once more be stated that the cases that will be discussed in this chapter were written in the 13th and 14th century, meaning

⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 36; This destructive stare is a frequent motif when it comes to witches, and it is shown that people from the local community knows to cover their head with a bag, or at one occasion a special seal skin bag, to avoid their gaze. Ingjald Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1928), 66-8; Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi*, (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003), 31-9.

⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 37, 38.

⁶ Another clearly villainised male witch who also steals is Þórólfr sleggja (sledgehammer) in *Vatnsdæla saga*, who enhances and ‘trollifies’ his twenty black cats to fight a group of local men. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 28. See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Big Black Cats of Vatnsdalr and Other Trolls’, in *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, ed. Luciana Cordo Russo and Santiago Francisco Barreiro (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

that these depictions of pagan magic from the 10th-11th century have been penned and influenced by an Iceland and Norse world that have gone through Christianisation, and reflect the consequent views and morals of said world. There was also a gradual development in the negative perception of and persecution of witches, based on the influence of continental Europe. While the sagas to some extent may have kept aspects of the pre-Christian view of the use of magic with encounters and conflicts with the supernatural, this does not mean that the narratives have not been affected by the views and values of 13th century Christian culture. While this distinction was important in the previous chapter about the topic of whetting, it is arguably even more relevant when it comes to the regard of magic, due to the Christian conversion that happened in Scandinavia in the 11th century. As anthropologist Dorothy Hammond has voiced: ‘Magic is not an entity distinct from religion but a form of ritual behaviour and thus an element of religion.’⁷ Similar to the saga depiction of whetting, there is the question of to what degree the magical actions were believed in, and to what extent they were used as a literary device to explain otherwise unexplainable events such as natural disasters and disease. Magic, like whetting is far less frequent in the contemporary sagas than in the more distant and fantastical saga genres. However, in the case of magic, Old Norse laws continued to exist forbidding both magic and the assistance of those practicing it. Persecution of witchcraft also increased in later times, as will be detailed below.

The term ‘witch’ will here be used as a gender neutral term for those practicing magic, as the gender distinctive witch and wizard would create unsuitable associations. While magic and witchcraft have a modern association with something primarily feminine, there is a more balanced number of depictions of male and female practitioners of magic in the Old Norse sources.⁸ In the *Íslendingasögur* these characters appear in many forms, and both their descriptions, actions, and fates differ greatly, as do their roles. As the use of magic in the sagas is not always inherently villainising, this chapter will look at what exactly makes it so, and what role the practitioner’s gender plays in this characterisation. Here then, there is the question of the correlation of the supernatural, the monstrous, and the feminine. There is also the

⁷ Dorothy Hammond, ‘Magic: A Problem in Semantics’, *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970), 1355.

⁸ François-Xavier Dillmann, *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), 157.

role of the maliciously intended male witches, such as the *seiðmenn*, who are villainised both by their harmful acts, and their degenerate, unmasculine role.

Magic, Old Norse religion, and the unknown Other: introduction and theory

The concept of magic, from the Greek *mageia* and Latin *magia*, has through different ages and cultures primarily revolved around the concept of otherness. It is, going by Karen Jolly's definition, 'most often a label used to identify ideas or persons who fall outside the norms of society and are thereby marked as special or nonnormative, either for the purpose of exclusion or to heighten a sense of mysterious power inherent in their status.'⁹ This phenomenon manifests in different ways and with different names, of which some within the Old Norse culture will be discussed later in the chapter.

The dichotomy between the heretical, demonic, and generally pagan magic versus the miraculous, divine power given by God is also found within the Old Norse literature of the 13th century, such as in the *Íslendingasögur*, and in the *konungasögur*. Here there are encounters with the supernatural: witches, giants, shapeshifters, trolls, and other threats from the pagan faith endanger the local society or are met in the wild, and the faithful may put them down for the betterment of all. Organised prosecutions of those utilising magic were also portrayed as part of the process of the Christianisation of Norway in the *konungasögur*, such as in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*, sagas written in the first half of the 13th century. Magic is also greatly featured in the later fantastical tales of the *fornaldarsögur* of the 14th century, in which wicked witches and supernatural monsters and trolls are frequently encountered in faraway lands.¹⁰

The topic of magic in Norse literature has been of interest for a long time, and in particular during the last three decades there has been an increased interest in the gendered aspect of it, some of which will be discussed in further detail below.¹¹ Other

⁹ Karen Jolly, 'Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices', in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 3: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse images of women*.

¹¹ Works such as Dillmann, *Les magiciens*, Katherine Morris' *Sorceress or Witch?* from 1991, as well as Ármann Jakobsson and Catherine Raudvere's works on the meaning of the term *tröll* have brought new questions into the day. See also the more recent works of Stephen A. Mitchell. Morris, *Sorceress or*

scholarship has been on the depictions of magic and how they relate to the Old Norse religion and mythology, such as the works of Gro Steinsland, Catherine Raudvere, Brit Solli, and Neil Price.¹²

While I will only briefly get into the topic of the Old Norse pagan belief and its connection to magic in this thesis, it is still important to see where the vilification of the witch comes from. Not only is it based on the negative Christian view directed at something representing the pagan past, but also possibly the remains of the negative gendered perceptions within the pagan faith itself. Within the Old Norse laws, the laws against the use of *trolldómr* tend to relate to the laws against having and practicing pagan beliefs as opposed to the Christian ones, and the act of performing *blót*. The supernatural and at times religious fights between the pagan powers of old and the new faith is another motif found in the *Íslendingasögur*. Here pagan witchcraft is often depicted to be something evil and despicable that must be defeated to cleanse the local community or re-establish the status quo. However, despite Christian aversion to paganism and magic, there are still nuances pointing to this period of change, and even positive depictions of the pagan magic to be found.¹³ This is even pointed out in *Fóstbræðra saga*: ‘Nú fyrir því at kristni var ung ok vangör, þá sýndisk þat mörgum mönnum atgørvi, at maðr væri fjölkunnigr.’¹⁴ (Since Christianity was new to the country and had not fully taken hold, many considered [magic] quite an advantage.)¹⁵ Some, like François-Xavier Dillmann has argued for a more balanced view of witches in the sagas based on them frequently belonging to the intellectual, social, and economic elite within the Icelandic society, while Price has questioned the consistency

witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); Raudvere, ‘Trolldómr in Early Medieval Scandinavia’, in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 3. The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: The Athlone Press, 2002); Raudvere, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition. Mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003). Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Trollish Acts’; Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Ármann Jakobsson and Mayburd eds., *Paranormal Encounters*.

¹² Steinsland, ‘Husfruer, gydjer og volver’, in *HUN - en antologi om kunnskap fra kvinners liv*, ed. Gjertrud Sæter (Oslo: Spillerom, 1996); Steinsland, *Norrøn religion: myter, riter, samfunn* (Oslo: Pax, 2005); Raudvere, ‘Trolldómr’; Raudvere, *Norrøn tradition*; Brit Solli, *Seid: myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid* (Oslo: Pax, 2002); Price, *The Viking Way. Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. 2 ed. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019).

¹³ See for example the devoted Christian Guðríðr who helps the esteemed *völva* Þorbjörg lítilvölva (Little-völva) perform *seiðr* to see the future through participating in the act of magic singing (*varðlokur*). *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 5. For the discussion of shamanism in the description of Þorbjörg’s rituals, see Dillmann, *Les magiciens*, 275-308, as well as François-Xavier Dillmann, ‘Seiður og shamanismi í Íslendingasögum’, *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1993).

¹⁴ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 9.

¹⁵ ‘The Saga of the Sworn Brothers’, trans. Martin S. Regal, in *Complete Sagas*, 2:369.

of this view.¹⁶ There is also the matter of the possible merging of secular and religious power with the *goði*'s and other powerful individuals' position in Old Norse cultic practice. Despite the supposed importance given to this practice, these cultic and magical aspects of their position are rarely detailed in the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁷

Some Old Norse terms for magic

For this thesis, the word 'magic' will primarily be used as an umbrella term to refer to supernatural phenomena, particularly in the context of magical violence.¹⁸ There are several specific terms in the Old Norse language when it comes to the concept of magic, and with them there are many different connotations that leaves the English words 'magic', 'sorcery', 'witchcraft', and 'sorcerer' too limited and loaded by themselves. The wide span of these terms, and what they mean both based on the situation where they would be used, as well as what kind of connotation they invoke also help to reveal the many facets of the beliefs of magic there have been in Old Norse. To better understand the nuances, an introduction is in order. The two most relevant terms for this chapter are *trolldómr* and *seiðr*, two terms that relate to the dangerous paranormal, pagan practices and beliefs, despicable actions, and the margins of the Old Norse society.¹⁹

Trolldómr

Trolldómr and *trollskapr*, like their strange and monstrous *troll*- prefix implies, often have more negative connotations by their association to the dangerous and supernatural. *Troll* by itself is a generic term primarily used for huge creatures, giants, fiends, and to some extent, demons.²⁰ In particular in old Icelandic the *troll* term correlates to

¹⁶ In his thesis, Dillmann identifies 70 or so saga characters described as workers of magic, and studies their characterisation and social status. Dillmann, *Les magiciens*; Price, *The Viking Way*, 332-3.

¹⁷ For a more detailed look on the *goði*, *gyðja* (female *goði*), and other more obscure cultic leaders and their role, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 33.

¹⁸ For discussions on the terms to use for medieval magic, see for example Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8-17.

¹⁹ For a more in-depth explanation of the different terms used for magic, see Lucie Korecká, *Wizards and Words: The Old Norse Vocabulary of Magic in a Cultural Context* (Munich: Utzverlag, 2019).

²⁰ For this study, it is necessary to separate the *troll* term as it is used and presented in the 13th and 14th century Old Norse literature, from how it is used in later times in the Scandinavian fairytales and folklore, even if there at times are overlapping details; Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary: Based on the Ms. Collections of the Late Richard Cleasby* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 641.

something of great or gigantic size: ‘maðr mikill sem troll’ (a man as large as a troll).²¹ As a prefix, *troll-* is thus often used to describe something of a particularly large size. Still, the *troll* term is used more broadly than that, and can refer to a variety of fiendish or beastly creatures and people regarded as *trollsliga* and *trollsligr* (troll-like).²² According to Katja Schulz, there are seventy-two examples of the *troll* term being used in the *Íslendingasögur*, and another ninety-six cases in the *fornaldarsögur*.²³ In the interest of this thesis then, the use of the *troll* term will focus on those who while described as humans, still possess supernatural powers, possess some beastly traits, or transgress normality in other ‘trollish’ ways. For example, enemies who prove to be difficult to defeat by normal means may be described as trolls or trollish due to their magic powers or physical strength with phrases like ‘*it mesta troll*’, ‘*mikit troll*’, and ‘*líkari tröllum en mönnum*’ (more like a troll than a man). The *troll* definition is also used by Christians about pagan people and their antagonistic activities that must be stopped. An example is in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason, where in Hálogaland there was said to be ‘*svá mikit um tröllagang*’ (so much trollish activity), that the king had to travel up there and do something about it.²⁴ In speech, despite the different uses for the *troll* term, it is distinctly negative, and is used in speech to cause offence by name-calling and fixed curses.²⁵ The term is external and othering, and it is rare that one refers to oneself as one, especially not in the *Íslendingasögur*.²⁶ While this trollish identity and traits were things one could be born with or develop as one grew, they are also depicted as things one can learn both in the sagas and in the other source material.²⁷ The *troll* term is also interesting in its breadth when it comes to the witches

²¹ For more on the concept of the *troll*, see Martin Arnold, ‘Hvat er tröll nema pat?: The Cultural History of the Troll’, in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

²² Ármann Jakobsson has found four uses of *trollsligr* in the *Íslendingasögur*, which is used on a variety of creatures, including a witch, a ghost, and a ‘blámaðr’ (black man), as well as an offence directed at a man. Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Big Black Cats’, 44.

²³ Katja Schulz, *Riesen: Von Wissenschütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda und Saga*, vol. 20 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004), 39; For a more in-detail discussion on the term, see also Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Trollish Acts.’

²⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Trollish Acts’, 47.

²⁵ Like previously mentioned on the topic of insults and honour, saying that a man had been sexually used by a *troll* is stated to be sufficient offence to justify murder. See the previous chapter.

²⁶ The *troll* term is also othering in other ways, such as when it is given to *blámenn* (black men, literally meaning ‘blue men’), due to their different skin colour, and their deemed trollish tendency to fight without restraints and to bellow. Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Trollish Acts’, 51, 47.

²⁷ Stephen Mitchell, ‘Learning Magic in the Sagas’ (Paper Presented at the Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2000); For nightmare hags in a wider perspective, see Catharina Raudvere, *Narratives and Rituals of the Nightmare Hag in*

who summon a supernatural creature, most likely by malice. As the laws such as *Jónsbók* suggest, there was also the fear of a witch, who could be deemed a troll, to call upon another troll (*vekja upp troll*), which could mean a multitude of dangerous, supernatural beings, such as the *kveldriða* (night-rider), an evil spirit summoned by a witch that can attack others at during the night.²⁸

Gender as related to the concept of *troll* and giantism is also a topic of relevance here, as well as the concept of the monstrous femininity. Female trolls and giantesses (*gýgjar, jötnar*) are also featured in the *Íslendingasögur*, albeit not as often as in the more fantastical sagas. While in the mythology sources they have violent yet occasionally intimate relations with male gods, in the *Íslendingasögur* they appear to represent a monstrous femininity found in distant places far away from common society, uncontrollable and unpredictable, but still at times attractive, which results in some men being born from the brief union between a man and a giantess, which can explain some of his trollish traits.²⁹ This combination of female monstrosity and the specific relation this creates with them and the men they interact with is worth looking into later in the chapter. Furthermore, while this chapter will focus on characters who are still to be considered more human than not, this concept can at times be more fluid, and in different ways both men and women are shown have lost their humanity through their interactions with the supernatural and their evil deeds, thus something that must be defeated.

Seiðr

Seiðr is perhaps the most unique magical term, due both to its religious ties and its gendered connotations. As Price has described it: ‘*seiðr* and all its attendant rituals, the whole complex of a possible Norse “shamanism” and its correlates, is nothing less than

Scandinavian Folk Belief, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²⁸ Jan Ragnar Hagland, ‘The Troll and Old Norwegian-Icelandic Law’, in *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition*, ed. Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, Borders, Boundaries, Landscapes (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018), 176.

²⁹ In his study of the mythological encounters between Æsir and other-world females, McKinnell divides these meetings into myths of exploitation and of confrontation. McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 109. One example being Búi Andriðsson’s relationship with Fríðr, the daughter of Dófri, the troll king of the Dofri mountain (*Dofraffjall*), and their son Jökull Buasson. *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF 14; Martin Puhvel, ‘The Mighty She-Trolls of Icelandic Saga and Folktale’, *Folklore* 98, no. 2 (1987); In comparison, see also Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, ‘Transforming the Trolls: The Metamorphosis of the Troll-Woman in Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss’, *Quaestio Insularis* 9 (2008).

a view of the nature of reality itself.’³⁰ In *Heimskringla*’s *Ynglinga saga*, traditionally suspected to be written by Snorri Sturluson in the 1220s, *seiðr* as a concept of magic is connected to the Old Norse religion and its gods, the *Vanir* and the *Æsir*, and particularly Freyja and Óðinn.³¹ It is explained as the greatest power, as it is said to give the practitioner knowledge of the future and of people’s destiny, and could affect people’s health and even cause misfortune and death, and steal knowledge and strength.³² *Seiðr* as a form of magic has in past research been compared to shamanism, such as that of the indigenous Sámi, certain Siberian communities, and that of Native American tribes, while possessing its own unique traits. The discussion on *seiðr*’s likeness with shamanism has been ongoing, among the earliest ones supporting a shamanic interpretation being Johan Fritzner and Dag Strömbäck, but since then some scholars, such as Jere Fleck and Francois-Xavier Dillmann, have argued that there are few if any similarities between the Old Norse *seiðr* and shamanism.³³ In her book on *seiðr*, Brit Solli distinguishes between different types of *seiðr*, one kind that is divinatory, such as the kind practiced by the *völur* or some Sámi people (*Eiríks saga rauða*, *Vatnsdæla saga*), and ‘black’ *seiðr* that is more harmful, such as curses (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*.)³⁴

³⁰ Price, *The Viking Way*, 327, 69-71.

³¹ *Ynglinga saga* is the first section in *Heimskringla* that is a genealogical account of the kings going back twenty-eight generations to Freyr. *Ynglinga saga* is closely based on the older *kvað Ynglingatal*, which according to Snorri was composed by the skald Þjóðólfr enn hvinverski sometime during the 9th century, supposedly during the time of King Haraldr hárfagri. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*; Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga: En studie i historiske kilder* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1991); Price, *The Viking Way*, 56-69.

³² *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7.

³³ Strömbäck was also the first to systematically go through the Old Norse textual sources for descriptions of *seiðr*. Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1935); For overviews on the debate, see Åke Hultkrantz, ‘Scandinavian and Saami religious relationships: Continuities and discontinuities in the academic debate’, in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. M. Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001); Price, *The Viking Way*, 260; Jere Fleck, ‘The knowledge-criterion in the Grímnismál: the Case Against Shamanism’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 86 (1971); Jere Fleck, ‘Óðinn’s Self-Sacrifice—A New Interpretation: I: The Ritual Inversion’, *Scandinavian Studies* 43, no. 2 (1971); Dillmann, ‘Seiður og shamanismi’; Stefanie von Schnurbein, ‘Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: a Theory Between Ideological Camps’, *History of religions* 43, no. 2 (2003); Asko Parpola, ‘Old Norse seið(r), Finnish Seita and Saami Shamanism’, in *Etymologie, Entlehnungen und Entwicklungen: Festschrift für Jorma Koivulehto zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Hyvärinen et al., (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, 2004); Rune Blix Hagen, ‘Witchcraft and Ethnicity: A Critical Perspective on Sami Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Northern Norway’, *Writing Witch-Hunt Histories. Challenging the Paradigm*, eds. Marko Nenonen and Raisa Maria Toivo, (Brill: Leiden, 2014); See also Parpola, ‘Old Norse seið(r), Finnish Seita and Saami Shamanism’; Solli, *Seid*, 181-2; Bandlien, *Man or Monster?*, 57. On gender and sexual practices within circumpolar religion, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 249-53.

³⁴ She also distinguishes between the kind of *seiðr* that Óðinn is believed to do, a kind of ‘travelling *seiðr*’ (reise-seid), as opposed to the ‘divinatory *seiðr*’ of the *völur* (spådoms-seid). Solli, *Seid*, 139-40.

Despite the existence of male practitioners of *seiðr* (*seiðmenn*), the practice itself appears to be specifically femininely coded in Old Norse literature, and is shown to be regarded as something disgraceful and *ragr* for a man to do.³⁵ This connection between *ergi* and men practicing *seiðr* has been a topic of interest for several scholars.³⁶ One particular topic of interest here has been on the gods Óðinn and Lóki, and queer theory readings of them.³⁷ Particularly with Óðinn there is the question of how he, as a known practitioner of *seiðr*, would be the masculine god of the elites, while also practicing arts associated with effeminacy and great shame.³⁸ Solli has argued that *seiðr* and its gender ambiguity should be regarded as a part of the Norse religion, and that Óðinn and other male known performers of *seiðr*, the *seiðberendr*, constituted a third gender.³⁹ To this argument, Solli brings up stanza 33 in the Edda poem *Hyndluljóð* (The Lay of Hyndla), where the term ‘*seiðberendr*’ (*seiðr*-carrier) is used to refer to a third group of wise people or witches, alongside the female *völur* (*völur allar*) and the male witches (*vitkar allir*).⁴⁰ The form of the word *seiðberendr* implies something male, but it has strong female associations as it can be read as something female bearing children. As a suffix, *-berendr* has been associated with female animals in some legal texts, and elsewhere it has also been read by some as a crude term referring to female genitalia.⁴¹ Price has questioned Solli’s argument of a third gender based on the speculative etymology of *seiðberendi*.⁴² Crossdressing in general is punishable by lesser outlawry in *Grágás* K

³⁵ Jochens distinguishes between the more mythical *völva* and the more mortal sybil, where the sybil did not have automatic connection to the information and thus had to engage with a magic *seiðr* ritual to access it. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 116.

³⁶ A point brought up by Ronald Grambo is how the male Sámi shamans, *no ’aidi*, are not associated with the transgressive effeminacy and sex roles, as opposed to the man practicing Norse *seiðr*. Instead Grambo states that the male shamans of the Siberian communities are more similar, with crossdressing and passive homosexual relations. See Ronald Grambo, ‘Unmanliness and Seiðr: Problems Concerning the Change of Sex’, in *Shamanism Past and Present: Part I*, ed. Mihály Hoppály and Otto von Sadovszky (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1989).

³⁷ Else Mundal, ‘Androgyny as an Image of Chaos in Old Norse Mythology’, *Maal og minne* 1 (1998); Brit Solli, A. Gustafsson, and H. Karlsson, ‘Odin the Queer? On Ergi and Shamanism in Norse Mythology’, *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum-en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh* (1999); Solli, *Seid*; Brit Solli, ‘Queering the Cosmology of the Vikings: A Queer Analysis of the Cult of Odin and “Holy White Stones”’, *Journal of Homosexuality* 54, no. 1-2 (2008); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Óðinn as mother’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 126 (2011); Price, *The Viking Way*, 55-69, 175-7.

³⁸ Price, *The Viking Way*, 175-7.

³⁹ Solli, *Seid*, 147-8, 152-3; Solli, ‘Queering the Cosmology’, 197-9.

⁴⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 74.

⁴¹ The progenitor of the *seiðberendr* is in the stanza called ‘Svarthöfi’ (Blackhead). While Jochens has interpreted this as an innuendo for female pubic hair, Strömbäck has argued for it being literal, considering the connection between witches and darkness. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 74; Strömbäck, *Sejd*, 27-8.

⁴² Price, *The Viking Way*, 177, 84, 341.

§254, and it is given as a reason to divorce in *Laxdæla saga*.⁴³ In the sagas and in the Eddic poems, male crossdressing is depicted as shameful but useful for disguises.⁴⁴ Male crossdressing is also a rare motif in archeological finds, such as the Gotlandic Lärbro Tängelgårda stones I and IV, where bearded men are shown to wear what looks like the kind of long dress used to indicate women.⁴⁵ Price has said that it is conceivable that the stones depict a gathering of *seiðrmenn* or the like.⁴⁶ Elements of sexual transgression, crossdressing, and other kinds of gender ambiguity of different kinds have also been found to be tied to shamanism across the circumpolar area.⁴⁷ Determining sex and gender has also been an issue within archaeological works, such as funerary archaeology looking at arguable ‘sorcerer graves’ from the Viking Age.⁴⁸ In the literary sources the staff is the most characteristic of the witch’s equipment, and in 26 Viking Age burials in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark iron staffs have been found, with eight more found in burials within the Norse sphere of influence. Most of these graves have been defined as women’s graves due to artefactual association and them containing items deemed female such as weaving equipment and jewelry. However, this gendering of burials is considered provisional, especially considering the possible gender ambiguity when it comes to witches.⁴⁹

A more negative related term is *seiðskratti* (*seiðr*-cackling), which refers to a particularly wicked male or female witch practicing *seiðr*.⁵⁰ In later sagas this is also associated with magic that conveys invulnerability to damage.⁵¹ One manner of *seiðr* shown both within the sagas and the laws is *útiseti* (literally ‘sitting outside’) and involves the act of lying out in wait at night in order to do a specific kind of magical

⁴³ Male ‘crossdressing’ may include a man wearing a shirt with a deep enough neckline. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 34-5.

⁴⁴ For example, Þórr disguised as *Freya* in *Þrymskviða* 15-19. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 73.

⁴⁵ Eva-Marie Y. Göransson, ‘Bilder av kvinnor och kvinnlighet: genus och kroppsspråk under övergången till kristendomen’, PhD Thesis (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1999), 67-9.

⁴⁶ Price, *The Viking Way*, 175.

⁴⁷ Price, *The Viking Way*, 223, 249-53.

⁴⁸ For a study on ten Scandinavian Viking Age graves likely to belong to *völur* or other kinds of witches, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 84-118.

⁴⁹ In total some 51 staffs including wooden staffs have been found. For more on the staffs in the Old Norse sources and the archaeological finds, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 132-68. On the uncertainty of gendering burials, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 341-2. See also Neil Price et al. ‘Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj. 581’, *antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019).

⁵⁰ See also *karlskratti*, *kvennskratti*. Besides meaning witch the word *skratti* is tied to hags, monsters, or other supernatural being, with examples of added prefixes being *vatnaskratti* (water-sprite, sea monster). See also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Hvað er seiðskratti?’, *Vísindavefurinn*, February 12, 2006, <http://visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=5565>.

⁵¹ Bo Almqvist, ‘I marginalen till Sejd’, in *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning*, ed. Gertrud Gidlund, (Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag, 2000), 255-8.

action.⁵² While this is sometimes shown to be done for divinatory purposes, it may be used to harm someone, or ‘awaken trolls’ (*vekja upp troll*).⁵³ With *-seta* (sitting) and *-lega* (lying, lying in wait) referring to their hidden but dangerous nature as an outsider, and this secret or hidden aspect of it is particularly looked down upon, similarly to that of hidden theft and hidden murder, as opposed to robbery and confessed murder.

Interestingly, despite the different terms for witches and those familiar with magic found within Old Norse literature, the most frequently used terms for them in the *Íslendingasögur* are more ambiguous. Words like *margkunnigr*, and *fjölkunnigr*, in addition to similar phrases like ‘ein som kann’ (one that know/can), ‘ein som kann meir hell anna folk’ (one who knows more than others), ‘kunna sér mart’ (know much), ‘kunna sér nökkut’ (know some things) all point to someone with more knowledge than ordinary, and implicitly of the supernatural.⁵⁴ The reason why these phrases would be used instead of the direct terms could arguably be because they are a less negative way of referring to someone practicing magic, as it is instead referring to them as someone possessing considerable amounts of knowledge, while not necessarily specifying what kind of knowledge this is. Considering the general high regard for knowledge, both within the Old Norse mythology and the later Norse culture, these references to the knowledge of witchcraft appear to be less inherently dangerous and malicious than in other cases. In contrast, words like *gerning/görning*, meaning (mis)deed, and the related titles *gerningakarl*, *gerningamaðr*, *gerningakona*, *gerningakyrtil* instead refer to the actions of the witch, and the assumed negative result stemming from them.⁵⁵ These can for example be spoken right before the witch is executed, and the curse will prove to have tragic effects on the ones it is directed at, and their families. Another word for the use of magic that is mainly prevalent in the legal material is that of *fordæða*. *Fordæða* can mean witch or sorceress, evil-doer, misdeeder, while the related *fordæðuskapr* translated to witchcraft, sorcery, and misdeed.⁵⁶ These terms are distinctly negative, and using them to refer to someone else can be a grave offence according to certain laws, as will be detailed below.

⁵² *Útiseta* is mentioned in *Voluspá*, condemned in the *Gulapingslög*, *Frostapingslög*, and in the *Borgarþingslög*. See also *Orkneyinga saga*, and the *konungasaga Hákonar saga Herðibreiðs*.

⁵³ Other words referring to seers are *spámaðr* (seer) and *spákona* (seeress), who have premonitions and visions (*spáðomr ok vísindi*).

⁵⁴ Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vár gamle trolldomsmedisin*, 63.

⁵⁵ Besides these words, there are Old Norse words for specific magical actions and states of being. For example, there are the *atkvæði*, a word used for bad premonitions and curses that are directed at the witch’s enemies.

⁵⁶ Fritzner, s.v. ‘fordæða’, ‘fordæðuskapr.’

Linguistically then, the many terms for magic show that there has been a wide belief and regard for magic and those who use it, and even if it in Christian times was regarded extremely negatively in both laws and literature, there are nuances to this too. From these examples, most of these titles and words for these people regard them as supernatural, misbehaving, dangerous, and connected to the supernatural either by their own nature or by their deeds. However, there are also cases where instead of being titled as a witch themselves, they are simply presented as someone knowledgeable or talented, which may be intentional in making a difference to their overall characterisation. In the sagas, their characterisation is also partly based on what role they have in the narrative, and what else these individuals are, be it their gender, their origins, and nature. This raises the question of whether the witches' characterisations are based more on their gender alone, or on their role within the narrative. This and more will be kept in mind during the analysis of characters practicing witchcraft later in the chapter. First, it is useful to look at how magic was sanctioned and judged in the other, contemporary sources, and how this might have influenced the *Íslendingesögur* that do not stem only from the older, oral narratives that was later written down.

The view of magic in the 13th century

Old Norse laws and magic

Before looking deeper into the depictions of magic in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is necessary to be aware of how magic was viewed in West Norse society in the 13th century, when the sagas were written, and how this might have coloured the depictions in the sagas. While acts of destructive magic are shown multiple times to be punished in the *Íslendingasögur* by both the saga heroes and the local community, the act of using magic itself is not shown to be as inherently vilified as the concept of magic is in the contemporary 13th and 15th century's society, at least according to the remaining laws. In these laws, witchcraft and associated actions are illegal, with the general punishment being outlawry. In *Gulapingslög* the illegal practice of prophesising, magic song (*galdra*), and 'evil deeds [done by magic]' are mentioned:

‘Ðat er nu því nest at ver scolom eigi lyda spám ne golldrum ne gerningum. Illum. En sa er kunnr oc sannr verðr at því. At hann segir spar. Æða ferr með spám. Þa er hann maðr utlagr oc uheilagr. Oc hverr penningr fiár hans. Pat a halft konongr. En halft biscop. [...] En sa annarr er ferr með galldra oc gerningar. Oc verða at því kunnir oc sanner. Þeir scola fara or landeign konongs várs.’⁵⁷

(Whoever is identified and convicted of soothsaying and telling fortunes, he is an outlaw and he is not entitled to legal protection; and he forfeits every penny of his property, half of it goes to the king, and the other half to the bishop[...] Other men who practice sorcery and witchcraft and are identified and convicted of this, they must leave the realm of our king.)⁵⁸

While outlawry is regularly the most severe punishment for witchcraft within the Icelandic and Norwegian laws, a more severe version can be found in a specific manuscript fragment of the *Gulapingslög*, which calls for the execution of witches.⁵⁹ In this extended version of §28 it is said:

Enn ef þæt er kent kono at hon se trolkona eða manæta. Þa skal mæla a hendr henne or husum prim. Oc se þæt adr heraz flöytt. En ef hon værðr at því son þa skal föra hana a sæ vtt oc hoggua a ryg.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Gulapingslög* §28; cf. ‘Eidsivatings-Christenret’ I, §45-46; ‘Den ældre Borgarthings-Christenret. I, §16; *Frostapingslög* III §15, §45.

⁵⁸ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 35.

⁵⁹ Addition found in *NRA 1 B*, *AM 146 4to*, and *AM 78 4to*, see *Gulatingslovi*, ed. Knut Robberstad and Carsten Lien, 4 ed. (Oslo: Samlaget, 1981), 43n25; ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 36; *NgL* 2:495; §98 in the so-called ‘Kong Sverrers Christenret’ in *NgL* 1:434; cf. §28 *NgL* 4:6; Gunhild Kværness, *Blote kan ein gjere om det berre skjer i løynd. Kristenrettane i Gulatingslova og Grágás og forholdet mellom dei* (Oslo: Noregs forskningsråd, 1996), 144-6.

⁶⁰ *NgL* 1:434.

(If a woman is accused of being a witch or a man-eater, then that should be pronounced against her from three houses, after having been rumoured in the district. If she is found guilty, she must be taken out to sea and executed by an axebow to her back.)⁶¹

This version stands out in three ways. For one, the law is unique for calling for the execution of a woman when the most severe punishment given to women in the other laws are outlawry. Secondly, the way the woman is to be executed, as will be shown later in this chapter, has some interesting ties to how in the sagas several witches and trollish women and men are killed by having their backs broken by the hero. Thirdly, here being a witch is comparable to being a cannibal, as the punishment is the same.⁶² This fragment is believed to be from about 1180, while the major remaining parts of *Gulatingslög* are thought to be written around 1250. This difference may suggest that the law of killing female witches in this manner was removed by the time of the later 1250s version.⁶³

The Icelandic *Grágás* (K §7) shares its perspective on witchcraft with the extended version of *Gulatingslög* §28, and presents separates magic into two major categories, namely magic (*galldra, gerningar, fiolkýngi*) and dark magic (*fördæs skap*):

Ef *maþr* ferr með galldra eða gerningar. eða fiolkýngi. þá ferr hann með fiolkyngi. ef hann queðr þat eða kennir. eða lætr queða. at *ser* eða at fe sinv. þat varþar honvm *fiorbavgs Garþ*. oc scal honvm heiman stefna. oc sækia við .xij. qvið. Ef *maþr* ferr með fördæs skap. þat varþar *scogGang*. Þat ero fördæs skapir. ef *maþr* gérir i orðvm sinvm. eða fiolkyngi sott eða bana. fe eða mavnnvm. þat scal sekia við .xij. qvið.⁶⁴

(If someone uses spells or witchcraft or magic — he uses magic if he utters or teaches someone else or gets someone else to utter words of magic over himself or his property — the penalty is lesser outlawry, and he is to be summoned locally and prosecuted with a panel of twelve. If a man practises black sorcery, the penalty for that is full outlawry. It is black sorcery if through his words or his magic a man brings about the sickness or death of livestock or people. That is to be prosecuted with a panel of twelve.)⁶⁵

Here black magic with the bringing of illness and death to men and animals is separated from other magical acts, and while lesser outlawry is also a severe punishment for the individual, this distinction still shows how there is a special fear and thus penalty given to those whose magic is considered destructive towards men and the animals compared to the non-destructive kinds. This is unique for *Grágás*, as in the later *Jónsbók's* section

⁶¹ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 36.

⁶² On cannibalism and the complex depictions of it in Old Norse culture, see Timothy Bourns, ‘Meat and Taboo in Medieval Scandinavian Law and Literature’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018). and Andrea Maraschi, ‘Taboo or magic practice?: Cannibalism as Identity Marker For Giants and Human Heroes in Medieval Iceland’, *Parergon* 37, no. 1 (2020).

⁶³ *Gulatingslovi*, 10.

⁶⁴ *Grágás* K §7.

⁶⁵ *Laws of Early Iceland*, 1:38-39.

vm niðingsverk (concerning the deeds of a villain), witchcraft (*fordædu skap*) is included on the list of *úbotamál*, as well as all kinds of soothsaying and *útisetur* in order to awaken trolls or to ‘promote paganism.’⁶⁶ Magic in general is thus punished by outlawry without distinction.

While the oldest of these laws most likely stem from pre-Christian times and values, they have been written down in a Christian society which is shown in the new religion’s influence on the laws, while also proving the long-lasting acknowledging of, and fear of the pagan magic. This is proven not only by the many laws against the practice of magic, but also with the punishment for those that seek out those that use magic. If it has been deemed necessary to forbid it in the laws, there has likely been a market for it, and thus a cause for the lawmakers to forbid it. However, this could also be the remains of archaic beliefs rather than contemporary notions. Additionally, biblical knowledge like Exodus 22:18: ‘thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ could also have played a part here. Additionally, considering the punishment for being found guilty of being a witch, the penalty for coming with false accusations of this were similarly severe. In the *Gulapingslög*’s §196 ‘Um fullrettes orð’ the accusation of witchcraft is stated to be a grave insult which demands full compensation (*fullrétti*): ‘þat er oc fullrettes orð ef maðr þrælar karlmann frialsan. æða kallar hann troll. æða fordæðo.’⁶⁷ (It is a word worthy of full compensation if a man names a free man a thrall, or calls him a troll, or a witch.)⁶⁸

Otherness, foreignness, and magic

One thing to keep in mind while studying these depictions of magic in Old Norse sources is the characters’ cultural and ethnical background, and how this together with the gender aspect might influence the view of their magic. Those deemed foreigners, strangers, or otherwise an ‘Other’ in the Old Norse world, as well as those found to live on the edge of, or outside of the local society, are more likely to possess strange supernatural traits and powers. Based on a cultural perspective, it is also perhaps telling

⁶⁶ *Jónsbók* IV, §2 in Jana K. Schulman, ed., *Jónsbók: The Laws of Later Iceland; The Icelandic Text According to MS AM 351 fol. Skálholtsbók eldri* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2010). The fight against the promotion of paganism and its customs in order to purify the country in the 11th and 12th century is also found in Old English laws: ‘In the first place they declared they would love one God, and zealously renounce all heathen practices.’ Frederick L. Attenborough, ed. and trans, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1922), 102-3; ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 68n133.

⁶⁷ *Gulapingslög* §196, *NgL* 1:70.

⁶⁸ For the punishment of slander and other false accusations, see for example *Grágás* K §237; *Jónsbók* IV, §24.

how to a greater extent than with whetting and physical violence, magic appears to be othering in its connection with foreign cultures. This is shown with the frequency that practitioners of magic, and especially of the dangerous kind, are said to be from more remote places such as the Hebrides, Ireland, and Northern Norway.⁶⁹ In the latter case there are also the '*finnar*' (Sámi people) who within the sagas are particularly known for their skills in magic. Despite the number of settlers of Iceland who travelled from Northern Norway, there are few concrete examples of Icelanders of Sámi background.⁷⁰ Hermann Pálsson has tried to find Sámi Icelanders by mapping out characters said to be related to trolls and the like, either by direct parentage, or further away in genealogy, due to their similarities in descriptions.⁷¹ This approach has been criticised by some, including Ármann Jakobsson, as trollishness has several meanings, but with more nuance the idea has its merits.⁷² With the Christianisation of Norway and Iceland more distance was put between the Old Norse and the *finnar* due to superstition. This is made visible by how the two times where the *finnar* are explicitly mentioned in Scandinavian laws are in the Norwegian provincial laws of the *Eiðsivabing* and the *Borgarþing*, where it is stated that it is strictly forbidden to seek out prophesies from them.⁷³ In comparison, magically adept people from Christian areas such as Ireland are sometimes shown in a less negative light.⁷⁴

Kotkell's family

⁶⁹ *Historia Norwegie* 16-24; For sources on the Sámi in the Old Norse sources, see Mundal, 'The perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse sources'; Hermann Pálsson, 'Úr landnorðri: samar og ystu rætur Íslenskrar menningar' (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1997); Hermann Pálsson, 'Searching for the Sami in Early Icelandic Sources', Article, *ReVision* 21 (1998); Hermann Pálsson, 'The Sami People in Old Norse Literature', *Nordlit*, no. 5 (1999); Sirpa Aalto, 'Neighbour or Enemy at the Gates? Construction of Space Between the Sámi and the Norwegians in the Sagas' (Paper Presented at the The Sixteenth International Saga Conference Sagas and Space, 2015); Aalto and Lehtola, 'The Sami Representations Reflecting the Multi-Ethnic North of the Saga Literature'; The trollishness of exoticism is also found in cases such as the 'blámaðr' (black man) in *Kjalsinga saga*. See Cole, 'Racial Thinking'; Price, 'Búi and the Blámaðr.'

⁷⁰ Alf Ragnar Nielssen, *Landnám fra nord* (Oslo: Orkana Akademisk, 2012).

⁷¹ Pálsson, 'Úr landnorðri', 16-17.

⁷² Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in 'Egils saga'', *Scandinavian Studies* 83, no. 1 (2011), 144n10. See also Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts.'

⁷³ Tveit, 'Otherness' Within?', 443.

⁷⁴ A rare male neutral to positive example is Bárðr stirfinn, who stops a sea storm after being asked to by his fellow travellers. A part of his magic casting here includes speaking in Irish, and having his fellow men answer in affirmative to it. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 47. See also Þórgunna from *Eyrbyggja saga*. In *Landnámabók* there is also the Norse Helgi the lean who is fostered in the Hebrides and reared in Ireland who while Christian calls upon Þórr when making difficult sea voyages.

Before looking into the different cases of witches and the gendered aspect of their villainous characterisation, it is of interest to first return to Kotkell's family from the introduction of the chapter to look at how they represent the antagonistic 'other' that must be removed without hesitation. In their depiction, they are foreign invaders who have entered the local community only to create trouble and danger for the people who lives there, without being given any insight as to why, simply something dangerous to defeat to re-establish the order of the local community. The family's misdeeds, theft and magic, take on different forms, but their most damaging crime is done when they together on a great *seiðr* pedestal (*seiðhjall mikinn*) call upon a great storm that successfully kills Þórðr Ingunnarson and all the people onboard his ship as revenge for having them outlawed.⁷⁵ Like in the case with some exceptionally dangerous, lawless groups of people, the saga describes how the locals collectively regarded the threat of Kotkell's family to be too high to let them live, and furthermore, how their kind were seen as unfit to live, especially after the murder of Þórðr and the people who died with him on his ship:

‘Þessi tíðendi spyrjask víða ok mælask illa fyrir; þóttu þat ólífismenn, er slika fjölkynngi frömdu, sem þau Kotkell höfðu þá lýst.’⁷⁶

(News of this were spread far and wide and were spoken of with blame and horror. People who did the kind of magic such as what Kotkell and his family had done were considered unfit to live.)⁷⁷

While they had already been about to be fully outlawed for their previous crimes, stated to be theft and sorcery (*þjófnað ok fjölkynngi*), before they had killed anyone, the necessity of their deaths is not pronounced before after the murder of Þórðr and his men.

Possibly the single most despicable act Kotkell's family does, more than the murder of Þórðr's people, is the planned murder of Kári, Hrútr's twelve-year-old son, an act that is particularly incriminating, even when it comes to witches in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁷⁸ After a disagreement with Hrútr, the man Þórleikr requests his new

⁷⁵ See the first page of the chapter. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35, 36. The magical creation of storms and manipulation of weather is also featured in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Fostbræðra saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Víglundar saga*. It is also featured in the *fornaldarsögur* *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, *Sörla saga sterka*, *Illuga saga Tagldarbana*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar*.

⁷⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 36.

⁷⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 36.

⁷⁸ Like mentioned in the chapter on whetting, children were generally considered excluded from the murders of blood feuds, as this would only unbalance the feud and increase the stakes. That it is here shown in the saga further incriminates the murderer in the eyes of both the relatives and the narrative.

tenants, the Kotkell family, to disgrace Hrútr, something they are said to do gladly before preparing to kill Hrút's youngest son. They move to hide outside Hrut's home at night and begin a strange chant which lulls all the people inside to sleep, besides the young Kári who thanks to the magic is tricked out of the house, and instantly killed by the magic: 'Kári spratt upp ok sá út; hann gekk á seiðinn ok fell þegar dauðr niðr.'⁷⁹ (Eventually he sprang to his feet and looked outside. He went outside into the magic and was struck dead immediately.)⁸⁰ This murder of an innocent child forces even the peaceful and overall agreeable Óláfr pá into calling others to action when he states that it was best to have the sorcerers killed as soon as possible, even if it was already too late to prevent the deaths of the victims:

Óláfr varð óðr við þessi tíðendi ok segir verit hafa mikla vanhyggju, er þeir höfðu látit setja slík illmenni í næsta sér, sem þau Kotkell vǫru [...] Óláfr kvað þá þegar skyldu drepa þau Kotkel ok konu hans ok sonu, - 'er þó ofseinat nú.'⁸¹

(Olaf was furious at the news and said it showed great foolishness to have allowed such evildoers as Kotkel and his clan to settle so close by. [...] Olaf said that Kotkel and [his wife and] his sons should be put to death at once – 'even though it's already too late.'⁸²)

Soon after, with the help of fifteen men, the hunt for Kotkell's family commences, and does not stop until the four of them have all been killed.

When it comes to the gender aspect of the depiction of this family of witches, the female witch Grima perhaps stands out by how little she stands out. While Kotkell and the two sons are shown to act on their own when it comes to magic, such as building the *seiðr* platform, the sons attempting to fighting their capturers with their storm inducing glares, Grima is said to follow along with the men's actions, and is killed at the same time as Kotkell, without being given further description. While this more often is the case with women in the sagas, this being in *Laxdæla saga*, a saga that more than any other saga attempts to show events from the women's perspective, this instead moves the attention to the actions of Kotkell and the two sons. Arguably, this means that she is shown the most neutrally out of the four, despite her also being killed at the same time as Kotkell, while being a woman.

Unlike some instances where young boys at times are presented to be considered grown up by the age of twelve, Kári is not presented in this way.

⁷⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 37.

⁸⁰ 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', 5:54.

⁸¹ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 37.

⁸² 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', 5:54.

When it comes to the three male witches, do they possess their own sense of masculinity and honour, and can there be honour in being a male witch? The two brothers are shown to take significant pride in their own position, based on them taking offence at Þórðr's hostility towards them, as this is stated to be the first time someone had ever openly challenged them so aggressively, and Kotkell is soon to build the *seiðr* platform to take revenge. Their spite is also shown in their eagerness to disgrace and wound Hrútr by killing his youngest son. Instead of them showing the saga typical motif of the dishonoured man regaining his honour through physical violence, they answer in their own way, namely through magical violence, which costs more lives and may be regarded as more indirect, hidden, and cowardly, yet more effective and deadly. In these actions one can see some sort of pride, if not personal sense of honour, both for their position and as well as spite. This sense of pride and spite are shown in several depictions of witches in the sagas, and later in this chapter it will be looked into how effective this is used as a manner of negative characterisation, as well as an argument for a potential different kind of masculinity.

While there are cases of male witches where the emasculating magic influences the men practicing it, as will be shown later in this chapter, none of the men in Kotkell's family seems to be influenced by it. Stíganði, the last surviving son on the run is even shown to be close with a slave woman (*ambátt*) during his time as a wicked strifer (*illr viðreignar*), and it is him lowering his guard around her after she made a deal with Óláfr pá that becomes his undoing.⁸³ Instead of Kotkell and his sons being made into targets of insult for despicable *ergi* acts, their main negative feature is instead their cruel deeds, the refusal to be at peace with their neighbours, and their social transgressions when it comes to magical violence and theft. The question is then if this lack of gendered mockery towards these men instead is based on their background as Hebrideans, or if the saga author of *Laxdæla saga* in this case intentionally chose not to connect femininity with magical monstrosity. In comparison to this example's lessened focus on gendering, the remaining sections of this chapter will look at how important gender is otherwise in the depiction of female and male witches, if there are differences in their sympathies, and if there are specific patterns for this.

⁸³ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 38; This lack of a gendered insult is interesting, as *Laxdæla saga* to a great deal contains commentaries on gender, and the acceptable roles thereof, such as the stories of Guðrún, Vígdís, Þuríðr, and Brókr-Auðr (Pants-Auðr), four women who all emasculate men in their lives. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 16, 30, 35.

Female witches

Female witches are frequent motifs in the *Íslendingasögur*, and they can be found in different roles and geographical settings, from within the local community, to the most distanced areas of the Old Norse known world. They can make use of several kinds of magic, be it the ability to see into the future, illusions to protect or hinder others, or more violent and damaging powers that may be more dangerous than a large group of ordinary armed men. In the cases where these women are described in detail, their descriptions may include such things as their knowledge of magic, their background, and their relations to others.⁸⁴ In this section, there will first be a look into the monstrously feminine and the fear connected to it, then a look at the motif of witches in conflict with each other, female witches working on behalf of others, and finally the characterisation of the magical (foster-) mother.

The Monstrous Feminine

As Dana M. Oswald has said: ‘The human response to the monstrous body is a desire for its erasure or its death, not for its transformation or redemption.’⁸⁵ As has previously been shown in the thesis, regular free women in the *Íslendingasögur* are almost never severely punished for their transgressions, including the crimes that would justify the killing of a man.⁸⁶ In the case of female witches, however, those that partake in magical violence, and those that assist magically in violence, are frequently shown to be put to

⁸⁴ Certain names are repeated when it comes to witches. These may have specific meanings which refer to their supernatural or vilified characteristics. For example there are names with Þor- prefixes referring to their pagan faith. Some witches have names with the -grímr/-gríma (grim, gruesome) suffix, while some female witches are named Gríma (night, mask). For example, there are two witches called Gríma alone in *Fóstbræðra saga*, and one in *Laxdæla saga*. The name *Þorgríma* can be found in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Harðar saga*. Witch characters with Katla (kettle) as their name or byname can be found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Þorskfiringa saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*.

⁸⁵ Dana M. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 116.

⁸⁶ Some examples being *níð* and certain kinds of physical violence.

death for their actions in brutal ways.⁸⁷ This appears to be due to their transgressions having moved them beyond any protection their gender otherwise would give them by common attitudes or by the narrative, and they have through their supernatural being and transgressive actions transcended into a monstrous body. This is particularly apparent in the ways they are executed, often in the ways of stoning and drowning, as well as having their backs and necks broken by the saga hero. These animalistic executions are frequently done without a trial, and these spontaneous revenge executions of these witches are occasionally shown to be praiseworthy.⁸⁸ There is also the tendency for the female body to be more freely described and brutalised when considered more trollish than human.⁸⁹ This correlation between how beastly and othered they are, and how brutal their deaths are and how justified they appear to be within the narrative is the most apparent in the cases of meetings with supernatural women such as giantesses and other physically trollish women with their supernatural size and strength, but also in the other magical gifts and different gender dynamic with the saga men they encounter and have relations with. The repeating motif is the male saga hero wrestling the trollish woman or witch and breaking her back. Killing her is particularly notable due to the physical brutality done by a man towards a woman that is otherwise hardly ever shown in the *Íslendingasögur*, and that would otherwise be seen as dishonourable for the man.⁹⁰ Interestingly, this phenomenon is also found in Old Norse mythology, as Þórr is seen fighting and breaking the backs of giantesses in Eddic Poetry such as Þrymr's sister.⁹¹ A particularly clear example can be found in *Jökuls þáttir Buasson*, where the protagonist, who is half troll on his mother's side himself, fights one of the saga's several supernatural, trollish women:

⁸⁷ In one example in *Vatnsdæla saga*, even the seemingly innocent sister of a witch is driven from her bought property and the local society due to her sister having magically caused a landslide that killed a group of people. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 36.

⁸⁸ Raudvere, 'Trolldómr', 151.

⁸⁹ For an overview of the depictions of trolls from Scandinavian folklore, fairytales, and up to modern times, see John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2014).

⁹⁰ Of the *Íslendingasögur* this is shown to be done to giants in *þáttir* like *Orms þáttir Stórólfssonar*, *Jökuls þáttir Buasson*, *Þórsteinn þáttir uxafóts*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, as well as the later *riddarasaga* *Sigrarós saga frókna*. This is also done both to the male witch Sválr and his witch wife Þúfa in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*.

Puhvel, 'The Mighty She-Trolls of Icelandic Saga and Folktale'; Riti Kroesen, 'Ambiguity in the Relationship Between Heroes and Giants', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111 (1996), 175.

⁹¹ Þórr killing giantesses is also mentioned in the poetic *Hárbardsljóð*, and in *Skáldskaparmál* from the *Prose Edda*, where he is also breaking of backs of two giantesses. For more on Þórr and giantesses, see McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, ch. 8.

Syrpa mælti: ‘Skal mik svá grátt leika, Jökull?’ ‘At því mun þér verða’, sagði hann ok braut hana síðan á bak aftr ór hálsliðunum, ok var hon þegar dauð.⁹²

(‘Are you going to be so violent to me, Jökull?’ ‘So it will be’, he said and twisted her backwards so that he broke her neck, and she was soon dead.)

Here no mercy is shown to the trollish Syrpa despite the author including her plea, and like her fellow male giants she is killed like an animal.⁹³ This tendency of killing these trollish women with their perceived monstrosity in this specific manner suggests that they are not regarded as worthy of the sword like the fellow man and warrior; instead they are harmed and killed in a manner more similar to beasts. This is also extended to how men are shown to stone witches to death without repercussions, despite how killing someone (*mann*) with a blunt edge such as a staff or rocks is otherwise considered a shameful kill (*niðingsvig*) and something worthy of outlawry according to *Gulapingslög* §178.⁹⁴ This more brutal way does however not come out of nowhere, as there are several times that witches and trollish women sometimes do seem to cross over into the beastly realm of being, making them do things that are seemingly unimaginable for normal women, such as biting through a man’s throat to kill him.⁹⁵

In contrast to the fear and danger associated with female witches, their unpredictable abilities, and their at times physical trollishness, there are also the more sexual connotations brought forward in interactions with them, shown in both female witches and trolls’ uncharacteristic sexual forwardness and presentation, and in the way they manifest their supernatural abilities. While male witches may be accused of being *argr*, namely obscene for their magic in an emasculating or effeminising way, trollish women may be accused of being *örg* for displaying a depraved, unsatiable lust which may either seduce or repulse their male targets.⁹⁶ While giantesses may stand out due to their larger stature and beauty, more trollish women tend to be described as more

⁹² *Jökuls þáttur Buasson*, ch. 2.

⁹³ Some animals, and in particular the more dangerous, outlandish, or trollish kind are occasionally shown to get the same end, such as the murderous ox in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the bear in *Finnboga saga ramma*. Another dangerous ox is killed when Josteinn priest hits it in the back with his crucifix. *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, ch. 18.

⁹⁴ ‘þat er oc niðingsvig ef maðr höggr mann við stocke æða við steini.’ *Gulapingslög* §178.

⁹⁵ Female trollish figures are shown to kill in this manner in *Þórsteinn þáttur uxaföts* and *Jökuls þáttur Buassonar*. While this is perhaps more shocking as a contrast when women do it, a few male saga characters are also shown to do it, although this is then interestingly enough the male heroes, such as Egill and Finnbogi. *Egils saga*, ch. 66; *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 29, 40. See also Atli in *Hávarðar saga*, ch. 21.

⁹⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 18-9; Solli, *Seid*, 140.

hideous and with physical abnormalities.⁹⁷ Besides their oftentimes physical abnormalities, troll women in the *Íslendingasögur* and in the *fornaldarsögur* are several times described as wearing what would be considered inappropriate dress, such as short leather tunics that barely cover them, estranging them further by how they do not adhere to human and socially agreed upon modesty. This also results in them being given descriptions like ‘mjök ókvenliga’ (very unwomanly) from *Jökuls þáttur Buasson*.⁹⁸ As Sandra Ballif Straubhaar has noted, this is likely connected then with the othering of these troll women, as they are shown as impure and inappropriate bodies, separated from, or otherwise disregarding the manners and modesty of regular saga women.⁹⁹

While these supernatural women may momentarily be shown as just another sexual conquest for the saga hero, it usually ends up going against the hero in the end. Besides the more clear cut examples of trysts between human men and giantesses and other trollish female creatures, there are cases of attempts of seduction done by witches towards men, at times supported by levels of force or predatory behaviour or violence if the advances are spurned.¹⁰⁰ In *Eyrbyggja saga* alone there are three witches who are in close contact with young men, of which two of their advances are explicitly unwanted and rejected, and in the case of the witch Katla, a rejection leads to the magical brutalisation of the young man Gunnlaugr.¹⁰¹ There is also a sense of captivity or power imbalance in some of these cases, related either to physicality, social status, or other

⁹⁷ As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has pointed out, giantesses are a distinct feature of the *fornaldarsögur*, and this stands in contrast to other Western medieval literature. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*. 60, 59-77; See also Bagerius, ‘Mandom och mödom’, 145-7; For more on the topic of the relationships between heroes and giantesses, see Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo, ‘The Giantess as Foster-Mother in Old Norse Literature’, *Scandinavian Studies* 78, no. 1 (2006), 2-12; Arnold, ‘Hvat er troll nema þat?’, 116-24; Philip Lavender, ‘Whatever Happened to Illuga Saga Gríðarfóstra? Origin, Transmission and Reception of a Fornaldarsaga’ (PhD Thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2014), 158-64.

⁹⁸ *Jökuls þáttur Buasson*, ch. 1.

⁹⁹ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, ‘Nasty, Brutish, and Large: Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the ‘Fornaldar sögur’’, *Scandinavian studies* 73, no. 2 (2001), 118; *Jökuls þáttur Buasson*, ch. 1; See also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Behind the Cloak, Between the Lines: Trolls and the Symbolism of their Clothing in Old Norse Tradition’, *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2017). See also the fear and desire of the monstrous in Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, 16-20.

¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, there are also the encounters and unions between giantesses and the Norse gods, such as the Freyr and the jotun Gerðr in *Skirnismál*, as well as and Skaði in *Háleygatal*. See Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i Skirnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygatal og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo: Solum, 1991). Kroesen, ‘Heroes and Giants’; For other European monster-human relationships, see Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15-16.

abilities. Here, two examples are the witchcraft savvy Queen-Consort Gunnhildr's forceful seduction of the younger Iclander Hrútr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and *Kjalnesinga saga*'s Búi's time spent in the underground with the giantess Fríðr Dofradóttir and her people who call him a 'bearded child' (*skeggbarn*).¹⁰² Despite the momentary gratification, honour, and gifts that are given to the men for these encounters, in the end the physical relationships both lead to trouble for the men which is suspected to be due to magic. Gunnhildr's curse affects Hrútr's manhood and ruins his marriage, and Fríðr seemingly kills Búi when he duels with their young son Jökull.¹⁰³ Thus, this kind of forceful and intimidating female sexuality is presented as both something exceptional but ultimately dangerous, like other kinds of association with the supernatural.¹⁰⁴

As with the sexualisation of othered giantesses and trollish women, this is also the case with some witches, such as those performing *seiðr*. While these rites are usually not described in great detail, perhaps due to being considered too shameful and despicable, there are still some hints of them in the sagas. For example there is the peculiar example found with the witch Ljótr in *Vatnsdæla saga* when she is spotted by her enemy:

[...]Jök er þeir bræðr kómu at, mælti Högni: 'Hvat fjánda ferr hér at oss, er ek veit eigi hvat er?' 'Þar fer Ljót kerling ok hefir beytiliga um sik búizk,' hon hafði rekit fótin fram yfir höfuð sér ok fór öfug ok rétti höfuðit aptr milli fótanna; ófagrligt var hennar augnabragð, hversu hon gat þeim trollsliga skotit. [...] 'Já já', sagði Ljót, 'nu lagði allnær, at ek mynda vel geta hefnt Hrolleifs sonar míns, ok eru þér Ingimundarsynir giptumenn miklir.' Þorsteinn svarar: 'Hvat er nú helzt til marks um þat?' Hon kvazk hafa ætlat at snúa þar um landslagi öllu, – 'en þér ærðizk allir, ok yrðið at gjalti eptir á vegum úti með villidýrum, ok svá myndi ok gengit hafa, ef þér hefðið mik eigi fyrr sét en ek yðr.' Þorsteinn kvað þess ván, at hamingja skipti með þeim. Síðan dó Ljót kerling í móð sínum ok trolldómi, [...]¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 3; *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 13-14.

¹⁰³ 'Fellt mun nú til hlítar, ok mátti móðir þín eigi hlutlaust láta vera.' ('Now you have beaten me properly, and I do not think your mother is without blame for this.') *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 18; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 6.

¹⁰⁴ These brief trysts with trollish women can sometimes be seen in the *Íslendingasögur*, although it is more frequent in the *fornaldarsögur*, which in place of the more familiar female roles have a diverse role gallery of trollish and supernatural women, who often meet their ends at the hands of the saga heroes. See Lotte Motz, 'The Divided Image: A Study of the Giantesses and Female Trolls in Norse Mythology and Literature', *Mankind quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1987); Puhvel, 'The Mighty She-Trolls of Icelandic Saga and Folktale'; Kroesen, 'Heroes and Giants'; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large: Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the 'Fornaldar sögur'', *Scandinavian studies* 73, no. 2 (2001); See also Matthew Roby, 'The Licit Love Visit: Masculine Sexual Maturation and the "Temporary Troll Lover" Trope', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 2020); Matthew Roby, 'The "Troll-Girl Revelation" Motif: Female Infantile Sexuality and Pedophilia in Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra and Jökuls þátrr Búasonar', *Scandinavian Studies* 93, no. 4 (2021).

¹⁰⁵ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 26; See also Kerling (Hag) in *Þorskfirðinga saga*, ch. 17.

(When the brothers approached, Hogni said, ‘What monster is this coming towards us here? I do not know what it is.’ Thorstein replied, ‘This is Ljot the old witch – look how bizarrely she has got herself up.’ She had pulled her clothes up over her head and was walking backwards, with her head thrust between her legs. The look in her eyes was hideous – the way she could dart them like a *troll*[...] ‘Well, well’, said Ljot, ‘I came very near to being able to avenge my son Hrolleif, and you sons of Ingimund are very lucky men.’ Thorstein replied, ‘What is the clearest sign of that?’ She said that she had intended to change the whole lie of the land there, ‘and all of you would have run wild and been driven crazy with fear out among the wild animals, and that is how things would have turned out if you had not spotted me before I saw you.’ Thorstein said that it was no surprise that their respective luck had changed. Then Ljot the witch died in her rage and sorcery [...])¹⁰⁶

Here Ljótr is not only shown to be a despicable witch intending to do harm in the worst and maddening way, she is also shown to attempt to do this in what is visibly an off-putting and indecent way, sexually loaded yet also repulsive. Her attempt at turning the earth upside down, much like herself, fails as she is discovered, but instead of having the men kill her too like they had killed her son, she is instead stated to die by her own evil magic, a motif that also is seen elsewhere in the sagas.¹⁰⁷ As can be seen here in these examples, the magical and supernatural female body is a source of fascination, but as it is perceived as something uncontrollable, obscene, and out of place, it is feared and mocked, and ultimately something to abandon or brutalise.

Witch fights

Where there is one witch in a saga, more tend to follow. There are also several examples where instead of threatening the local community, the witch instead fights one of their own. These battles in the *Íslendingasögur* generally happen between two female witches, and the fights are motivated by a rivalry or conflict between the two of them. The fight may demonstrate devastating forms of magical powers that have disastrous results for one or both witches. The inclusion of these scenes may have been due to a fascination with the supernatural, and a way of explaining an unexplainable natural event, as well as a way of showing these fights without the inclusion of regular people. While both witches may be presented negatively, either due to their actions towards regular people, or in their general characterisation or motivation, one might

¹⁰⁶ ‘The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal’, 4:34.

¹⁰⁷ Both in *Þorskfirðinga saga* and in *Egils saga* are witches shown to be killed when a rock is thrown between her legs as they try to escape into the water, killing them. While this is not connected to her magic, it can however instead possibly be connected to how women’s bodies are more often and more freely described when they are considered otherworldly and magical. The witch in *Grettis saga* who at last causes the death of Grettir also has her hip bone broken by a giant rock thrown at her by him. *Grettis saga*, ch. 78.

instead be presented in a more positive way, making the reader take sides in the fight between two witches. If so, what constitutes the more villainous witch?

One of the more brutal examples of a witch fight is found in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, between the two powerful witches Þorbjörg katla and Þorgríma smíðkona (Smith-Wife). While both witches have faced off against the powerful outlaw leader Hörðr, it is the fight between the two witches that ends with both of their deaths.¹⁰⁸ In the saga, only their torn up remains are said to be found after their fight:

Litlu síðar fundust þær Þorgríma smíðkona ok Þorbjörg katla, móðir Refs, ok fundust síðan dauðar báðar í Múlafelli. Þær vóru allar rifnar ok skornar í sundr í stykki, ok reimt þykkir þar síðan vera hjá kumlum þeira. Þess geta men til, at Þorgríma, móðir Indriða, mundi vilja sækja hringinn Sótanaut til handa Imdriða, en Katla verði ok vildi eigi lausan láta ok fyrir því dræpist þær niðr. Aldri fannst hringin síðan.¹⁰⁹

(Soon after, Þorgríma Smith-wife and Þorbjörg katla, Refr's mother, met. Both were later found dead in Mula mountain. They were both ripped and torn apart, and since then it was said that people could hear wailing from their graves. People believed that Þorgríma, the mother of Indriði, wanted to get the ring for Indriði, and that Katla had kept it and refused to hand it over, which was why they had killed each other. The ring was never found.)

Here both witches fall victim to their own and the other's destructive magic, proving the sheer power they possess and the distress it had caused, according to the wailing that could be heard since. Interestingly enough, neither witch demonstrates this kind of destructive power when they earlier in the saga each have to deal with the considerable force that is Hörðr and his gang of outlaws, instead preferring to use trickery and illusions. In Þorbjörg katla's case, she leaves the violence to the men she is supporting with her illusions. Of the two women, Þorgríma smíðkona is the one painted as the most sympathetic of the two. She is stated to be 'very knowledgeable [about magic]' (*ffölkunnig mjök*), as well as being 'a rich and proper woman', (*hon gerðist auðig kona ok mikil fyrir sér*), and instead of assisting in harming Hörðr and the outlaws, she is easily able to prevent their theft.¹¹⁰ While Þorbjörg katla is also called *ffölkunnig mjök*, the saga author specifies that she is also 'in mesta galdrakona', specifically calling her a witch by bringing up her ability to perform *galdr* (magic chants), unlike Þorgríma.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Their conflicts with Hörðr's outlaws revolve around who are the strongest, as Þorbjörg is said to brag about her magic and how the men of Geirshólmr would not be able to harm her. *Harðar saga*, ch. 25, 30, 40.

¹⁰⁹ *Harðar saga*, ch. 40.

¹¹⁰ When Hörðr attempts to steal her cattle, her magic drives the animals back to her farm, prompting Hörðr to say that Þorgríma's *trolldómr* is so strong that not even her animals can move by themselves: ('Mikit er um kynngi Þorgrímu, at fénaðr skal eigi sjálfr mega ráða sér.') *Harðar saga*, ch. 30.

¹¹¹ *Harðar saga*, ch. 24.

While both women are shown to be capable of harmful magic then, only one is directly said to be a witch, which might speak less positively in her favour. Still, in the end they are both killed due to their own greed.

We also see this difference in sympathy towards witches in *Eyrbyggja saga* and during the conflict between them. In Mávahlið, Geirríðr Þórólfsdóttir is said to be knowledgeable (*margkunnig*).¹¹² Due to this knowledge, it is said that the young and knowledge hungry Gunnlaugr often visits her to learn knowledge (*kunnáttu*) from her, implying magic. Geirríðr's witch rival is the widow Katla, who is presented in a negative light already from her introduction: 'hon var frið kona sýnum, en eigi var hon við alþýðuskap.'¹¹³ (She was good looking but there was something peculiar about her.)¹¹⁴ This unpopularity is shown as Katla appears to be jealous of the connection between Geirríðr and Gunnlaugr, stating that Geirríðr is not the only one that knows this and that: 'engi þykkir yðr nú kona nema Geirríðr ein, en fleiri konur kunnu sér enn nökkut en hon ein.'¹¹⁵ ('No woman except Geirrid will be able to please you now, but there are more women who know a thing or two apart from her.')¹¹⁶ Katla's jealousy, be it professional, carnal, or both, is clearly suggested here, as she is also stated to repeatedly attempt to make Gunnlaugr stay over at her farm whenever he visited her son Oddr, but it is stated that he always went straight home. The saga's need to express this clearly shows Gunnlaugr's rejection, something that Katla is shown to receive badly. These rejections are at last punished one night, after Gunnlaugr and Geirríðr have spent the day together, and Gunnlaugr is on his way home. Warningly, Geirríðr states: 'Þat vilda ek, at þú færir eigi heim í kveld, því at margir eru marlíðendr; eru ok opt flögð í föggu skinni.' (I don't want you to go home tonight, because it's a night of much spirit-movement and many a witch wears a fair face. You don't strike me as a lucky-looking man right now.)¹¹⁷ Gunnlaugr does not heed Geirríðr's warnings, and as he passes by Katla's farm, he once more refuses her requests to stay over, prompting her to say: 'Fari

¹¹² *Eyrbyggja*, ch. 15. This is the same Geirríðr that whet her son Þórarinn in the previous chapter.

¹¹³ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15.

¹¹⁴ 'The saga of the People of Eyri', 5:142.

¹¹⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15.

¹¹⁶ 'The saga of the People of Eyri', 5:142.

¹¹⁷ Ármann Jakobsson translates it as 'sense mares in the air', meaning night-mares, and that an ogre may hide beneath fair skin. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Two wise women and their young apprentice: A miscarried magic class', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 122 (2007), 45; *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 16; 'The saga of the People of Eyri', 5:142.

hann þá, sem hann hefir fyrir sér gört.’ (Let him go, just as he's determined it, then.)¹¹⁸ Gunnlaugr does not return home that night, and the next day he is found unconscious by the door, with the flesh of his shoulders ripped to the bone. Oddr Kötluon accuses Geirriðr of having ‘ridden’ Gunnlaugr in the fashion of a *kveldriða* (night-rider hag), and a great court case begins to get to the bottom of the incident, but in the end, Geirriðr is judged innocent.¹¹⁹ After this, there is peace for a while, until the conflict between Geirriðr’s son Þorarinn svartr and Oddr Kötluon, described in the previous chapter, happens. Both mothers support their son in different ways, Geirriðr by whetting Þorarinn into action, using non-magical means to motivate him into showing an honourable side of himself. Katla on the other hand has created a magic tunic, a saga motif where no weapon can hurt him. Þorarinn and Geirriðr’s brother Arnkell attempt to find Oddr to punish him for his actions, but due to Katla’s illusions, they are tricked thrice. In the end, however, the conflict reaches its crescendo when Geirriðr herself enters the scene, for the occasion wearing a navy cape, and a holding a sealskin bag, making her way directly towards Katla. This prompts Katla to say: ‘Mun Geirriðr trollit þar komin, ok mun þá eigi sjónhverfingum einum mega við koma.’¹²⁰ (That will be the troll, Geirrid, coming with them, [...] and simple illusions will not be enough now.)¹²¹ Despite her efforts to hide Oddr once more, Geirriðr goes directly for Katla instead, covering her head with the sealskin bag, which as previously shown is a preventive action to stop witches from using their evil eyes to cause destruction. Soon after, Oddr is hanged, and just before Katla herself is stoned, she confesses her crime towards Gunnlaugr, and despite the sealskin bag covering her head, she manages to lay a curse on Geirriðr’s brother Arnkell, causing further disaster within the family.

This story displays several views regarding witches, and different ways of presenting them. The character of Geirriðr is once more an interesting exception, as she

¹¹⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15; ‘The saga of the People of Eyri’, 5:143.

¹¹⁹ For more on the *mara* and *kveldriða*, see Catharina Raudvere, *Föreställningar om maran i nordisk folktro*, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993). And the translation: Raudvere, *Nightmare Hag*. See also Morris, *Sorceress or Witch?* 17; Caroline R. Batten, ‘Dark Riders: Disease, Sexual Violence, and Gender Performance in the Old English Mære and Old Norse Mara’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120, no. 3 (2021).

¹²⁰ The detail of Geirriðr being the one dressed in a (dark) blue cloak, a reappearing saga symbol, can be a sign of her superior position amongst her own and her enemy, or possibly be due to her role in the violence and death that ensues. See Thor Ewing, ‘“Í litklæðum”–Coloured Clothes in Medieval Scandinavian Literature and Archaeology’ (Paper Presented at the Thirteenth Annual International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 2006); Kirsten Wolf, ‘The Color Blue in Old Norse-Icelandic literature’, *Scripta Islandica* 57 (2006); *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20.

¹²¹ ‘The saga of the People of Eyri’, 5:154.

was in the chapter on whetting. Again, her actions are presented as just within the narrative, and are necessary for her family to successfully deal with the danger that is Katla and her son. She is depicted as the knowledgeable witch who knows more than she acts, and whose magic is more related to visions and seeing past illusions. She is capable of dealing with other witches without the use of offensive magic, and this in turn presents her in a more neutral light, and as the one needed to stop Katla. It is also interesting how her final act of stopping Katla is not done with her own magic, resulting in another witch fight with a test of their powers, but instead how she makes use of direct, physical action, and importantly one that non-witches would do to prevent a witch from causing harm. This could potentially have been an intentional choice to ground her, or rather de-other her by making her actions closer to those of a regular person.¹²² Katla on the other hand possesses several of the negative traits that makes a witch a danger to the local community, and early on she is even described as a *troll* beneath her beautiful appearance by Geirríðr. Her most distinct act of magical violence, the *kveldriða*, is also gendered, as it appears to be something a woman sends to harm a man after being scorned.¹²³ Together with her knowledge of, and use of magic illusions that prevent what would be considered justice, she also shows knowledge of how to cause magical violence such as the *kveldriða*, leaving a man deeply wounded. She also represents the predatory, dangerous woman who will hurt a young man with magic if he does not do as she says, such as staying the night at her farm, and the connotations there. A question that arises from this example is if there are cases where a witch that does not limit her powers are sympathised with, or if the worst witches are those that are the most active with their magic.¹²⁴

¹²² Besides Geirríðr, there is possibly also Álfðís, one of the helpers of Gísli. While she is said to be ‘fárskona sem mest í skapi ok var inn mesti kvenskratti’ (handsome in looks but violent in temper, and altogether a shrew), she hides Gísli from his pursuers by hiding him in their bed and distracts the pursuers with yelling and *galdr* so that he is not found. *Gísla saga*, ch. 27.

¹²³ The *kveldriða* is also used by a woman scorned in *Ynglinga saga*, where the king Vanlandi’s Finnish wife Drifa has the witch Hulð send the hag to either bring him to her or kill him after he broke his promise and did not return to her for ten years. Here too the attack is described in brutal details, including him seemingly being stomped and suffocated to death by the invisible ‘mare’ (*mara*). *Ynglinga saga* ch. 13.

¹²⁴ A more ambiguous witch conflict in *Eyrbyggja saga* between Þorgríma galdrakinn (Witch-face) and the witch Þorgunna from the Hebrides is also mentioned right before a sudden storm of mysterious blood appears on the farm of Fróða which initiates the plague that ends up killing not only Þorgunna and Þorgríma herself, but also many of the other people of Fróða. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 50. If counting the people who die to the plague and the undead created by it, this might rank amongst the deadliest magic attacks shown in the sagas.

Female assassins and magic as paid services

As has been previously mentioned, in several of the legal codices, not only was the use of magic illegal, but also the act of seeking aid and magical services from those practicing magic. While this is seldom stated as illegal within the *Íslendingasögur* themselves, there is still the question of how those practicing magic were regarded when the magic was done as a paid service. Here there are also nuances, such as the aid of those proficient in divination, like the previously mentioned Þorbjorg lítilvölva in *Eiríks saga rauða*, who were given the best meals, and are portrayed in a useful or even positive manner. However, more relevant to this chapter there are the cases of witches being paid for what could pass as assassination attempts, or at the very least attempts to forcefully hinder or harm their enemies.¹²⁵ More frequently these actions appear to be done by female witches.

One example is Þorgríma *galdrakinn* (Witch-face), who is paid by the jealous husband Þóroddr to create stormy weather to stop Björn Breiðavíkingakappi (Champion of Breiðavík) from visiting his wife, Þuríðr: ‘Þóroddr keypti um vetrinn at Þorgrímu galdrakinn, at hon skyldi gera hríðviðri at Birni, þá er hann færi um heiðina.’¹²⁶ (That winter Thorodd paid Thorgrima Magic-Cheek to bring about a wild storm while Bjorn was crossing the heath.)¹²⁷ This time, as Björn left to visit Þuríðr, a great snow storm and total darkness descended upon him, leaving him lost for three days. No legal punishment is given to either Þóroddr or Þorgríma for the misdeed.¹²⁸

More severe is the case of the evil witch Kjölvör in the later *Víglundar saga*, who is paid to kill the warrior poet Víglundr and his brother Trausti. This she attempts to do through weather magic by climbing onto the house roof and waving her hood towards the east, which calls upon both wind and frost from east and northeast. This causes a storm while Víglundr and Trausti are onboard a ship, and they barely make it.

¹²⁵ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 5.

¹²⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 40.

¹²⁷ ‘The Saga of the People of Eyri’, 5:181.

¹²⁸ In both cases, the person purchasing this service is a man who is unable to take revenge, or otherwise handle an offence done by another man, instead having to depend on a witch’ magic. Both Þóroddr and Þórkr are also at other points shamed in their respective sagas for their failings.

Furthermore, it is told that Kjölvör in advance used *galdrar* to make two other men ill so that their spots on the ship would be available for the two brothers.¹²⁹

In both cases, the witches are paid to specifically harm and hinder someone else through magical means. An interesting detail here is how neither woman is actually punished for their actions by the local community, despite the destructiveness of their spells. In the case of Þorgríma, she is not punished by the people, but her actions can be said to be punished by the narrative as she later suffers due to the later supernatural events at Fróðá, while Kjölvör disappears altogether from the saga without punishment.¹³⁰

A (foster-)mother's magic for support and vengeance

At times the witch does not act for her self-interest or payment, but instead on behalf of a relative. A recurring witch role that at times appears to be more ambiguously presented is the role of the magically adept mother or foster-mother who uses her knowledge of magic to either support her son or other relatives in combat, or wreak revenge.¹³¹ Unlike some witches, these women are not always held responsible for their magical actions despite their consequences, and may not be punished for their assistance, even if the relatives they support are.¹³² Most frequently this help is that of protective magic, such as protective spells and the giving of magical garb that blocks

¹²⁹ Kjölvör is described as 'fjölunnig mjök ok at öllu illa fallin, harðla óvinsæl við alþýðu manna.' *Víglundar saga*, ch. 12. Similarly, in *Gísla saga* Þorgrímr *nef* is paid by Börkr to curse the man who had killed his brother Þórgrímr: '[...] Börkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni yrði ekki at björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit, þó at menn vildi duga honum.' (Börkr paid Þórgrímr *nef* to cast a curse at the man who had killed Þórgrímr so that he would have no peace or security, even if people wanted to help him.) This curse proves to be effective, as it is stated: 'En sakar þess trollskapar, er Þorgrímr hafði haft í seiðinum, ok atkvæða, þá verð þess eigi svá ólíkiga horfa, þá bar þó alls staðar nökkut við.' Here the trollishness of Þórgrímr is also pointed out once more. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts'; This curse that turns not only the local society and fate, but also the supernatural against Gísli is said to cost a nine-year-old ox. *Gísla saga*, ch. 18.

¹³⁰ Other times, the witch will instead assist someone else in a murder. In *Harðar saga*, when a group of outlaws try to harm the witch Þorbjörg Katla, she blinds them with magic and has her son Refr and his men come and kill all but one of them. In the end she is punished for this by the narrative when she herself dies in a witch fight. *Harðar saga*, ch. 25; Kent Pettit, 'The New Faith vs. The Undead: Christmas Showdowns', in *Paranormal Encounters*.

¹³¹ Sometimes the (foster-)mothers also teach them said magic, such as Ljót and her son Hrolleifr in *Vatnsdæla saga*, and Þorgunna and Þorsteinn uxafótr in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, and Egill and Þorgerðr brák in *Egils saga*. See Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Magic and Gender: þáttur þorvalds ens Víðförla', *Scandinavian Studies* 63, no. 3 (1991), 309, and Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', in *Medieval Mothering* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 214.

¹³² Raudvere argues that the individual's guilt and responsibility for the usage of magic is more pronounced in the Christian laws than in these sources, which to some extent seems to be correct, even if there are cases where mothers are strictly punished. Raudvere, 'Trolldómr', 160.

attacks. This is hardly ever punished by the narrative, even when it is gifted to the antagonist.

While the previously mentioned Katla uses her magic to hide her son from being taken by his enemies after his misdeeds, Ljótr gives her troublemaker son Hrolleifr a magical cloak that no iron will cut through.¹³³ There are other examples of both kinds of mothers. However, frequently enough it is instead the magically adept foster-mother who aids her foster child.¹³⁴ This may be due to their possibly more othered background, as well as them not being related to the descendants in the contemporary society.¹³⁵ While supernatural foster-parents are not restricted to foster-mothers, these tend to be more positively presented.¹³⁶ A foster-mother who stands out here is Esja from *Kjalnesinga saga*, who protects and assists her foster-son Búi with her magic and gives him sound counsel. This she does both through protective spells, and with more violent means. When Búi is being hunted by his enemy Þórsteinn and his men, a stone is said to suddenly shoot from his sling, killing one of his pursuers, and afterwards, they are enveloped in darkness while Búi flees. Þórsteinn acknowledges what they have been up against, saying that they have had to fight both dog (Búi) and troll (Esja).¹³⁷ She is however, not persecuted for this murder nor for her other actions. She also aids Búi by giving him a magical sword and shirt, as well as a fur coat.¹³⁸ What is interestingly in the case of Búi and Esja is then how they are written as the heroes of the saga, despite filling the trollish and othered roles in the local community, with several negative

¹³³ Other magical and protective mothers can be found in *Vatsndæla saga*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*.

¹³⁴ Other helpful foster-mothers are Þórbjörn's foster-mother in *Grettis saga*, Sæunn in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Halldís from *Eiríks saga rauða*, Helga's healing foster-mother as well as Þordís in *Kormáks saga*. See also Þorgerðr brák, the servile witch from *Egils saga Skallegrímssonar* said to have taken care of Egill during his childhood and who saves his life at the cost of her own.

¹³⁵ One example is the woman known as Helga's magically adept foster-mother, who habitually protects others by putting their hands on them: 'Fóstra Helgu var því vön, at þreifa um men, áðr en til vígs færi; hon gerir svá við Ögmundr áðr hann fór heiman; hon kvað hvergi stórum við hnita.' *Kormáks saga* ch. 1.

¹³⁶ On supernatural pseudo-kinships like fosterage, see Gallo, 'The Giantess as Foster-Mother.'

¹³⁷ Their ties with Christianity may be a reason for this. Esja is said to be familiar with the old arts, meaning magic: ('Allir þessir men váru kallaðir skírðir, en þó var þat margra manna mál, at Esja væri forn í brögðum.'). but she is also said to have been baptized. Furthermore, while Búi does not show aversion against her magic, he refuses to do *blót* (pagan sacrifices) and even burns down the pagan *hof*. *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 2; While Esja hides Búi, and prevents Þórsteinn from properly looking for him, he threatens her, saying that they would have attacked her (*gangast*) if it had not been for his father, and he sees no reason to take her captive. *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 5; Her magic as a threat is also voiced later, in relation to how Búi is a dangerous foe to fight ('margkunnedi Esju'). *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 8.

¹³⁸ The magical shirt is so that neither sword nor magic can harm the wearer, while the sword is guaranteed to strike true. Before his duel with Kólfinnr she further prepares him for the fight by giving him a bath while massaging all his bones and dressing him up as she saw fit the next day. *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 8, 9.

parallels found within the sagas.¹³⁹ Not only does Búi violently protest against the pagan religion of the local society, making him an outlaw and enemy of the pagan believers, but he also steals the woman Ólof from her family, albeit supposedly with her own permission.¹⁴⁰ In the end, Esja dies a peaceful death from age, without judgement for her liberal use of magic. On the other hand, Búi is accidentally killed in a wrestling match as he refuses to acknowledge his past contact with the Norwegian giantess Fríðr, and their son Jökull, and Búi insinuates that his death is caused by the power of Fríðr.¹⁴¹ In an ironic twist, Búi is here killed when someone else's mother's magic aids them in combat, similar to how he himself had previously been protected. While the witches and supernatural women in Búi's life are depicted as living well without harsh judgements and it is his involvement with magic that keeps him alive, in the end magic causes his death when he defies it, giving an ambiguous perspective on magic and the witches who use it.

Sometimes the mothers' magic is not limited to protection but is also used to harm their son's enemies or take revenge for the harm they may have caused. For example, there is the case of Auðbjörg from *Gísla saga Súrsonnar*. After a rowdy game of ball between some of the local men, her son Þorsteinn is hurt badly with an axe hammer by the men from the losing side. As Auðbjörg gets news of this, her despair and anger are carefully described, as is the following use of weather magic summoning of an avalanche that kills twelve men:

[...] bindr hon um sár hans ok lætr eigi vel yfir hans ferð. Kerling fær ekki sofnað um nóttina, svá var henni bimbult. Veðr var kalt úti ok logn ok heiðrikt. Hon gengr nökkurum sinnum andsælis um húsin ok viðrar í allar ættir ok setr upp nasarnar. En við þessa hennar meðferð þá tók veðrit at skipast, ok gerir á fjúk mikit ok eftir þat þey, ok brestr flóð í hliðinni, ok hleypr snæskriða á bæ Bergs, ok fá þar tólf menn bana, ok sér enn merki jarðfallsins í dag.¹⁴²

([...] she bound up his wound. She was displeased about what had befallen him. Old Audbjorg was so uneasy that she had no sleep that night. It was cold outside, but the air was still and the sky cloudless. She walked several times withershins around the outside of the house, sniffing in all directions. As she did this, the weather broke and a heavy, blustering snowstorm started up. This was followed by a thaw in which a flood of water gushed down the hillside and sent an avalanche of snow crashing into Berg's farmhouse. It killed twelve men. The traces of the landslide can be seen to this day.)¹⁴³

¹³⁹ One being Þórbjörn Öngull and his foster-mother (*Grettis saga*, see below).

¹⁴⁰ Similar to the character of the despicable Eyjólfur in *Gísla saga*, Búi's rival, Kólfinnr, who is pitiful in his own right, is the one to represent more general ideals of the local community despite his own misdeeds, and try to get Ólof back from Búi, and is thus villainised for it. He later kidnaps Ólof against the will of her father 'with violence', and is in the end killed in his fight against Búi. Búi is here called a *troll* for his supernatural fighting prowess.

¹⁴¹ 'Fellt mun nú til hlítar, ok mátti móðir þín eigi hlutlaust láta vera.' ('Now you have beaten me properly, and I don't think your mother is without blame for this.') *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 18.

¹⁴² *Gísla saga*, ch. 18.

¹⁴³ 'Gisli Sursson's Saga', 2:22.

After this, Borkr inn digri, the local *góði* and thus a law enforcer, takes her to Saltnes, and has her stoned to death as punishment for killing the men.¹⁴⁴ This punishment would fit with similar acts of magical violence done by women in the *Íslendingasögur* that result in death. However, despite the severity of this crime as one of the magic attacks with the most resulting deaths, her grief for the treatment of her son is still included as if to humanise her more than the typical witch. Furthermore, Gísli, her son's friend and the outlaw hero of the saga, is shown to both help Þorsteinn get out of the country and avenge the murder by in turn killing the witch Þorgrímr nef whom Borkr was allied with.¹⁴⁵

Revenge can come in different forms, and the same goes for the avenger herself, such as is the case of Þórveig from *Kormáks saga*. After the death of her two sons Oddr and Guðmundr by the hands of Kormákr, she at multiple points tries to avenge her loss, with the worst attack being cursing him to not be able to '*njóta*' (take pleasure in) his love interest Steingerðr:

Þórveig mælti: Þat er líkast, at því komir þú á leið, at ek verða heraðflótta, en synir mínir óbœttir, en því ska lek þér launa, at þú skalt Steingerðar aldri njóta. 'Kormákr segir: Því mantu ekki ráða, in vanda kerling.'¹⁴⁶

(Þórveig said: 'You can throw me out of the district, and not atone for the murder of my sons, but I shall pay you back so that you will never be able to enjoy Steingerðr.' Kormákr answered: 'That is not your decision, you evil hag.'

Despite Kormákr's words, this curse proves itself to be an effective, and thanks to Þórveig's *seiðr*, their planned marriage and future together is ruined.¹⁴⁷ The last that is seen of Þórveig is when Kormákr later kills a walrus that the saga suggests was Þórveig herself due to it having her eyes, and as it dies, it is said that Þórveig herself died shortly after.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *Gísla saga*, ch. 19.

¹⁴⁵ The moral of this revenge is left vague as Þorgrímr nef is the brother of Auðbjörg. While their family relation is pointed out in Auðbjörg's introduction, Þorsteinn is seemingly not expected to avenge the murder of his uncle. While Gísli showing sympathy to Auðbjörg might be surprising, it is possible that it is due to Gísli's other cases of support, where he is either aided by or aiding those considered othered people on the outskirts of the local society, perhaps because he as an outlaw belongs in this category.

¹⁴⁶ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 5.

¹⁴⁷ 'at síðan þessum ráðum var ráðit, fannsk Kormáki fátt um, en þat var fyrir þá sök, at Þórveig seiddi til, at þau skyldi eigi njótask mega.' *Kormáks saga*, ch. 6.

¹⁴⁸ This version of the dying shapeshifter theme is also found in other sources, one of them being the depictions of Sámi *gandr* in *Historia Norwegie*, where one male witch (with the help of *gandr*) is killed while he has taken the likeness of a whale, as another enemy *gandr* had in turn turned itself into pointed stakes in the lake, resulting in the first witch falling over dead. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, eds., *Historia Norwegie* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 62-4. For a discussion on the meaning of *gandr*, see Price, *The Viking Way*, 133-4; Besides this case of shapeshifting she also makes

Depending on their actions then, and for whom they do it, the mothers may, despite the damaging and illegal facet of their actions, be rewarded or not punished in the same manner that other witches would be punished. This is particularly the case when their magic takes the form of magical assistance and protection, and particularly if they are on the side of the saga hero.¹⁴⁹

Male witches

In comparison to the female witches' use of magic, how are men depicted? As was shown in the introduction with the male witches Kotkell and his two sons, while their deeds were regarded as dangerous and villainous, and being othered by their foreign background and othering actions, their masculinity alone is not challenged or questioned within the narrative. This next section will look at male witches, and how they like female witches clash with the local saga societies and their norms. Firstly, the concept of *ergi* and its ties to male witchcraft and *seiðr* will be detailed, followed by a look at how male magic is not only a dangerous weapon, but also a cowardly and shameful one.

Male witchcraft and ergi

While both male and female witches are shown at times to be othered and to transgress expectations of gender roles and perceived notions of proper behaviour in both the sagas and in the 13th century, there are still some key differences, some of which make the man regarded as more despicable. As has been shown in the previous chapters,

use of other tools than her own magic to get to Kórmákr. Once, as Kórmákr approaches them, she makes other people destroy the nearby ships to stop Kórmákr from travelling. She then sells him a defect ship for a high price which later starts to sink, and they barely get safely back to the shore. Once more he calls her an evil witch: 'Vítis erte verð, enn eigi kaups, en illa kerling.' (It is worthy of punishment, and not payment, you evil hag.) *Kormáks saga*, ch. 8. Another witch in the saga, called Þórdís, is also called evil (*illa lynd*), lives on 'Spákonufell' (Prophetess mountain). Besides her witchcraft, she also stands out for her hostile words against another woman, calling the woman Helga a *falskonu* (whore) that is 'fífl ok engum duganda manni við sæmenda [...]' (stupid and not worthy of such a proper man). In reply, she is told off, being called an evil witch (dragstu í brott en vanda fordæða). *Kormáks saga*, ch. 9; In *Harðar saga*, the witch Skroppa suffers a similar fate when she transforms herself and two girls into pigs in order to flee from outlaws. However, in her case, her dead body is found where the pig was killed. *Harðar saga*, ch. 26.

¹⁴⁹ More monstrous cases of mothers can for example be seen in the *finngálm* in *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* (ch. 9) where the beastly ogress attacking Ormr is killed after Ormr's Christian prayers gives him the strength to break her back.

being *argr* and displaying the effeminising, dishonourable, and obscene traits associated with the term is seen as one of the worst things a man can be, and few men who perform *ergi* or are associated with magic gets to keep their honour and masculinity, or even their lives by the end of the saga they feature in.¹⁵⁰ In particular, performing the rites of *seiðr* is presented as being particularly obscene and emasculating for an honourable man due to its specifically feminine association. While male witches are not described as performing the sexually suggestive rites as some female witches in the *Íslendingasögur*, such as being seen with their heads between their legs in the midst of a rite, the hatred for their role as a *seiðmaðr* and the disgraceful and effeminising factor of it suggests that there could still be certain perceived similarities in their rites according to the saga authors. Despite this, the best-known male *seiðmaðr* in the Old Norse texts in general is the all-father Óðinn himself, who is said to be a skilful practitioner of it despite the shame associated with it. In *Ynglinga saga* within the Prose Edda, *seiðr* is stated to be the most powerful skill, but also seen as something unsuitable and self-degrading for men to practice:

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, er mestr máttur fylgði, ok framdi sjálf, er seiðr heitir. [...] En þessi fjölkyngi, er framit er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skamlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt.¹⁵¹

(Óðinn knew, and practiced himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called *seiðr*, [...] But this magic, when it is practiced, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the priestesses.)

Even Óðinn does not always escape ridicule for his *seiðr*, as shown in the in *Poetic Edda*'s *Lokasenna*, where Lóki shames Óðinn for his *seiðr* and for supposedly appearing in the form as a female witch while doing so, which Lóki deems *argr*.¹⁵² The negative view of male and female witches is also shown elsewhere in the Prose Edda, with the most brutal case being found in *Haralds saga hárfagri*, where king Haraldr has his son Eirík blóðöx burn eighty male witches (*seiðmanna*) inside a house, including

¹⁵⁰ In the few cases where a saga hero or other man who is presented in an admirable or neutral way is said to know of or possess magic, this impression tends to be maintained by mentioning his courageous feats such as Jökull in *Vatnsdæla saga* and Egill Skallagrímsson. Egill is shown to have magic abilities, but his bravery in combat and physical prowess, as well as his skaldic skills appears to balance this, as his magical actions are not dishonoured or mentioned in a negative light within the saga. Instead, he is said to be big as a troll (*mikill sem troll*). *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 29; *Egils saga*, ch. 59.

¹⁵¹ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7.

¹⁵² *Lokasenna*, verse 24. Here too it is not specified why he changes into a female form while doing so, but it may suggest that the female shape would either improve the rite in question, or function as a disguise.

Haraldr's own son Rögnvaldr réttílbeini (Straight Legs).¹⁵³ It is here said that Eiríkr gained much praise for this deed, despite having killed eighty men in a less than honourable way, including his kin.¹⁵⁴

Within the *Íslendingasögur*, the perhaps worst-depicted male practitioner of *seiðr* is Þorgrímr nef in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.¹⁵⁵ Þorgrímr's wickedness is pronounced already in his introduction, where he is said to be 'fullr af gøringum ok fjölkynngi ok var seiðskratti, sem mestr mátti verða.'¹⁵⁶ (full of ill deeds, knowledgeable about witchcraft and he was the worst witch anyone could imagine.)¹⁵⁷ In the saga, Þorgrímr's *seiðr* done to Gísli is briefly described, although it too creates more questions than answers:¹⁵⁸ 'Nú flytr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi ok skelmiskap.'¹⁵⁹ (Now Thorgrim goes to work on the *seiðr* at once, and makes himself a scaffold and works this magic with all its obscenity and devilry.) Here too a scaffold (*hjall*) is built, similar to how Kotkell and his family build the *seiðhjall* to cause the storm sinking Þórðr's ship in *Laxdæla saga*. His act of *seiðr* is considered both *argr* and trollish, suggesting that they involve actions that people would consider debasing and transgressive of the honourable and masculine. He is also referred to as *seiðskratti*. Þorgrímr's *seiðr* and the way it is performed appears to be a great threat, and thus greatly feared and loathed by the local community. While he is not shown to directly physically harm anyone with it in the saga, his *seiðr* curse that he casts on Gísli is said to prevent him from being hidden by others, and is given as a reason for why Gísli is unable to stay in one place for long, and for his vivid nightmares, which seemingly cause him as much or even more distress as the men pursuing him.¹⁶⁰ In the end, Þorgrímr is stoned to death like his witch sister.¹⁶¹

¹⁵³ Likely not unintentionally, Rögnvaldr is said to be the son of the magical Sámi woman Snefriðr, explaining his witchcraft.

¹⁵⁴ *Haralds saga hins hárfagra*, ch. 35.

¹⁵⁵ For more on Þorgrímr nef, see for example Ármann Jakobsson's article that discusses him and the enigmatic words *troll* and *ergi*. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts.'

¹⁵⁶ *Gísla saga*, ch. 9.

¹⁵⁷ In Martin S. Regal's translation: '[he] was versed in all manner of spells and magic — the worst kind of sorcerer imaginable.' 'Gísli Súrsson's Saga', 2:11.

¹⁵⁸ The curse is meant for the one who killed the man called Þorgrímr, Bórkr digri's brother. This curse may, based on interpretations, be more of a threat versus Gísli than the men chasing him due to his outlawry. For more on *seiðr*, see the discussion earlier in this chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, his sister Þorgríma is shown less scorn for her status as a witch, and is only punished after causing the avalanche that kills the men who attacked her son. *Gísla saga*, ch. 18.

¹⁶⁰ *Gísla saga*, ch. 26.

¹⁶¹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 19.

In *Vatnsdæla saga*, a saga that otherwise shows little sympathy for witchcraft and its practitioners, it is stated that in Norway during King Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair)'s rule, the foster-father of the saga hero Ingimundr, and his men prepare and hosts a *seiðr* rite together in accordance with the old fashion at a celebration: 'Þeir Ingjaldr efna þar seið eptir fornum sið, til þess at menn leitaði eptir forlögum sínum. Þar var komin Finna ein fjölmenni.'¹⁶² (Ingjaldr and his men prepared a *seiðr* in accordance with the old ways. A Sámi woman capable in magic had arrived.) Here, like in the earlier-mentioned example of Guðríðr and the völva Þorbjörg lítilvölva in *Eiríks saga rauða*, people prepare for *seiðr* together, and in this case they can learn of their future by the help of a Sámi woman knowledgeable of magic. This woman is supposedly leading the *seiðr*, and for this she is well-received and given the seat of honour.¹⁶³ Unlike everyone else at the celebration, Ingimundr and his foster brother Grímmr do not wish to have their futures told, but Ingimundr has his told nonetheless.¹⁶⁴ After seeing Ingimundr's displeasure with having his destiny told, Ingjaldr tries to comfort Ingimundr, and says that inviting the Sámi woman had only been done out of goodwill.¹⁶⁵ It is uncertain what Ingjaldr and the men did to prepare (*erfa*) for the *seiðr*, and if this could be considered *argr* or inappropriate as this is not how it is presented in the saga. Instead, the text makes it clear that it is the more othered Sámi woman who has travelled there from elsewhere who performs the actual *seiðr* rites, and the people such as Ingjaldr and his men welcome and support it without judgement and receive no shame in return. The different perspectives of witchcraft and in particular *seiðr* and partly male engagement with it can be based on several causes, such as the differences in saga genres, the geographic and socio-political settings, in the more othered north siding against Haraldr versus the more central south, the magic being primarily done by an othered (Sámi) woman versus a large group of Norse men, to mention some.

¹⁶² *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10.

¹⁶³ The Sámi woman's soothsaying skills and her good treatment by the people is similar to the völva in *Eiríks saga rauða*.

¹⁶⁴ Their distaste for the Sámi woman's prophesies may be due to her actions, making the saga hero Ingimundr and his fellow young friend represent a more modern and negative perspective of the old ways (eptir forlögum sínum) that Ingjaldr and his men still participate in. The mood sours further when Ingimundr is told that he will leave Norway and settle down in Iceland. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10.

¹⁶⁵ '[...] hefir mér ok gott eina til gengit, þótt ek byða hingat finnunni.' *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10. The *seiðr* and the Sámi woman's prophecy appears to function as a prophecy telling Ingimundr that he will end up in Iceland, and him fighting against his own destiny to no avail, which is a well-used motif in the sagas. These predictions of the future tend to foreshadow the events that later will happen in the sagas. In Ingimundr's case it presents an unavoidable destiny that he fights against, and like several other saga figures he scolds the (supernatural) messenger for delivering the bad news. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 7, 10.

A coward's weapon

In addition to the aspect of sexual and gender deviancy, male witchcraft is also associated with dishonourable cowardice and trickery. Unlike the fairer and open physical fights in duels and on the battlefield, disruptive and destructive magic is something done in secrecy, and, like hidden physical murder, is something shameful yet dangerously potent. Furthermore, several times these witches are described as also being thieves, adding to their negative depictions as unnatural with neither morals nor honour. This is particularly the case with male witches. Besides some cases with shapeshifters, their magic tends to less often be directly destructive or violent than female witches' magic. Instead, they are more frequently said to have the power to enhance or repel attacks done by weapons in combat, or otherwise subtly manipulate the fight through trickery.

A difference between the judgement of female witches and male witches is how magic is regarded as a coward's weapon when used or employed by men, as well as being considered something used to unfairly defeat an enemy by shameful means. Unlike the women of the sagas, men are expected to be able to fight physically for their honour and repay any transgressions done to them, and this expectation presses on them even when they are weaker than their opponent. When they try to breach this gap in ability and strength by alternative means, such as trickery and magic, this tends to negatively affect the regard of the victory, or even incriminate the man who has benefitted from the help. For this reason, some saga heroes also refuse the aid of magical assistance, as they prefer to fight by normal means. This does however vary, and what is considered admirable shrewdness in one saga's protagonist is presented as cowardly trickery in a protagonist's enemy.

Sometimes giving magical protection in combat is sufficient to be deserving of judgement and punishment for male witches. Þorgrímr skinnhúfa (Skin-Hood) appears in *Vatnsdæla saga* and is said to be very familiar with witchcraft and other evils (‘hann var fjölkunnigr mjök ok þó at öðru illa.’).¹⁶⁶ During the fight between his ally Már and his men and Ingimundr's sons, he hides from the fight to assist his allies magically, to the silent disapproval of one of them. Thanks to his magic, the men on his side are protected from the cuts of the enemies' swords, and this magic is only stopped once the

¹⁶⁶ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

brothers Jökull and Þorsteinn find him lying down and hidden from the combat, and before he is able to flee from them, Jökull reaches him and cuts off his buttocks. Despite him not being said to directly cause physical harm to anyone with his magic, his trick with the swords and the cowardice displayed are apparently considered grave enough an offence for this assault to be justified, and at the following *Þing* meeting, he is not paid back for his shameful wounds, nor does he have to pay for his magic, although it is said that he should have had a stricter punishment: Þorgrímr skinnhúfa skal ekki hafa fyrir sína ákvámu, ok er hann þó verra verður.¹⁶⁷ (Þorgrímr Skin-hood will receive no compensation for his injury, and he deserves something worse.)¹⁶⁸ While Þorgrímr's actions are looked down upon, the *klámhögg* (shame-stroke), usually regarded as a major crime, is in this case presented as justified and even comedic.¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, the man Jökull is also said to possess magic, but here, as if intentional, he is said to be the furthest in the front of the battle, unlike Þorgrímr, and to be the bravest of all men. In this case then, the use of magic could be balanced by one's courage. Furthermore, he like Geirríðr possesses knowledge of magic, but instead bests the other magical foe with the help of non-magical means, which paints them in a more positive light.

Another interesting detail of this case is the contrast shown with the man who gives Þorgrímr the shame-stroke, the man Jökull. Jökull is the bold and rash son of Ingimundr, who ends up with the name Jökull from the giant his grandfather once defeated. He has also inherited his strength, being said to be formidably strong, (*var afrendr at afli*).¹⁷⁰ To stress the contrast between these two trollish men, while Þorgrímr hides by the sidelines and sabotages the fight with his witchcraft after admitting to not being capable of joining the fight alongside the other men in proper combat, Jökull stands in the front of the combat, fighting vigorously and said to be the bravest of all men (*inn mesti fullhugi*).¹⁷¹ There is a notion of him being trollish, both by his size, the trollish origin of his name, and his manner of fighting: 'ok í því kom Jökull at ok tók þá í annat sinn æsing sinn inn mikla, sótti þá at Hrómundi með ákafa.'¹⁷² (At that moment Jökul arrived; he was again seized with his great fury and attacked Hromund

¹⁶⁷ *Vatsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal', 4:40.

¹⁶⁹ *Vatsdæla saga*, ch. 29. For more on *klámhögg* and other major wounds, see chapter 3.

¹⁷⁰ *Vatsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

¹⁷¹ *Vatsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

¹⁷² *Vatsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

savagely.)¹⁷³ While he is not explicitly stated to use any supernatural abilities, it is still he who swiftly tracks down the hidden Þorgrímr, and this fury does appear similar to the uncontrollable rages found in supernatural men such as shapeshifters, as well as *berserkir*. In this example from *Vatnsdæla saga* then, a man related to the trollish and supernatural is shown to be shaming and disfiguring another, showing their separate social positions despite their shared knowledge.¹⁷⁴ What separates them is primarily their actions and the manner in which they do them, where Jökull's fearlessness and strength are his dominating features, while Þorgrímr's are his cowardice and weakness, in addition to his witchcraft, and this is ultimately what he is punished for, which is played for laughs by the saga author. Additionally, someone trollish in physique and fighting style such as Jökull appears to still be considered far more admirable than someone cowardly who associates with magic and other evil (*illa*) things.¹⁷⁵

The male witch who aids the enemy, or the cowardly enemy who only succeeds due to magic support, are consistently depicted in a negative way. If they are not killed or outlawed, they are otherwise punished and shamed. While the male witch's magic is generally less destructive and more often of a supportive or preventive nature compared to female witches, their actions and their shameful nature are still punishable. Despite this, there are several cases where the hero is aided by magic without apparent negative judgements towards him or the witch supporting him. Here the witch supporting him tends to be a woman, as if associating with or depending on a male witch in this situation would generally be regarded as too shameful to be done by the hero.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ 'The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal', 4:39-40.

¹⁷⁴ Their positions are also shaped by whose side they stand on within the narrative. Similarly to the previously mentioned fight between the two witches Katla and Geirríðr, it is the witch that are shown to use their magic powers on others the least, and that are instead able to engage with the other's witchcraft in a manner similar to their non-supernaturally capable peers, besides being aided by their knowledge of them to help stop them, following the norms and rules of the society, and if they use their abilities, they are simply to help catch the other witch from using their own magic.

¹⁷⁵ This motif of a trollish man versus a villainous witch who makes the trollish man better in comparison is also seen in such cases as Egill Skallagrímsson and Grettir. Furthermore, this is seen in other cases of outlaws, where while also othered by society, they prove their worth by fighting the supernatural. See also Bernadine McCreesh, 'Grettir and Glámr: Sinful Man Versus the Fiend: An Allegorical Interpretation of a Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Saga', *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 51, no. 2 (1981); Janice Hawes, 'The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider', *Scandinavian Studies* 80, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁷⁶ A rare male example here is Barðr *stirfínn* (the peevish), who calms the weather in *Vatnsdæla saga* by speaking in Irish in what is presumably a Christian spell. See Bernadine McCreesh, 'The Structure of Vatnsdæla saga', *Saga-Book* 34 (2010), 82.

Guilt by association – The case of Þórbjörn Öngull

Sometimes, a man is judged harshly simply for his association with magic, which damns both him and his accomplishments. In *Grettis saga*, Þórbjörn Öngull (Hook)’s foster-mother Þuridr curses the unstoppable outlaw Grettir, leaving him deadly ill with a deadly rotten sword wound.¹⁷⁷ The curse itself is detailed in the saga:

‘Nú mæli ek það um við þik Grettir að þú sért heillum horfin, allri gift ok gæfu, og allri vörn ok visku, æ því meir sem þú lifir lengr. Vænti ek að þú eigir hér fá gleðidaga héðan frá en hingað til.’

(Now I pronounce the following on you, Grettir: your good fortune has now left you along with your luck, your defences, and your good sense. Things will become worse for you the longer you live. I expect that, from now on, you will have fewer carefree days than you have had up to now.)¹⁷⁸

An additional curse is described when she later finds a rooted tree stump on the beach and carve runes into it, before spilling blood on it and chanting *galdr* above it.¹⁷⁹ With some magic words, she sends the bewitched hag root towards Þórsteinn’s island that Grettir has occupied, knowing that there is a shortage of firewood on the island. The root thus becomes a temptation that results in Grettir hurting his leg as he tries to chop the wood, and results in a festering wound that leaves him half dead. It is in this weakened condition that Þórbjörn and his men find him and cut him down as well as severing his sword hand and head, something that is described in detail to shame his killers further. Þórbjörn insists on bringing the head back as proof of having killed Grettir, and while the others agree, they are otherwise said to say little as they all found his actions unmanly. Þórbjörn taunts Grettir’s brother Illugi, who in turn refers to Þórbjörn’s own uncertain future:

‘Svá framt veiztu þat, sem úti er alþingi í sumar, hverir útlægir verða. En eigi muntu né kerling fóstura þín, dæma þessi mál því at galdrar ykkir ok forneskja hafa drepit Gretti, þó at þér bærið járn á hann dauðvána, ok gerðuð svá mikit niðingsverk ofan á fordæðuskap.’¹⁸⁰

(‘As soon as the Althing is over next summer, you will know who has been outlawed. But neither you nor that old woman, your foster-mother, shall pass judgement on this case, because it

¹⁷⁷ Þuridr is described as an old woman who people did not regard to be able to do much, but who had been very knowledgeable about magic and skillful in many arts in her younger years when people were still pagans. *Grettis saga*, ch. 78; The theme of the cursed, rotten sword wound that is made worse is also found in *Droplaugarsona saga*, where the witch Gefjon worsens the wound of Grímr that the viking Gauss had given him, consequentially killing him. It is also added that Gefjon was the concubine of Gauss. *Droplaugarsona saga*, ch. 15.

¹⁷⁸ ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong’, trans. Bernard Scudder, in *Complete Sagas*, 2:178.

¹⁷⁹ Þuridr’s first curse truly shakes Grettir, who throws a large stone at her that breaks her hipbone. The returning festering leg wound is later said to reach all the way up to his crotch, a possible parallel to the damage dealt. *Grettis saga*, ch. 79.

¹⁸⁰ *Grettis saga*, ch. 82.

was your sorcery and black magic that killed Grettir, yet you put him to the sword when he was at death's door anyway, and compounded your sorcery with this malicious deed.')¹⁸¹

Illugi here refers to the magic that helped kill Grettir as belonging to both Þórbjörn and Þuridr (*ykkir*). By killing Grettir while he was already dying, further disgraceful acts (*níðingsverk*) have been added to the already shameful witchcraft. When Þórbjörn returns, the people's reactions to his methods are similarly negative as soon as it is revealed that his defeat of Grettir was accomplished through witchcraft: 'Öngull var óþokkar mjök af þessum verkum, þegar at men vissu, at Grettir hafði með görningum unninn verit.'¹⁸² (Öngull was greatly despised for his deed when people realised that he had overcome Grettir with witchcraft.)¹⁸³ When Þórbjörn later comes to demand his fee for the death of Grettir, this clear loathing of magic is distinctly voiced by Þórir, the man who made Grettir an outlaw in the first place:¹⁸⁴

‘Hefi ek ok oft fengit hart af honum en ekki vilda ek þat til lífs hans vinna, at gera mik at ódádámanni eða fordæðu, sem þú hefir gört; mun ek síðr leggja þér fé, at mér sýnisk þú ólífismaðr vera fyrir galdr ok fjölkynngi.’¹⁸⁵

(‘I often received harsh treatment from him, [...] but I never wanted to claim his life by acting like an evil-doer or sorcerer as you have done. I shall not give you any money, since in my view you have forfeited your right to live through your magic and sorcery.’)¹⁸⁶

Here even the one who wished for Grettir's death clearly judges Þórbjörn for his actions, and Grettir's death being aided by witchcraft is presented as a greater wrong in the eyes of the local community than Grettir's own actions which made him an outlaw. To express this even further, at the *Alþing*, instead of getting any rewards for fulfilling his mission as he was promised, Þórbjörn is made an outlaw himself after being prosecuted for *galdr* and for magic that led to Grettir's death, as well as killing a half-dead man. Interestingly, as if to further express the negative regard of magic in the saga, it is stated that at the same *Alþing* a new law was established that said that anyone who practiced witchcraft should be outlawed: ‘Var þá í lög tekið að alla forneskjumenn gerðu þeir útlæga.’¹⁸⁷ (It was put to law that all who performed witchcraft, should be

¹⁸¹ ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong’, 2:177.

¹⁸² Grettis saga, ch. 82; Raudvere, ‘Trolldómr’, 161.

¹⁸³ ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong’, 2:178.

¹⁸⁴ The character of Þórir here stands in contrast to men like Bórkr digri from *Gísli saga*, an earlier saga character and *góði* who is quick to employ both witchcraft and cowardly assassins to kill an outlaw.

¹⁸⁵ Grettis saga, ch. 82.

¹⁸⁶ ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong’, 2:178.

¹⁸⁷ Grettis saga, ch. 84.

made outlaw.) This law corresponds with later West Norse laws.¹⁸⁸ The use of *trolldómr* is here regarded as something not even acceptable when dealing with outlaws, and the supposed moral presented is thus that while stopping outlaws who endanger the safety and peace of the local society is admirable, doing so with the help of a witch's magic is despicable, unmanly, and only worthy of outlawry. In this case however, it is the man helped by a witch that is punished, more than the female witch.¹⁸⁹

Þórbjörn Öngull's characterisation is negative even before benefitting from magic and the killing of Grettir, where he is said to be brutal and intractable (*harðfengr ok ódæll*).¹⁹⁰ One point of interest is who is to blame for the sorcery and Grettir's death. While both Illugi and Þórir refer to the witchcraft and *galdr* as the work of Þúriðr and Þórbjörn, at no point is Þórbjörn himself shown to practice magic, nor is he said to possess the skills to do so. Despite this, it is specifically Þórbjörn who is sued for causing Grettir's death through *galdr* and witchcraft in addition to then killing him. Þúriðr herself instead disappears from the saga and is not punished in any way for her actions despite the newly established law of outlawing the practice of witchcraft. While the law of punishing those who buy or seek out magical services by others is not mentioned in this saga, is it not unlikely that a later saga such as *Grettis saga* from the 14th century would have been influenced by this view. Both in *Grágás* K §7 and *Gulapingslög* §178 one is considered guilty of witchcraft if they have made someone else do magic, here defined as uttering words of magic over himself or his property, and supposedly also when doing black magic such as the harming of Grettir.¹⁹¹ However, based on the saga, Þórbjörn Öngull is explicitly said not to be aware of all of Þúriðr's attacks towards Grettir. Despite being the man benefitting from this witchcraft and the greatest pursuer and foe of Grettir, it is peculiar then that Þórbjörn alone is punished,

¹⁸⁸ *Grettis saga*, ch. 84. Despite this inclusion of the legal decision at the *Alþing*, a character already mentioned in chapter 81 that magic was prohibited ('því at hon er fjölkunnig en þat er nú fyrirboðit.'). *Grettis saga* is considered one of the younger sagas, being written sometime in the 15th century, which could influence both the particularly negative regard for magic due to the heavier Christian references and aversions as well as its later romance elements.

¹⁸⁹ This choice to not incorporate Þúriðr's punishment or demise into the saga is interesting, as earlier sagas do not shy away from graphically depicting the stoning or similar executions of female witches, such as has been described earlier in the cases in *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Gísla saga*.

¹⁹⁰ Þórbjörn is negatively depicted already from the start, where it is told that he as a child in retribution beat his pregnant stepmother so badly that she later died of the wounds. *Grettis saga*, ch. 70. More on this can be found in the next chapter.

¹⁹¹ *Grágás* K §7; See also 'Den ældre Borgarthings-Christenret' II §25 1:362, with specifically forbidding people to travel to the land of the Finns (Sámi) to seek soothsaying. *NgL*. Cf. 'Eidsivatings-Christenret' §45, *NgL* 1:389-90.

while the one performing the actual action of magic is not punished by the narrative, even if she is an old woman, as this alone does not necessarily prevent punishment elsewhere.

The male shapeshifter

Several men are described or alluded to being shapeshifters. Here they are referred to as being *hamramr* (shape-strong), while others are said to be *eigi einhamr* (not of one shape). In the Christian sources, this is connected with the Old Norse religion. While there are some similarities between being *hamramr* and *berserkr*, this does not necessarily correlate.¹⁹² As Merkelbach has argued, there is a difference between *berserkr* and shapeshifters, where *berserkerangr* appears more like a behavioural or psychological shift, and the shapeshifting more physical.¹⁹³ These shapeshifters can be werewolf-like, such as Úlfr from *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, who was called Kveld-Úlfr (Night-wolf) due to how dangerous he turned at night.¹⁹⁴ Despite this, as Ármann Jakobsson has noted, the actual transformation is often left unexplained and vague, leaving it to the audience to interpret the details of the shapeshifting while still underlining the unknown danger and occult otherness the shapeshifter represents.¹⁹⁵ Their shapeshifting abilities are usually stated early on in their presentations, and is

¹⁹² For one, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, two *berserkr* are said to become exhausted after shapeshifting, as was natural for those who changed *hamr* to be left powerless when their *berserkerangr* ended. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 28; For more on the *berserkr*, Benjamin Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme', *Scandinavian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1982); Merkelbach, 'Eigi í mannligu eðli: Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Íslendingasögur'; Keith Ruiter, 'Berserks Behaving Badly: Manipulating Normative Expectations in Eyrbyggja saga', in *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia* (2020).

¹⁹³ Merkelbach, 'Eigi í mannligu eðli: Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Íslendingasögur', 85. See also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007); Christa Agnes Tuczay, 'Into the Wild — Old Norse Stories of Animal Men', in *Werewolf Histories*, ed. Willem de Blécourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015); The question of the transformation's physical aspect has been a matter of discussion for a long time, for example see Strömbäck, *Sejd*; For more recent works on the topic of shapeshifters in the Medieval North, see Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo, eds., *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019). More on *berserkr* in the chapter on physical violence.

¹⁹⁴ For more on werewolves in the Old Norse sagas, see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature'; Tuczay, 'Into the Wild'.

¹⁹⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man', 38; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Watch Out for the Skin Deep: Medieval Icelandic Transformations', *Arts* 12, no. 1 (2023).

done to other them and characterise them in a negative manner, usually together with other negative characteristics.¹⁹⁶

A particularly brutal example of someone called a shapeshifter is found in *Finnboga saga ramma* with Þórvalðr Moðskegg, the unpopular neighbour of Finnbogi. One day Finnbogi's two young sons anger Þórvalðr when they bring up the local ill opinion of him, and in a rage he kills them both:

Alfr mælti: Nú muntu gera nökkut illt, ok ertu inn vesti maðr, sem er sagt er ok eigi einhamr, ok ertu troll, þó at þú sýnist maðr. Þat þolir hann eigi ok hljóp út ok tók sinni hendi hvárn sveininn, slær niðr við steininum, sva at rýkr heilinn um.¹⁹⁷

(‘You’re doing something evil’, said Alf. ‘As people say, you are the worst kind of man and a shape-changer. You’re a troll through you appear to be a man.’ Thorvald could not endure this and, running out, he took one boy in each hand and dashed them against a rock so that their brains spurted out).¹⁹⁸

Finnbogi sees this, and a long and difficult fight ensues with Þórvalðr. It is said that of all the men Finnbogi fought, no one were as difficult to defeat as the devilish (*ffjanda*) Þórvalðr, referring to his trollish strength supposedly tied to his shapeshifter nature. In the end Finnbogi kills Þórvalðr, and interestingly, he too is driven to beastly measures as he is said to do so by biting through his throat, a brutal act of killing rarely shown in the sagas and then done by trollish characters.¹⁹⁹

In comparison to Þórvalðr Moðskegg there is Þorkell silfri (Rich-of-silver) from *Vatnsdæla saga*. Þorkell is said to be knowledgeable of magic as well as being a ‘terrible shapeshifter’ (hamrammr mjök), even if he too is not actually shown to shapeshift in the saga. As his name implies, he is said to be rich, but he is disliked by most, despite being a powerful man.²⁰⁰ His power and riches appear to be connected to his magic, and he is later shown to be able to force the outcome of a lot vote in his

¹⁹⁶ While shapeshifters primarily are presented negatively, there are some more neutral cases such as Kveld-Úlfr, the grandfather of Egill Skallagrímsson, who is not described as negatively as other shapeshifters, possibly due to the distance in time. His son, Skalla-Grímr is presented more antagonistic like when he is in an uncontrollable rage and mid-shapeshifting tries to attack his son Egill. *Egils saga*, ch. 40.

¹⁹⁷ *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 29.

¹⁹⁸ *Einhamr* meaning ‘of one shape or skin’, as opposed to those that can shapeshift into animalistic or supernatural forms.’ ‘The saga of Finnbogi the Mighty’, trans. John Kennedy, 3:248-9.

¹⁹⁹ Finnbogi also bites someone’s throat in a later fight against the trollish man Þorbjörn. *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 40. See also Atli and the male witch Þorgrímr in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 21. Elsewhere this kind of attack is more prevalent amongst monstrous women, such as the beastly witch mother Syrpa in *Jökuls þáttur Búassonar*, and the troll mother in *Þórsteins þáttur uxafóts*.

²⁰⁰ ‘Þorkell silfri frá Helgavatni var hamrammr mjök ok þó margkunnigr; hann var vellauðigr at fê, eigi vinsæll ok óþokkasæll af flestum mönnum, enn þó verðr mikils.’ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 42.

favour for the position of the next *góði*.²⁰¹ Þorgrímr, one of his competitors, has his young son Þorkell Scratcher kill him, and this is done without any repercussions and he soon receives the *góðórð*. Curiously, the traits given to Þorkell silfri besides his supposed shapeshifting and attempted fraud are his vanity and interest in valuable clothing, as well as his odd manner of sitting.²⁰² Unlike Þórvalðr, Þorkell is presented as a socially powerful, albeit disliked man.

While these two ‘shapeshifters’ are presented in thoroughly negative ways, their shapeshifting abilities are not necessarily shown, and when they are, it is in the form of supernatural strength rather than the physical changing of shape.²⁰³ While they are also described as being bad, disliked by others, knowledgeable of magic, or even trollish, and even if the fight may be a difficult one, they are both killed by normal men, and in the case of Þorkell, a child. As Bernadine McCreesh has noted in the case of Þorkell, the accusation of witchcraft and shapeshifting may have been used to discredit Þorkell and ultimately justify a killing.²⁰⁴ In addition to this, killing these bad men prove the strength of the heroes.²⁰⁵

Magic in the Contemporary World

Unlike the more distant *Íslendingasögur*, there are hardly any mentions of *seiðr* or proper *blót* in the contemporary *samtíðarsögur*, and pagan magic is rarely depicted there.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, in Norway there is not a single surviving criminal case from the

²⁰¹ This dislike due to his magically acquired wealth is also shown in *Laxdæla saga* with Þorkell’s family, although this is likely due to theft.

²⁰² A specific addition is that he is said to often sit with one leg over his knee, and with a hand under his cheek, without specifying what this is meant to imply. Another case of ridiculing someone’s specific sitting position and *níð* speech (closely closed legs and rubbing thighs together) in a political setting is found in *Bandamanna saga*, ch. 10.

²⁰³ A rare instance of a shapeshifting saga protagonist is Gull-Þórir Oddsson from *Þorskfirðinga saga*.

²⁰⁴ McCreesh, ‘The Structure of *Vatnsdæla saga*’, 81. Jacqueline Simpson has previously discussed how this kind of ‘political propaganda’ could be used to discredit the opposition of Óláfr Tryggvasson. Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Olaf Tryggvason versus the powers of darkness’, in *The Witch Figure*, ed. Venetia Newall (London: Routledge, 1973), 182.

²⁰⁵ Possibly overly so. Finnbogi’s fights with the supernatural could be said to momentarily turn him into a beast, with how he is described as killing Þórvalðr by biting through his throat.

²⁰⁶ As Boyer explains, the rare use of *blót* in the *samtíðarsögur* do not refer to the sacrificial ritual central to the pagan belief. Régis Boyer, ‘Paganism and Literature: The so-called ‘Pagan Survivals’ in the *Samtíðarsögur*’, *Gripla* 1 (1975), 144. On magic depicted in the *fortíðarsögur* and the ties to the 15th century authorship, see Hans Jacob Orning, ‘The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the *Fornaldarsögur*’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 35, no. 1 (2010).

medieval times wherein the terms *trolldom* or *trollfolk* is used.²⁰⁷ While Christianity in the Nordic countries solidified in the 11th century to the 13th century, it, and the ensuing ‘Europeanisation’ with its change of social values, were gradual processes. The existence of legal sanctions in the law suggests that witchcraft was still presented as a threat in the Norse societies. Instead, different forms of magic emerged, and along with this there came to be a concept of a more acceptable ‘high’ elite form of magic in the form of miracles and prayers to contrast with the pagan magic. This would in turn replace the pagan religious status roles possessed by women like the *völur* and *guðjur* (female *goðar*) with a male-centred power structure and clergy.²⁰⁸ Many miracles performed by saints such as Saint Óláfr the Holy and Saint Sunnifa are found both in ecclesiastical texts such as the homilies of Norway and Iceland, and in the secular literature of the sagas and poems.²⁰⁹ Besides them there are the 13th and 14th century Icelandic Bishop sagas (*biskupasögur*) detailing the lives and occasionally miraculous deeds of the bishops of Skálholt and Hólar from mid 11th century to the 14th century.²¹⁰ Here, like in some of the *Íslendingasögur*, Christianity is shown to enhance a man’s masculine standing, and sometimes also his physical prowess.²¹¹ This kind of Christian magic is also depicted in the conversion stories, where the pagan and filthy magic is defeated by the priest and his godly magic.²¹² Despite this, the difference between what was categorised as a miraculous incident rather than witchcraft had less to do with the inherent nature of the event but rather who instigated it. If it was a priest who controlled or had approved of the action, it would generally be approved by the church. Miracles

²⁰⁷ Rune Blix Hagen, “‘I Hurl the Spirits of Gandul.’ Pleasure, Jealousy, and Magic: The Witchcraft Trial of Ragnhild Tregagaas in 1325”, in *Myths and Magic in the Medieval Far North: Realities and Representations of a Region on the Edge of Europe*, ed. Stefan Figenschow, Richard Holt, and Miriam Tveit (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 146. On the change of view of trolls and the Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavia, see Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History*.

²⁰⁸ For more on the development of the male clergy and the matter of masculinity in the Nordic countries, see Anthony Perron, ‘Saxo Grammaticus’s Heroic Chastity: A Model of Clerical Celibacy and Masculinity in Medieval Scandinavia’, in *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁰⁹ For more on the miracles and cult of saints in Middle Age Norway and Iceland, see Ragnhild M. Bø and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, eds., *The Cult of Saints in Nidaros Archbishopric: Manuscripts, Miracles, Objects* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2022). In particular, see Cornelia Spjelkavik Sparre, ‘The Miracles of Medieval Norway’, in *The Cult of Saints in Nidaros Archbishopric: Manuscripts, Miracles, Objects*, ed. Ragnhild M. Bø and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2022).

²¹⁰ See Diana Whaley, ‘Miracles in the Sagas of Bishops: Icelandic Variations on an International Theme’, *Collegium mediævale*, 7 no. 2 (1994).

²¹¹ For more on this Christian masculinity in the *Íslendingasögur*, see Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, 99–102.

²¹² See for example Carl Phelpstead, ‘In Honour of St. Óláfr: The Miracle Stories in Snorri Sturluson’s *Óláfs saga helga*’, *Saga-Book* 25 (1998).

are regarded as actions done on behalf of God, and include the healing of a sick person, the continued growth of hair of a dead saint, as well as someone having a saint visit them in their dreams. Other saintly miracles included the expelling of demons.²¹³ Besides female saints like Saint Sunnifa, the practitioners of these miraculous acts are mainly men, and unlike in the *Íslendingasögur*, this kind of magic performed by men is always presented positively.

Unlike the miracle magic, old pagan rites, charms, and witchcraft became ‘village-level’ superstition and heresy.²¹⁴ This was apparent both in the laws of the 13th century and in the ecclesiastical texts that were written down during the same period.²¹⁵ In two early fourteenth-century sermons from the West Norse *Hauksbók* magical practices, here referred to as *taufi* and *galðra*, are strongly condemned.²¹⁶ People are here told to not venerate land spirits (*signa land vettum*), or use love potions, practice divination, or apotropaic (bad luck preventative) magic.²¹⁷ These kinds of magical actions are here regarded as diabolical, *diofuls villu* (the devil’s delusion, or diabolical heresy), great sins (*syndir storar*), as well as *villa eða vantru* (error, or false belief). This development is also shown in the later versions of the *Gulapingslög*. While the versions from approximately 1250 penalised witchcraft with outlawry, later manuscript versions from the 14th century instead call for the execution of those found guilty of witchcraft or of ‘riding someone’ (*riði mann*).²¹⁸ Here then the Christian condemnation of magic is not only strengthened, but also based on witchcraft’s ties to heresy and the diabolic. While references to the devil and the diabolical in relation to villainy were not unheard of in the *Íslendingasögur*, the magic is more rarely explicitly stated to be tied to the diabolic. This is likely to avoid having ancestors associated with heresy.²¹⁹ While

²¹³ Sparre, ‘The Miracles of Medieval Norway’, 165-66.

²¹⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 43.

²¹⁵ Similar views are also found in East Scandinavia, including 14th century Swedish postils like ‘trolskaps synd är at stridha mot gudz budhi’ (the sin of witchcraft is to go against God’s commandments’) *Svenska medeltids-postillor*, ed. G. E. Klemming, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Kungliga Boktryckeriet, 1880), 1:160.

²¹⁶ Stephen A Mitchell, ‘Nordic Witchcraft in Transition: Impotence, Hersery and Diabolism in 14th-century Bergen’, *Scandia: Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 63, no. 1 (1997), 23-4.

²¹⁷ Male and female witches are also still referred to with the pagan terms *galðramenn*, *gerningamenn*, *völur*, and *skrattar*. Stephen Mitchell, ‘Heresy and Heterodoxy in Medieval Scandinavia’, in *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft*, ed. Louise Nyholm Kallestrup and Raisa Maria Toivo, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 43-4.

²¹⁷ Mitchell, ‘Heresy and Heterodoxy’, 40. The specific Old Norse pagan act of *útiseti* in order to awaken trolls is also referenced here.

²¹⁸ Mitchell, ‘Nordic Witchcraft in Transition’, 18. For more comparisons of the versions of the Christian laws of *Gulapingslög* and *Grágás*, see Kværness, *Kristenrettane*, 143-6.

²¹⁹ For an example on the development and later inclusion of the diabolic in the *Íslendingasögur*, see Arthur, ‘The Devil in Disguise? Scribal Remarks on Valgarðr inn grái in *Njáls saga*.’

laws in the 13th and 14th century prohibited magic cures, runes, as well as trial by fire (*járnburðr*), people are not necessarily condemned in the stories for having tried magic to heal themselves. Instead, it is shown that only the prayers and the Christian miracle can help them.²²⁰ Important pagan rites like *jól* and the act of brewing and sharing beer got assimilated into the Christian culture. Some archeological finds suggest a more fluid development, such as the runic formulas found on pagan and Christian amulets.²²¹

While systematised witch trials would first fully take place in the Nordic countries a few centuries later, there are early separate cases found within the legal sources, with one being the trial of Ragnhildr *tregagás* in Bergen in 1325.²²² As Mitchell has said of the witch cases in the Nordic 14th century, female cases tended to involve witchcraft and similar activities tied to sexuality, such as aphrodisiac and anaphrodisiac charms, and that they tend to either be acquitted or lightly punished.²²³ In the unusual case of Ragnhildr, she was found guilty of love spells and charm magic, illicit sexual relationships, extramarital intercourse, and magically causing impotence by the way of black magic.²²⁴ She was suspected to have been moonstruck and of an unsound mind during her actions, and her punishment was here that of repentance, fasting, and a seven-year long pilgrimage. This shows a relatively mild punishment in comparison to the condemnations found in the contemporary writings.²²⁵ In comparison, the most severe punishment was given to a nun in 1343 at the Kirkjubær cloister who was burned to death. Three Icelandic accounts give different explanations for her supposed sins. One states that she had written a contract with the devil, fornicated with many laymen, and had thrown the consecrated host into the privy,

²²⁰ *Járnburðr* was eventually prohibited because it was considered forcing God's hand. Arnved Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society: 1000-1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009), 254, 280. For more on the ordeal in the Middle Ages, see Robert Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Clarendon Press, 1999).

²²¹ Michael Schulte, 'From Pagan Charms to Pious Prayers? A Case Study of Two Runic Formulas', *Maal og minne* 1 (2022).

²²² For a more detailed look into this case, see Hagen, "I Hurl the Spirits of Gandul"; See also Mitchell, 'Nordic Witchcraft in Transition'; For the charter on Ragnhild see *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, ed. Lange et al., 9:113.

²²³ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 169.

²²⁴ See also the case of Margit Halffstop from Stockholm in 1490, who admits to having used magic to make a man impotent. Mitchell, 'Heresy and Heterodoxy', 45.

²²⁵ As Mitchell has noted, had she been subjected to secular authorities rather than clerical, she may have been condemned for heretical wickedness, something punishable by execution. Blix Hagen has argued that Ragnhild's case was treated more like a heresy case rather than a witchcraft case. Mitchell, 'Heresy and Heterodoxy', 43-44. Hagen, "I Hurl the Spirits of Gandul", 146.

another accused her of in writing having given herself to the devil, while the third stated that she had blasphemed the pope.²²⁶

Unlike women accused of witchcraft, men were more often accused of apostasy, devil worship, and sometimes also of additional crimes such as theft (such as from churches).²²⁷ However, for men too, there were cases of sexually focused magic. In 1407 in Greenland a man called Kolgrímr was burned to death after supposedly having used ‘black arts’ to force his will upon a married woman.²²⁸

The belief in magic also continued to live on in the corners of the Old Norse world; the reputation of the Sámi as magicians is well-established in Norwegian laws as well as in other 13th century written sources such as *Historia Norwegie*.²²⁹ The conversion to Christianity would create more conflict between the Nordic population and the Sámi, something particularly visible in the proportionally high number of witch prosecutions of the Sámi population in the Early Modern period.²³⁰

Chapter conclusions

As seen in this chapter, unlike the thoroughly hostile reception of magic and its users in the legal works of the 12th and 13th century, the *Íslendingasögur* are more open to

²²⁶ Mitchell notes how the accusation and the punishment of the nun at Kirkjubær resembles the prosecution pattern of men. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 285n160.

²²⁷ In Stockholm in 1484 Ragnvald Odinskarl is found guilty of church theft as well as having ‘served Óðinn’ for seven years. In 1492, also in Stockholm, Erick Claueson confesses to having renounced God and having accepted ‘the devil Óðinn’ The latter is burned for this. Mitchell, ‘Heresy and Heterodoxy’, 45.

²²⁸ According to *Lögmannsannáll*: ‘In this same year [1407] a man in Greenland named Kolgrímr was burned because he had lain with a certain man’s woman named Steinunn, the daughter of Hrafn the Lawman, who died in the avalanche north in Lönguhlið. At that time, Þorgrímr Sölvason had her to wife. That man got her will with the black arts, and was later burned after the judgement. The woman was never the same again and died a little later.’ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 171. Translation by Mitchell. For more early court cases of heresy in Medieval Scandinavia, see Mitchell, ‘Heresy and Heterodoxy.’

²²⁹ ‘Horum itaque intollerabilis perfidia uix cuiquam credibilis uidebitur, quantumue diabolice supersticionis in magica arte exerceant.’ (A person will scarcely believe their unendurable impiety and the extent to which they practise heathen devilry in their magic arts.) IV ‘De Finnis’, in Ekrem and Boje Mortensen, *Historia Norwegie*, 60. Translation by Ekrem.

²³⁰ Blix Hagen has found that in Finnmark alone in 1593-1695 a total of 138 witch-trials were held, with 92 death sentences, making them amongst the harshest in Europe considering the terms of trials per individual within the population. Here the majority were Norwegian women (103 (73 executed)), followed by Sámi men (19 (13 executed)), Norwegian men (8 (1 executed)) and Sámi women (8 (5 executed)). To put these numbers into perspective, by the end of the seventeenth century Finnmark’s population consisted of approximately 3200 Norwegians and Sámi. Rune Blix Hagen, ‘Seventeenth Century Persecution of Sorcery and Witches in the High North’, *Seventeenth Century Persecution of Sorcery and Witches in the High North*, in *The Protracted Reformation in the North*, eds. Sigrun Høgetveit Berg, et al., (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 69; See also Liv Helene Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

nuance albeit both for better and worse. As is shown in the sagas, depending on factors besides the act of magical violence alone, a witch that kills could get away completely scot-free, or could instead be brutally killed without trial. From the saga examples studied in this chapter, the two key determining factors for how a witch or otherwise supernatural person may be vilified are the character's gender, and whether they are antagonistically positioned towards the saga hero. The latter point is by no means a revelation as a narrative will generally be inclined to sympathise more with the saga hero and those on his side. However, unlike the gender issue, sometimes those positioned in an antagonistic position towards the saga protagonist may in fact not be presented specifically negatively, making it not a constant, unlike the effect of their gender.

Supernatural women are more varied in the sagas, from helpful (foster-)mothers living in the homestead to monstrous she-beasts encountered on the wilder corners of the world. The most despicable female witches are those who harm other people in beastly and otherworldly ways. These trollish and fantastical versions of them are killed in more physical means, such as with broken backs and necks, while other witches get stoned to death. Together with generally being more magically destructive, female witches also have seductive abilities, acting unlike most 'proper' women, as they do not adhere to norms and appear depraved or licentious (*örg*), and in turn, these executions may be of a pseudosexual nature.

Male witches are hardly ever presented positively or even neutrally for their magical actions unless they are the protagonists of the saga or allied with them, and instead their magic is usually a short way of pointing out their villainous and otherwise despicable character. Besides the magic use itself, these men stand out the most for their cowardice and emasculation, which is considered transgressive behaviour of the norms of hegemonic masculinity, something that alone justifies ridicule. The exception are unruly shapeshifters, albeit not always. Even if they have allies, male witches are still outsiders, and acts of violence done against them are seemingly deemed just or not worthy of being avenged.

Chapter 3: Physical Violence

Ok nú stózk hann eigi átölur hennar ok bað menn upp standa sem skjótast ok taka vápn sín, ok svá gera þeir ok fara þegar til skála þeira bræðra ok gengu inn at þeim soföndum ok tóku þá ok færðu í bönd ok leiddu svá út hvern, sem bundinn var; en Freydís lét drepa hvern, sem út kom. Nú váru þar allir karlar drepnir, en konur váru eptir, ok vildi engi þær drepa. Þá mælti Freydís: 'Fái mér øxi í hönd.' Svá var gort. Síðan veigr hon at konum þeim fimm, er þar váru, ok gekk af þeim dauðum. Nú fóru þau til skála síns eptir. Þat it illa verk, ok fannsk þat eitt á, at Freydís þóttisk allvel hafa um ráðit ok mælti við félaga sína: 'Ef oss verðr auðit at koma til Grænlands', segir hon, 'Þá skal ek þann mann ráða af lífi, er segir frá þessum atburðum.' Nú skulu vér þat segja, at þau búi hér eptir, þá er vér förum í brott.¹

Not being able to ignore her upbraiding any longer, he told the men to get up as quickly as they could and arm themselves. Having done so, they went at once to the longhouse of the brothers, entered while those inside were still asleep and took them, tied them up and, once bound, led them outside. Freydis, however, had each one of the men who was brought out killed. Soon all the men had been killed and only the women were left, as no one would kill them. Freydis then spoke: 'Hand me an axe.' This was done, and she then attacked the five women there and killed them all. They returned to their house after this wicked deed and it was clear that Freydis was highly pleased with what she had accomplished. She spoke to her companions: 'If we are fortunate enough to make it back to Greenland', she said, 'I will have anyone who tells of these events killed. We shall say that they remained behind here when we took our leave.'²

This scene in *Grænlandinga saga* stands out within the *Íslendingasögur* for its brutality and how gender matters when it comes to viable victims of killing. After Freydís' male followers have attacked the bound and defenceless men, their sense of honour or moral stops them from killing the women. This prompts Freydís to murder five defenceless women with a weapon, a display of violence against women that is rare even for the most villainous of male characters in the *Íslendingasögur*. As was mentioned in the chapter on whetting, Freydís is also the one indirectly responsible for the murder of thirty men by deceiving and whetting her husband into killing them as revenge.³

Although their misdeeds and malice (ódáðum þeira eða illsku) are condemned, Freydís is in fact not shown to receive any direct punishment in the saga. To this notion, her brother Leifr Eiríksson simply states: 'Eigi nenni ek', segir Leifr, 'at gera þat at við Freydísi, systur mína, sem hon væri verð, en spá mun ek þeim þess, at þeira afkvæmi mun lítt at þrifum verða.'⁴ ('I am not the one to deal my sister Freydis the punishment she deserves', Leif said, 'but I predict that their descendants will not get on well in this

¹ *Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 8.

² 'The saga of the Greenlanders', trans. Keneva Kunz, in *Complete Sagas*, 1:31.

³ Wolf has previously argued that Freydís' depiction in *Grænlandinga saga* is a literary invention inspired by the classical world's stories of Amazon women. Kirsten Wolf, 'Amazons in Vinland', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95, no. 4 (1996), 484.

⁴ *Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 8.

world.’)⁵ The saga narrator confirms this, stating that since then they were only thought ill of (engum þótti um þau vert þaðan í frá, nema ills).⁶ In stark contrast to the murderous Freydis shown in *Grænlandinga saga*, in *Eiríks saga rauða* she is instead presented as braver than her male companions as she single-handedly prevents a massacre by scaring off a group of attacking *skrælingar* with a sword and a bared breast while pregnant:⁷

Sverðit lá bert í hjá honum; tók hon þat upp ok býsk at verja sik. Þá kómu Skrælingar at henni; hon dró þá út brjóstit undan klæðunum ok slettir á beru sverðinu. Við þetta óttask Skrælingar ok hljópu undan á skip sín ok reru í brott. Þeir fælast við ok hlaupa undan ok á skip sín ok heldu á brottu. Þeir Karlsefni finna hana ok lofa happ hennar.⁸

(His sword lay beside him and this she snatched up and prepared to defend herself with it as the natives approached her. Freeing one of her breasts from her shift, she smacked the sword with it. This frightened the natives, who turned and ran back to their boats and rowed away. Karlsefni and his men came back to her and praised her luck.)⁹

In both sagas Freydis deals or threatens to deal physical violence, something generally associated with men. However, what truly stands out here is how she in both instances utilises her femininity as she does it, either by exposing her feminine physique or by killing those regarded as unviable targets for men. In both cases this creates strong emotions with one portrayal condemning her cruelty, and the other lauding her bravery and luck.

Physical violence is a key component in the *Íslendingasögur*, and both men and women are shown to be on both sides of the blade, fists, or improvised weapons with both positive and negative outcomes, and their receptions strongly vary depending on the setting, the method, who the culprits and victims are, as well as the motivation. In opposition to these varying receptions within the narrative, such as the punishment of female instigators of physical violence, the oldest Norse laws are rich with description of and sanctions for physical attacks done to others, including those done by women. This raises questions such as whether the sagas are more forgiving with female physical violence than male violence, and what it is that determines what makes male physical violence laudable or condemned. This chapter will look at the concept of physical violence as a villainous action within the *Íslendingasögur*, and how the depictions of

⁵ ‘The saga of the Greenlanders’, 1:31.

⁶ *Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 9.

⁷ *Skrælingar* being the Old Norse name given to the original inhabitants of Vinland and Greenland in the sagas, as seen in *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Grænlandinga saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*.

⁸ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11.

⁹ ‘Eirik the Red’s saga’, trans. Keneva Kunz, in *Complete Sagas*, 1:16.

this violence differ depending on the gender of both the violator and the victim. The physical violence here will primarily be limited to the kind done by humans, as opposed to more supernatural beings, be they trolls, shapeshifters, or valkyries.

Scholarship on physical violence in Old Norse culture and literature

As physical violence is a core element of the sagas, several scholarly works have been written by historians, legal historians, literary scholars, and anthropologists on the topic of violence and warfare in Old Norse culture and literature.¹⁰ Here particular focus has been given to the motif of the viking warrior at home and abroad, particularly in reference to the viking raids.¹¹ Heroic battles depicted in Old Norse mythology, skaldic poetry, and in the sagas has also been a topic of fascination.¹² Much attention has also been given to the structure of feuds which have been described in chapter 1, such as the works of Byock and Miller.¹³ Another topic of discussion has been how violent the pre-Christian Norse world truly was compared to what is depicted in the literary sources, not the least due to the depictions of vikings abroad as described by their victims.¹⁴

While the perception has been that the Icelandic Commonwealth was a violent society, some historians like Jón Viðar Sigurðsson have also focused on the prevention of violence and peacekeeping mechanics within the Commonwealth, such as political friendships, gift giving, and settlements at the *þing*.¹⁵ Research has also been done on

¹⁰ Guy Morris, 'Violence and Late Viking Age Scandinavian Social Order', in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998); Kim Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially Hans Jacob Orning, 'Conflict and Social (dis)order in Norway, c. 1030–1160.'

¹¹ Dawn Hadley, 'Viking Raids and Conquest', *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500–c. 1100* (2009); Steven P Ashby, 'What Really Caused the Viking Age? The Social Content of Raiding and Exploration', *Archaeological Dialogues* 22, no. 1 (2015). Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'Warrior identities in Viking-Age Scandinavia', in *Vikings Across Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹² On Norse and Germanic heroes in literature, see Victor Millet and Heike Sahm, eds., *Narration and Hero: Recounting the Deeds of Heroes in Literature and Art of the Early Medieval Period* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). See in particular Diana Whaley's chapter 'The Fury of the Northmen and the Poetics of Violence', 71–94; Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, eds., *Revisiting the Poetic Edda* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013); Caroline R. Batten, 'Strengði hon elfi: Female Reactions to Male Violence in Eddic Heroic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 3 (2019).

¹³ Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*. For more generally on feuding see Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen, eds., *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007); Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado, eds., *Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁴ Caitlin Ellis, 'Remembering the Vikings: Violence, Institutional Memory and The Instruments of History', *History Compass* 19, no. 1 (2021).

¹⁵ See in particular Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, 12; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den vennlige vikingen: vennskapets makt i Norge og på Island ca. 900-1300*. and the later English translation Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship: The Social Bond in Iceland and Norway, c. 900-1300*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

the violence in the ‘civil war’ periods in Iceland and Norway, such as the works by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Hans Jacob Orning.¹⁶ In ‘Violence, Conflict and Order in Medieval Norway’, Orning describes a conflict-riddled decentralised society as one of ‘constant crisis’, and refers to the Norwegian civil wars of 1130-1240 as an example of this crisis. Similarly, contemporary Norwegian writers described the violent period after 1130 as a ‘cesspit’ or ‘fog of confusion.’¹⁷ In turn, Jónas Kristjánsson has detailed the old perception of a peaceful Icelandic interim period between the period the *Íslendingasögur* depicts (*söguöld*), and the *Sturlungaöld*. This supposed time of peace is called *fríðaröld*, and within its time frame of about a century (c. 1030-c. 1120) only two sagas take place.¹⁸ This perception of a peaceful time between two violent periods has however been subject to debate, and may instead be a result of lacking written sources of that time.¹⁹

In his recent monograph *Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland: This Splattered Isle*, Oren Falk looks thoroughly into the topic of violence in the Old Norse world.²⁰ Here Falk argues against the existing binary model of violence where it is either seen as a method to gain power, or an act that expresses a symbolic meaning, rather than intent. Falk here suggests an additional third dimension, that of risk. This inclusion of risk invites more external explanations for the violence, where it is used to deal with uncertainty. On the relation between violence and gender as described in different Old Norse sources, there is David Clark’s study *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*. This monograph studies the relationship between gender and physical violence within several Old Norse literary genres, including the Poetic Edda and the different saga genres, as well as the ties and references to the Eddaic poems in later works. Clark here points to how the ambivalent depictions of the heroic and violent way of revenge

¹⁶ Orning, ‘Conflict and Social (dis) order in Norway, c. 1030–1160.’ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Henrik Vigh, ‘Who Is the Enemy? Multipolar Micropolitics’, in *Medieval and Modern Civil Wars: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Hans Jacob Orning (Leiden: Brill, 2021); See also Beñat Elortza Larrea, *Polity Consolidation and Military Transformation in Medieval Scandinavia: A European Perspective, c.1035–1320* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

¹⁷ Hans Jacob Orning, ‘Violence, Conflict and Order in Medieval Norway’, *Global Intellectual History* (2023).

¹⁸ These two sagas being *Jons saga helga* by Gunnlaugr Leifsson and *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*.

¹⁹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988), 179-80.

²⁰ Oren Falk, *Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland: This Splattered Isle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

may be intentional to provoke debate among its audience on whether they are to be admired or feared.²¹

As has been highlighted above, there has been a multitude of approaches to physical violence and warfare within Old Norse scholarship, from the idea of the typical viking raider, violence and its prevention within the Old Norse world, to the perception of violence and the violator. For the interest of this thesis, the perceived ties between heroism and masculinity together with physical violence is the most relevant, as well as the matter of the turbulent situation in the 13th century Iceland. The latter will be described in more detail in the next section.

Contemporary saga attitudes to violence compared to the Íslendingasögur

One question to ask when looking at the frequent physical violence depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is whether the 8th-11th Old Norse society was that violent, or if it is the perspective of the 13th century authors' perspective on their past, as well as the influence of their own contemporary political situation. By looking at the depiction of the *Íslendingasögur* in comparison to the contemporary *samtíðarsögur*, the pattern is that while much violence, death, and maiming is depicted in both saga genres, there is far more of violence as spectacle found in the more distant *Íslendingasögur* than in the contemporary sagas depicting the 13th century civil war. The *Íslendingasögur* are rich with exaggerated violent imagery that is stated bluntly, and the vicious cycle of revenge structures most of the sagas. There is a tendency for the violence committed by the male saga heroes to be exaggerated, impressive, and to be justified within the narrative. The saga heroes fight and defeat feuding enemies as well as the supernatural Other, and if they are in turn killed by the end, there is a tragedy of their loss, and the promise of vengeance. Depending on the act of physical violence and its context, it can be a source of honour or be vilifying. Unlike the *Íslendingasögur*, the contemporary sagas are more grounded by the proximity in time and relations to the violent actions and their instigators. This proximity limits how these characters and their actions can be portrayed. Another point is that the *Íslendingasögur* and the other more distant saga genres are freer to give the most vicious acts to those most monstrous, supernatural, or otherwise villainous whose physical violence is safely tucked back in the past.

²¹ Clark, *Gender, Violence*, 164.

Likewise, their violent retribution can be presented more excessively and unapologetically.

Despite the unhinged violence depicted in the more distant *Íslendingasögur*, it is the period between 1210 to 1240 or 1250, the *Sturlungaöld* when many of the ‘classical’ *Íslendingasögur* are believed to have been written down, that was the most violent period in Iceland.²² This contrast is the most jarring when it comes to the depictions of maiming, torture, castration, and other disfiguring shown in the contemporary sagas.²³ As Lois Bragg puts it: ‘Whereas in *Egils saga* readers are filled with awe at the uncanny darkness of this famous skáld, we are simply repulsed by the gratuitous grossness and incommensurate violence of some of his twelfth- and thirteenth-century descendants.’²⁴ In *Sturlunga Saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler*, Stephen Tranter calls the sections of *Sturlunga saga* after *Íslendinga saga*, ‘a demonstration of the evils that came upon the land as a result of men’s failure to secure reconciliation... [It is] a plea to the men of the compiler’s own age to learn from the Age of the Sturlungs and to settle their differences before they fall into further chaos.’²⁵ The same goes for women and vengeful femininity, even if the cases of physical female violence are even rarer in the *samtíðarsögur* than in the *Íslendingasögur*. Instead of admirable, an attack such as Þorbjörg’s attempting to blind her husband’s enemy Sturla Þórðarson is presented as impulsive, and only serves to aid Sturla’s case.²⁶

A similar notion can be found in the end of the *Íslendingasögur* where peace can only be found by the feuding sides settling their differences with legal means and an end to violence. However, unlike in the *Íslendingasögur*, in the *samtíðarsögur*, there is not the same sense of heroes fighting the enemy, nor of martyrs being defeated by them, as there is no specific ideology separating the ‘us’ from ‘them’, as friends and family could

²² Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family Sagas.’, 112–6.

²³ In *Sturlunga saga* alone there are two cases of castration (*Arons saga* and *Íslendinga saga*), meanwhile in all the known *Íslendingasögur*, there is only one case found in *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar* where it is done to an Irish slave. Lois Bragg, ‘Disfigurement, Disability, and Dis-integration in *Sturlunga saga*’, *alvissmál* 4 (1994); For more on the castration and supposed miraculous healing of Órækja in *Íslendinga saga*, see Kari Ellen Gade, ‘1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gorr’, *Gripla* 9 (1995); Hugh Firth, ‘Coercion, Vengeance, Feud and Accommodation: Homicide in Medieval Iceland’, *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 2 (2012); Adams, “He took a stone away”; Sean Lawing, ‘Victims of Maiming in *Sturlunga saga*: Worse off Living than Dead?’, *Mirator* 20, no. 2 (2021).

²⁴ Bragg, ‘Disfigurement’, 19.

²⁵ Tranter, *Sturlunga saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1987), 221. See also Úlfar Bragason, ‘The Word and the World: A Resonant Textual Fragment of *Íslendinga Saga*’, in *Sagas and Societies: International Conference at Borgarnes, Iceland, 5–9 September 2002*, ed. Stefanie Würth (Tübingen: 2002); Gunnar Karlsson, ‘Goðar og bændur’, *Saga Book* 10 (1972).

²⁶ For more on this, see Clark, *Gender, Violence*.

find themselves standing on separate sides of the bigger conflicts.²⁷ For the first time, the *goðar* were fighting one another in six major battles (1237-1255), as Iceland by 1220 had been divided into seven *ríki* (domains) controlled by seven *goðar*.²⁸ Furthermore, the sheer number of combatants in these sagas is also noticeable. The largest battle, *Örlygsstaðabardagi* (The Battle of Örlygsstaðir) of 1238 fought between the Sturlungar against the Haukdælir and Ásbirningar had circa 3700 combatants.²⁹ During this period Iceland had an approximate population of 55,000, meaning that around seven percent of the Icelandic population were on that battlefield and personally experienced what combat was like.³⁰ For the small population, casualties up to a hundred per battle (about 60 in *Örlygsstaðabardagi*) were big losses for the population. Furthermore, those killed were frequently considerable people such as the chieftains and their followers, leaving more instability in the wake of a battle. As Torfi Tulinius has said, the *samtíðarsögur* show at times show an understanding of trauma as a result of violence and loss.³¹

Killing and murder in the laws

The judgement and punishment of violence and murder is one of the larger sections within the older Norse laws. In laws such as *Grágás* and the *Gulapingslög* there are sections on the nature of the criminal actions, such as categorising the kind of physical violence by the wounds left on the victim, the court proceedings for judging the case, the punishment and retribution, as well as the at times legally supported acts of revenge done by the victim. Physical violence can be perceived in different ways, and a key part to how it is perceived is the balance or rather imbalance of how the attack is initiated. This is primarily shown by how open acts of physical violence are regarded differently from hidden attacks. Hidden ambushes or attacks done in secret with the intention to

²⁷ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Vigh, 'Multipolar Micropolitics', 49-51. The tone and morals in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendingabók* are discussed by several, including Robert James Glendinning, 'Saints, Sinners, and the Age of the Sturlungs: Two Dreams from 'Íslendinga saga'', *Scandinavian studies* 38, no. 2 (1966); Ciklamini, 'Biographical Reflections in "Íslendinga Saga." A Mirror of Personal Values.'

²⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Vigh, 'Multipolar Micropolitics.', 43-44. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*, 12.

²⁹ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Vigh, 'Multipolar Micropolitics', 44.

³⁰ These numbers may be overestimated as is the tendency within Medieval battle numbers. They are based on *Sturlunga saga* and *Íslandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania: Grøndahl & Søns Bogtrykkeri, 1888); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Vigh, 'Multipolar Micropolitics', 44.

³¹ Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Honour, Sagas and Trauma: Reflections on Literature and Violence in 13th Century Iceland', in *Literature and Honour* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017).

disfigure or burn someone are severely punished in the older law codes.³² In *Grágás* the penalty for plotting an ambush to disfigure someone is lesser outlawry, and full outlawry if it succeeds. The same is the case with house burnings. In the case of manslaughter, this is also differentiated linguistically, socially, and legally with open violence and killings (*víg*, *dráp*), and hidden attacks and murder (*morð*).³³ This is for example stated in *Grágás* K §88 ‘Vm morð’ (On murder):

‘Þat er mælt. Ef maðr myrðir man oc varðar þat scog gang. En þa er morð ef maðr leynir eða hylr hræ eða genr eigi i gegn.’³⁴

(It is prescribed that if a man murders a man, the penalty is outlawry. And it is murder if a man hides it or conceals the corpse or does not admit it.)

While still a severe crime, open killings or homicides that are self-reported are regarded as more honourable and honest in comparison to the cowardly *morð*. As will be seen later in this chapter, this difference is also distinctive in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Gender (in)balance within the laws

According to the laws alone there is a notion of equality between male and female killers. In §159 of the *Gulapingslög* titled ‘Ef kona drepr karlmann’, it is stated:

Ef karlmaðr drepr kono. þa verðr hann sva utlagr um sem hann karlmann vege. En ef kona vigr karlmann. þa er hon utlog oc scoló frendr hennar föra hana af lande.³⁵

(If a man kills a woman, then he is just as much of an outlaw as if he had killed a man. If a woman kills a man, then she is an outlaw and her kinsfolk should send her out of the country.)³⁶

Similarly, in §190 that brings up the topic of blows it says:

‘Nu ef karlmaðr drepr kono. æða kono karlmann. þa scal sa böta slicum rette sem hann a at taca er uvæne fær. en baug kononge.’³⁷

(Now if a man beats a woman, or a woman (beats) a man, then such compensation shall be paid as the injured person is entitled to, and a ring to the king.)³⁸

³² *Grágás* K §108.

³³ Fritzner, s.v. ‘víg’, ‘dráp’, ‘morð.’

³⁴ *Grágás* K §88; The later *Jónsbók* (IV, §2) also has this distinction, where *morð* is defined as a *niðingsvíg* (dishonourable killing).

³⁵ *Gulapingslög* §159.

³⁶ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 146.

³⁷ *Gulapingslög* §190.

³⁸ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 155.

However, unlike in *Grágás*, in the *Gulapingslög* the outlaw woman's family is obligated to escort her out of the country, protecting her from an immediate revenge.³⁹ The versions of *Grágás* also describe female killers in different ways. The *Konungsbók* manuscript of *Grágás* does not mention women specifically as perpetrators of manslaughter, but instead uses the masculine or more gender neutral *maðr*. As Jochens has noted, the way the section on homicide is formulated suggests that the lawmakers primarily had in mind men fighting other men.⁴⁰ This is different from in the *Skálholtsbók* manuscript of *Grágás* that has an almost three times as long section on *Víglóði* (homicide). Here women are regarded as viable violators, and they are said to get full outlawry for manslaughter: 'a woman should be prosecuted in the same way as a man if she succeeds in killing a man or a woman.'⁴¹ Still, women would be more restricted here as they are not allowed to carry weapons, and similar to other kinds of crossdressing this was punishable with lesser outlawry.⁴²

According to the oldest laws, women had a relatively equal responsibility and judgement by the law for murder and violence, albeit with more restrictions due to their gender. However, this is not necessarily how this is portrayed in the sagas, where the great majority of acts of physical violence and its prosecution revolve around men, and the few examples of female physical violence are not equally prosecuted. This could imply that the assessment of acts of violence as a villainous action and the punishment are dependent on the instigator's gender for even the most severe acts of violence, when even clearly villainous women such as Freydís are not prosecuted, while others are excused. This raises the question if there are kinds of male physical violence that are similarly excused or otherwise depicted differently than what the laws or other sensibilities would suggest. With this historical and legal background in mind, this chapter will move to look at how the sagas in turn present and judge different types and cases of physical violence of women and men in the *Íslendingasögur*, and how the

³⁹ A similar skewed favouring is found in *Frostapingslög*. Unlike with men, if a woman kills someone, the victim's relatives are not allowed to kill her unless she does not leave the country within five days during summer, or half a month during winter. *Frostapingslög* IV, §33. See also §35 for further distinctions, and V, §31; Tveit et al., 'Kjønsspesifikke straffer', 306-7.

⁴⁰ Jochens supports this argument by how the section includes male-specific, shameful attacks such as *klámhogg* (shame-stroke) and castration. Jochens, 'Gender symmetry in law', 58. For more on these specific attacks, see later in the chapter.

⁴¹ Jochens' translation. Jochens also notes the perceived unlikelihood of this happening by the law writer's use of 'succeeds to kill.' Jochens, 'Gender symmetry in law?' 59; This legally places the women as more responsible for their own actions and available for prosecution of murder than boys who were not under legal penalty, and instead had their kinsmen to make restitutions with kindred payments. *Grágás* St §318.

⁴² *Grágás* K §254.

physical violence is gendered. As will be shown, the way their violence is depicted is influenced by several factors, such as the target victim, the weapon used and how, as well as the intent. Like in the previous chapters, this chapter will begin with studying cases of female physical violence, before moving on to male cases.

Physical violence done by women

Unlike the mythical figure of the valkyrie, as well as the similarly distant shieldmaiden of the *fornaldarsögur*, women are rarely shown to use physical violence in the *Íslendingasögur*. The examples there therefore stand out as cases of either exceptional strength and sense of honour, or of outstanding brutality.

Women attacking men

Despite the laws' seemingly equal punishment for women's physical violence as well as the prohibition on their carrying weapons, their rare cases of violent actions have tendency to be portrayed with support and admiration in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁴³ This is particularly the case when they do the honourable thing, such as protecting someone, or otherwise lashing out against dishonour towards themselves or those they care for. Together with this positively received aim, there is also the power and strength needed to do this, which sets them apart from other women, seemingly momentarily having them step out of their feminine role and its social limitations, and successfully achieving something one would expect from a man. This *manndómligr* (manly) achievement is then usually praised, even ignoring what and to whom it was done. It was also considered a great shame for the man struck by the women, as he could not avenge himself without the great disgrace of using force against a woman.⁴⁴

⁴³ In comparison to *Grágás*, the Norwegian laws also appear to be more skewed in favour of women. In the *Frostapingslög*, a woman guilty of harming her husband would have extenuating circumstances if people were aware that the violence came as a result of violence done by the husband. *Frostapingslög*, IV, §35; Tveit et al., 'Kjønnsesifikke straffer', 305.

⁴⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 76.

The hidden attack of Bróka-Auðr (Breeches-Auðr)

In *Laxdæla saga*, there is the case of the disgraced woman Auðr, who takes revenge on her ex-husband Þórðr who had divorced her on false premises, spreading the lie that she had worn male breeches like a masculine woman (sem karlkona), a disgraceful action worthy of divorce and bringing shame upon her and her family.⁴⁵ As her family is unable or unwilling to avenge her in her stead, she herself decides to set off into the night on a horse with a sword in hand while indeed wearing breeches, realising both the accusation of wearing trousers, as well as the masculine action of taking revenge when her male family cannot:⁴⁶

Hon gekk í lokrekkjuna, en Þórðr svaf ok horfði í lopt upp. Þá vakði Auðr Þórð, en hann snerisk á hliðina, er hann sá, at maðr var kominn. Hon brá þá saxi ok lagði at Þórði ok veitti honum áverka mikla, ok kom á hǫndina hǫgri; varð hann sárr á báðum geirvortum; svá lagði hon til fast, at saxit nam í beðinum staðar. [...] Ósvífr bauð at ríða eptir henni; kvað hana fámenna til mundu hafa farit, ok væri henni skapat víti. Þórðr kvað þat fjarri skyldu fara; sagði hana slíkt hafa at gort, sem hon átti. Auðr kom heim í sólarupprás, ok spurðu þeir bræðr hennar, hvert hon hefði farit. Auðr kvazk farit hafa til Lauga ok sagði þeim, hvat til tíðenda hafði gort í fǫrum hennar; þeir létu vel yfir ok kváðu of lítit mundu at orðit. Þórðr lá lengi í sárum, ok greru vel bringusárin, en sú hǫndin varð honum hvergi betri til taks en áðr.⁴⁷

She entered the bed closet, but Thord slept on his back facing upwards. She woke Thord, but he only turned over on his side when he saw some man had come in. She drew her short-sword and struck him a great wound on his right arm which cut across both breasts. She struck with such force that the sword lodged in the wood of the bed. [...] Osvif offered to ride after her, as she would have brought few followers and deserved punishment. Thord told him not to think of doing so, as what Aud had done was only evening the score. It was sunrise when Aud returned home and her brothers asked where she had gone. Aud told them she had gone to Laugar and told them the news of her visit there. They were pleased but said Thord deserved worse. Thord was a long time recuperating from the wounds; the ones on his chest healed well but he never regained much use of his right arm.⁴⁸

Despite the punishment designated for ambushes in the laws, here Auðr's attack is presented positively, by the narrative itself and her surroundings, as well as Þórðr's own understanding. Furthermore, her attack and how it is depicted is noticeably emasculating to Þórðr while she herself takes on the masculine, violent role, one that he had originally falsely and forcibly put upon her. Firstly, there is the motif of her trousers, the masculinising garment that was used to shame her while he is effeminised

⁴⁵ The wording 'karlkona' appears only in the old *Möðruvallabók* redaction of *Laxdæla saga*, while it in newer manuscripts have 'sem karlmaðr' (like a man), which raises questions with the wording and their intention. For more on this wording, Gareth Lloyd Evans, 'Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 2020). See 63n16. Like mentioned above, transvestism is a legal offence deserving of outlawry in *Grágás* K §254 although this is not shown to be punished in *Laxdæla saga*.

⁴⁶ 'ok nokkuru fyrir sólarfall sté Auðr á bak, ok var hon þá at vísu í brókum.' *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35.

⁴⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35.

⁴⁸ 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', 5:49.

in turn. Then there is the vulnerable position, with him lying on his back in bed when he is found and struck there.⁴⁹ Furthermore, there is her striking his chest, and specifically both his nipples, and finally there is the sword being stuck into the bed after her hit, as well as wounding his sword arm, a key part of his strength and masculinity to the degree that it is stated to never be as good as before. Auðr's revenge is shown to be an impressive feat. For a brief moment, she takes on the shape of the (male) avenger by physical appearance and actions, and avenges the offence done to her with what can possibly be considered a *klámhött* (shame-stroke).⁵⁰ This raises the question of whether this positivity is connected to her exceptionalism of being able to momentarily cross over into the masculine sphere. Alternatively, it may be specifically her femininity that saves her from the scorn of her doing her less than honourable ambush here. Possibly for women, it could be more acceptable as women are less expected to be able to participate in physical violence and revenge on equal footing with men, thus depending on the moment of surprise and trickery.

In *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, despite personally playing a part in his death Gísli's sister Þórdís ultimately attempts to avenge him by attacking his murderer, Eyjólf. While being made to serve food to him after his misdeed, she attempts to stab him underneath the table with Gísli's own sword. In the critical moment, she fails to give him a deadly wound with the table being in the way and she is stopped. In this case, Þórdís' attempted revenge on Gísli's killer, as well as the divorce from Bórkr changes the perspective in her favour in comparison to earlier when she herself instigated the hunt on Gísli, and it is seen as an honourable deed.

⁴⁹ The symbolic connection between the sword and a man's manhood referenced several times in the sagas, and this is also the case with the sexually coded penetration with a sword. One example here is Þorsteinn uxafót's killing of the sleeping trollwoman in her bed, stabbing her so far with his sword that the sword tip strikes the mattress. *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, ch. 10. As Helga Kress has said: 'Er drápinu lýst sem nauðgun, sverð og reður verða eitt.' (The killing is described as a rape; sword and penis become one.) Kress, *Máttugar meyjar*, 123; The sexual undertones of the fighting and killing of giantesses has been noted by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, noting the way their bodies are often penetrated with a spear or arrow in the genital area, the eyes, or the armpit, possibly signifying a 'displaced vagina'. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse literature*, 66. This emasculation and potential symbolic penetration with a sword has also been noted by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 57; Furthermore, the feminisation by cut nipples could also be further feminising by the men's breasts then becoming a woman's, as Kress and Heide have discussed. Heide also points to how this is shown to be possible in the sagas, by how Þorgils is able to begin lactating by cutting his nipples when he has to feed his son in Greenland in *Flóamanna saga*; For more on feminisation, see Kress, *Máttugar meyjar*, 144; Mundal, 'Symbol og symbolhandlingar', 63; Heide, 'Menn til kvinner', 81.

⁵⁰ Not only is he feminised by his cut nipples, but the way his sword hand is said to never heal properly, figuratively leaving him impotent. Heide, 'Menn til kvinner', 84. A scorned woman is also guilty of wounding Þormóðr's arm so badly that it never fully regains its strength in *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 9-10.

Another case of sororal love and need for revenge driving a woman to go against her husband is also seen in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, where Þorbjörg attempts to strike her husband Indriði after he has been part of the murder of her brother Hörðr. The attack in bed motif also appears here after Þorbjörg and Indriði have gone to bed, when suddenly Þorbjörg brings up a sword and wills to use it, before he grips it and wounds his hand badly: ‘En er þau kómi í sæng um kveldit, þá brá Þorbjörg saxi ok vildi leggja á Indriða, bónda sínum, en hann tók í móti ok varð sárr mjök á hendi.’⁵¹ (And when they went to bed that night Thorbjorg pulled out a short single-edged sword and tried to strike her husband Indridi, but he resisted and was seriously wounded on the hand.) Indriði shows a perhaps surprising amount of understanding here, as he realises the awful situation and asks her directly what must be done to reconcile with her. The answer is the head of the man who killed Hörðr, and this Indriði soon gives her. This, together with her tricking him into promising to protect her sister-in-law and her two sons, is lauded by the narrative, stating: ‘Þótti öllum Þorbjörgu mikilmannliga verða.’⁵² (Everyone thought Þorbjörg had acted magnificently.) Like with Auðr’s case, the attack is done in bed, and the result is a badly wounded hand. While he is able to kill with his sword afterwards, his wounded hand might still be similar to the case of Þórðr as he is shown to afterwards be yielding to Þorbjörg’s demands, emasculated both physically and in his deeds. Here too Þorbjörg’s attack as well as her trickery is presented as a great act.

Besides women harming others with proper weapons, there are cases where they improvise with other tools. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Þordís fights alongside Gísli with a wooden staff and even strikes down Eyjólfur whom she has previously fought with. This Gísli praises, saying: ‘Þat visa ek fyrir löngu, at ek var vel kvænt, en þó visa ek eigi, at ek væra svá vel kvænt sem ek em.’⁵³ (Then Gisli said, ‘I knew long ago that I had married well, but never realised till now that the match was as good as this.’)⁵⁴ However, this praise is oddly flipped around right afterwards, as he continues: ‘En minna lið veittir þú mér nú en þú mundir vilja eða þú ætlaðir, þó at tilræðit væri gott, því at eina leið mundu þeir nú hafa farit báðir.’⁵⁵ (Yet the help you gave me now was less than you wished and less than you intended, even though the blow was good, for I might have

⁵¹ *Harðar saga*, ch. 38.

⁵² *Harðar saga*, ch. 38.

⁵³ *Gísla saga*, ch. 34.

⁵⁴ ‘Gisli Súrsson’s saga’, 2:46.

⁵⁵ *Gísla saga*, ch. 34.

dispatched them both in the same way.’)⁵⁶ Jeffrey Turco has noted how Auðr is seemingly here given some of the responsibility for her husband’s death for getting in the way of the male fight, both by Gísli himself and by the narrative.⁵⁷ This could then be the result of her attempting to fight in a male sphere, the outside, with a wooden staff against men with swords. Of note here is the choice of weapon, the staff, instead of a sword like the previously mentioned women.⁵⁸ Still, even with this reading of Gísli’s words, the action of protecting her husband with limited abilities and means is not portrayed villainously, but instead as someone out of place in a saga with the honourable outlaw’s last stand.

The shaming silver pouch strike

A curious repeated motif in the sagas is that of an honourable woman hitting her male enemy with a pouch filled with silver that he has attempted to bribe her or her husband with, thus mocking both his bribe and his honour. This is found both in the case of Auðr in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, as well as Vigdís in *Laxdæla saga*. In Auðr’s example, tension is built as her loyalties are briefly doubted as she asks if she can do what she wants with silver, before she proves her loyalty:

Auðr tekr nú fêit ok lætr koma í einn stóran sjóð, stendr hon síðan upp ok rekr sjóðinn með silfrinu á nasar Eyjólf, svá at þegar stökk blóð um hann allan, ok mælti: ‘haf nú þetta fyrir auðtryggi þína ok hvert ógagn með. Engi ván var þer þess, at ek mynda selja bónda minn í hendr illmenni þínu. Haf nú þetta ok með bæði skömm ok klæki. Skaltu þat muna, vesall maðr, meðan þú lifir, at kona hefir barit þik[...].’⁵⁹

(Aud took the silver and put it in a large purse, then she stood up and struck Eyjolf on the nose and blood spurted all over him. ‘Take that for your gullibility’, she said, ‘and all the harm that ensues from it. There was never any hope that I would render up my husband into your hands, you wicked man. Take this now for your cowardice and your shame, and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you.’)⁶⁰

⁵⁶ ‘Gísli Súrsson’s saga’, 2: 46.

⁵⁷ Turco’s analysis of violence and gender in *Gísli saga* gives an interesting view on the correlation between the gender of the violator, the weapon they use, and where they do so, by looking at the female users of physical violence in the saga. Also of interest is the comparison between Auðr as a manly woman and Þorgrímur as a womanly man, and how they are both ‘out of place.’ Jeffrey Turco, ‘Gender, Violence, and the “Enigma” of Gísla saga’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 115, no. 3 (2016).

⁵⁸ Instead of the reading of the cudgel as to be a bad weapon in the hands of a woman considering her inability to fully immobilise Gísli’s enemies, her not using a sword could possibly be in her favour as she then further fulfils the ideal of a good wife and woman who does not carry a sword (transvestitism), and who during her transgressive actions still make use of ‘feminine’ weapons. Another example of a woman attacking a man with a similar improvised weapon is Steingerðr who after having her husband be knocked unconscious by her unwelcome suitor and dubious saga hero Kormákr responds by ramming their boat into Kormákr’s and sinking it. *Kormáks saga*, ch. 25.

⁵⁹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 32.

⁶⁰ ‘Gísli Súrsson’s saga’, 2: 41.

Eyjólfur is riled into violence by this, and orders his followers to ‘get that dog and kill it, even if it is a bitch’ (Hafið hendr á hundinum ok drepi, þó at blauðr sé). However, his men refuse, telling him that he has been disgraced enough without performing this *níðingsverk* by harming Auðr, and they leave.⁶¹ Here Auðr’s strike, like her later defence of Gísli is an act of loyalty as well as of dishonouring of the enemy by having them be struck by a woman.

Similar to Auðr, Vigdís strikes the man Ingjaldr with a pouch of silver after he has bribed her husband with it into giving up the outlaw she was protecting, although in this case this outlaw is a relative rather than her husband: ‘Vigdís hefr upp fésjóðinn ok rekr á nasar honum, svá at þegar fell blóð á jörð; þar með velr hon honum mǫrg hæðilig orð ok þat með, at hann skal þetta fé aldregi fá síðan; biðr hann á brott fara.’⁶² (Vigdís swung the purse up into his face, striking him on his nose which bled so that drops of blood fell to the ground. While doing so she heaped abuse on him, adding that he would never again see this money, and told him to be off.)⁶³ The reason for why this specific motif is repeated is possibly due to the symbolism of using an already undignified weapon, in this case the silver, against the bribing antagonist to disgrace him further. Both Auðr and Vigdís have throughout their story shown their exceptionalism; Vigdís is described as a *skörungr* who is regarded as more honourable and manly than her husband, and Auðr is regarded as the ideal loyal housewife who supports and fights by Gísli’s side to the very end. Both women are within the narrative clearly presented to be in the right, despite the laws against aiding outlaws (*skógarmannabjörg*).⁶⁴ Both of their blows are violent, and in both cases, they draw blood. However, the blows are less about inflicting lasting damage, and more about shaming the men for their disgraceful bribes, as well as for attempting to make the women’s faithfulness waver. While the violent rejection of a bribe is more associated with female violence, in *Svarfdæla saga* the young boy Karl strikes his father’s murderer with a pouch with three marks of silver that is the fee for the murder. Here Karl, like Auðr and Vigdís, refuses to be bribed; their own honour as well as their dedication is stronger than their greed. Interesting,

⁶¹ On the use of the word *blauðr*, see Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex.’

⁶² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 15.

⁶³ ‘The saga of the People of Laxardal’, 5:17.

⁶⁴ *Grágás* K §73. On the topic of female protectors of outlaws, see Sigrun Borgen Wik, ‘Women as Hosts and Protectors of Outlaws in the Sagas of Icelanders’, in *Guests, Strangers, Aliens, Enemies: Ambiguities of Hospitality in the Latin Middle Ages, 1000-1350*, ed. Wojtek Jezierski and Lars Kjær (Turnhout: Brepols, (forthcoming)).

however, unlike the cases of the two women, young Karl's hit is allowed to be more brutal, as it is described as causing the man to lose two teeth.⁶⁵

Women torturing

As will be explained in more detail further into the chapter, torture is generally a rare feature within the *Íslendingasögur* for both men and women. The rare case of female-led torture in the *Íslendingasögur* can be found in the short *Þáttr Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*. Here, the widow Yngvildr is avenging the murder of the titular Þorsteinn by torturing the Irish slave Gelli who killed him in his sleep. Here it is described that 'a red-hot goblet was put upon his stomach' (Þá var sett á kvið Gilla glóandi mundlaug), and that it was only kicked away by Yngvildr when Gelli threatened to curse her family for generations.⁶⁶ Gelli still dies from the torture as it is said that stomach 'explodes' from the warmth, and he is buried in a marsh. While it is noticeably phrased ambiguously to say who actively placed the goblet on him, she is shown to be the one responsible for it, as she is the one interrogating him, the one threatened by the curse, and the one shown to finally stop it. When it comes to the depiction of the torture, it is not shown in a negative way, instead more neutrally, which might partly be because the deadly torture is done to a foreign slave and as revenge, which within both the moral code of the sagas as well as the laws would be allowed.⁶⁷

A takeaway from these mentioned attacks shown in the *Íslendingasögur* by women is that the women and the action themselves are regarded as exceptional, despite them rarely being able to fulfil their wish for revenge by killing their target. Instead, their actions are shown to be more about dishonouring the target, and in turn their actions are regularly justified by the narrative, as voiced either by the author or characters within. They are also shown to be more likely to fail at their goals of revenge by physical violence when this is done with a typically masculine weapon like a sword, and that they are more likely to succeed in dishonouring a male with a strike rather than killing him. These emasculating strikes can be all the more effective in discrediting the

⁶⁵ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 23. A version of this with a male attacker is also found in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* where the cruel son-killer Þorbjörn during an attempted settlement hits the old father Hávarðr in the face with a pouch containing not silver but the dead sons' teeth. This is also said to draw blood. *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 7.

⁶⁶ *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*, ÍF 11, 326.

⁶⁷ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 105-6.

man and his masculinity than killing him, and here the woman is shown to be in the right.

Women attacking other women

Unlike in the supernatural world of trollish women shown in the previous chapter, regular saga women fighting each other is a rare sight. In the *Gulapingslög* §190, there is an interesting detail on the topic of women physically harming other women, that stands in contrast to violence done by men to other men, violence done by men to women, or violence done by women to men: ‘En ef konor beriasc þar a engi maðr rett a nema þær sialvar.’⁶⁸ (But if women fight, then no one shall have compensation besides the women themselves.) This phrasing likely means that no kin are involved in either paying for compensation or in receiving it, unlike in cases with men.⁶⁹ Interestingly, in §186 on claiming compensation (‘Um rettar far manna’) it is stated that neither man nor woman are allowed to demand compensation more than three times without taking revenge inbetween (‘Nv a engi maðr rett a sér oftarr en trysvar. hvarke karl. ne kona. ef hann hemnisc eigi a milli.’)⁷⁰ This suggests that vengeance might have been an expected action not only for men but also for women. Here it restricts both men and women from suing others frequently without taking actions by themselves. However, depending on the circumstances this could possibly encourage physical violence. While a law like *Gulapingslög*’s §190 is not found in *Grágás*, the laws there are generally more equal for men and women. Still, considering the small number of examples of female on female physical violence in the *Íslendingasögur*, there might have been a similar general lack of concern about this kind of physical conflict between women in the Icelandic society as in the sagas considering their less severe repercussions.⁷¹ One

⁶⁸ *Gulapingslög* §190.

⁶⁹ According to the *Frostapingslög*, this fine should be paid by the woman’s own money, and not from the household’s shared wealth. *Frostapingslög* IX, 38. Tveit et al. notes that the gender specific punishments for crimes connected to violence that were found in the older regional laws were not imported into Magnus Lagabøte’s City and State Laws in the 1270s. This suggests that these notions mirror the older culture where gender and private status decided the size of a fine. Tveit et al., ‘Kjønsspesifikke straffer’, 305.

⁶⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 14.

⁷⁰ *Gulapingslög* §186. See Jørn Øyrehagen Sunde, ‘De skal vera samde menn—Ei vitskapleg fundering og spekulasjon over den eldste norske prosessen’, *Eftersyn och eftertanke. De Lege-Juridiska Fakulteten i Uppsala Årsbok* (2007), 316-20.

⁷¹ The Norwegian *Frostapingslög* is similarly dismissive, where it says that a married woman shall only pay half a compensation if she hits another woman, compared to if she had struck a man. In comparison, a man must pay full compensation for striking both women and men. *Frostapingslög*, IX, 38; Tveit et al., ‘Kjønsspesifikke straffer’, 305.

rare example is shown in *Laxdæla saga*, where the jealous housewife Jörunn strikes her husband's concubine, Melkorka, with her stockings, just to have her pay back in turn:

Ok litlu síðar, er Jörunn gekk at sofa, togaði Melkorka af henni ok lagði skóklæðin á gólfít. Jörunn tók sokkana ok keyrði um höfuð henni. Melkorka reiddisk ok setti hnefann á nasar henni, svá at blóð varð laust. Höskuldr kom at ok skilði þær.⁷²

(Shortly afterwards, when Jorunn was getting ready for bed, Melkorka assisted her in removing her socks and shoes and laid them on the floor. Jorunn picked up the socks and struck her with them. Angered, Melkorka gave Jorunn a blow on the nose, causing it to bleed, before Hoskuldr came in and separated them.)⁷³

This fight seems to be over the authority within the household, as well as over Höskuldr and his inheritance for their respective sons.⁷⁴ However, it also appears as a personal battle of wills with two prideful women with the housewife fighting against her slave woman who is exceptional by the fact that she is the daughter of an Irish king. In the end, neither woman is punished for the incident, not even Melkorka for hitting her mistress, and Höskuldr solves this conflict by moving Melkorka out of their house and giving her her own homestead (Melkorkustaðir).⁷⁵ Despite striking her mistress, Melkorka then receives more freedom of action, and further makes use of it through her son Óláfr pá.

A more brutal description of a fight can be found in *Gull-Þóris saga*, also known as *Þorskfirðinga saga*, between Þuríðr dritkinn (Dirtcheek) and the witch Kerling.⁷⁶ During an ambush magically supported by Kerling, the woman Þuríðr rushes forward towards the witch as she stands with her head between her legs and her dress pulled up her back as she performs her witchcraft to dull the weapons of Þórir's group:

Þá sá Þuríðr drikkinn, at Kerling fór um völinn at húsbaki ok hafði klæðin á baki sér uppi, en niðri höfuðit, ok sá svá skýin á milli fóta sér. Þuríðr hljóp þá út af virkinu ok ran á hana ok þreif í hárit ok reif af apr hnakkafilluna. Kerling tók í eyra Þuríði báðum höndum ok sleit af henni eyrat ok alla kinnfilluna ofan, ok í því tók at bíta vápn Þóris, ok urðu þá mjök skeinusamir.⁷⁷

(Then Thurid Drikkinn saw Kerling walking around behind the house with her clothes pulled up and her head bent down, looking backwards through her legs at the clouds. Thurid then leapt out

⁷² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 14.

⁷³ 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', 5:13.

⁷⁴ Jörunn has several sons with Höskuldr while Melkorka had Óláfr pá before this fight. Óláfr's exceptional traits and Höskuldr's love for him are emphasised before the fight takes place.

⁷⁵ Another possible example of female physical violence driving forth a change of necessarily moving out could be Hallgerðr having to move out from Gunnarr's homestead after his death, as his mother Rannveig blames her for it: 'Hon var svá hörð við Hallgerðr, at henni helt við, at hon myndi drepa hana', (She was so cross with Hallgerðr, that she could have killed her.) Whether this is a figure of speech or not is uncertain, but in any case her anger driving Hallgerðr out of the homestead is not presented negatively. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 78.

⁷⁶ *Þorskfirðinga saga* is regarded as being amongst the younger sagas, being speculated to be from the first half of the 14th century. Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', 115.

⁷⁷ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, ÍF 13, ch. 17.

of the fortification, attacked her, and grabbed her hair, tearing the flesh off the back of her neck. Kerling grabbed Thurid's ear with both hands and tore off the ear and the flesh of her cheek below it. And at that moment Thorir's weapons began to bite, and they did a lot of harm.)⁷⁸

This fight both stands out as it is a common woman fighting a supernatural woman, as well as for the brutality of its description. While the supernatural Kerling's wounding of Þuríðr causes more damage, it is still said that neither of them were later capable of further fighting, and it is here Þuríðr's action that breaks Kerling's spell over the weapons. Considering this, it is surprising how little this feat is underlined in the saga in comparison to other saga women who either deal with witches to help men incapable of doing so, or otherwise show exceptional physical skills.⁷⁹ Perhaps this is because there is little honour or dishonour to get from physically fighting another woman, even if she happens to be a supernatural one. This would then be similar to the law where these kinds of fights would generally be considered inconsequential, unless driving forth a personal change such as the need to keep Melkorka and Jórunn separated. Additionally, women fighting might be considered a joke at times. It certainly is in the previously mentioned scene in *Svarfdæla saga*, where the servile woman (*ambátt*) taunts Klaufi wrestling with a male slave to be like two slave women fighting (*ambattáfang*), as neither one was falling.⁸⁰

Women's violence against children

Unlike in the cases of men and fathers harming young boys, women are rarely shown to be violent towards children. A rare but horrible example is found in *Grettis saga* with the future killer of Grettir, Þórbjörn Öngull, and his abusive stepmother. One time in a fit of rage, his stepmother stabs out one of his eyes with a sharp board game piece.⁸¹ This leads him to lash out in turn and to beat her so thoroughly that she later dies of the wounds. As is often the case with stories centred around children, this functions to prove his unbalanced nature at a young age. To make things worse, it is then stated that she had been pregnant as she was killed, which legally doubles his crime of murder.⁸² In

⁷⁸ 'Gold-Thorir's saga', trans. Anthony Maxwell, in *Complete Sagas*, 3:355.

⁷⁹ Kerling is otherwise presented as a despicable supernatural witch who does her witchcraft in an off-putting although comedic way, and who is eventually killed by having a large rock thrown at her between her legs while trying to swim away. See the previous chapter for similar examples of this motif.

⁸⁰ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 13.

⁸¹ *Grettis saga*, ch. 70.

⁸² Interestingly, a similar attack is done by a woman in *Sturlu saga* ch. 31. Here she attempts to stab out an eye of her husband in spite, as she says that she wishes to make her husband like the one he admires the most, Óðinn. *Sturlungu saga* 1:109.

the sagas, children as characters are often considered adults-to-be, and both their actions and the things done to them can foreshadow their future. In this case, the story from Þórbjörn's childhood introduces the violence and despicable nature of Þórbjörn, but it may also present how the cruel treatment of children like Þórbjörn can affect their development negatively as they grow up. This approach is also shown when it comes to more morally ambiguous saga protagonists like Egill and Grettir.⁸³

In the *Íslendingasögur* there are hardly any depictions of mothers physically harming their own children.⁸⁴ A possible exception that could be counted here is infanticide by setting out unwanted children to die by exposure (*bera út barn*). This is a phenomenon found in Icelandic and Early Norwegian laws, as well as in the sagas.⁸⁵ While forbidden and severely punished in the Norwegian laws, this is not penalised in *Grágás*.⁸⁶ This does not rule out that the children would be physically punished as a part of their upbringing, and it could simply be considered too inconsequential to the narrative, similar to the rarity of woman-on-woman physical violence. Some Norwegian laws also set limits to how severely parents could punish their children.⁸⁷ It was not permitted to punish a child such that they would have permanent injuries as a result of the beating. Additionally, in later Christian Norwegian law parents were legally bound to protect children below seven years old against all kinds of harm besides illness.⁸⁸ This is all unlike in Norse mythology. In these distant and exaggerated stories, the Eddaic heroine Guðrún Gjúkadóttir for example is shown to kill her own children and then serve them to her husband to avenge her murdered brothers, and this is presented as a severe but almost necessary act by the demands of honour and vengeance.⁸⁹

⁸³ 'The narratives of Egill and Grettir indicate that even though some children are born difficult, they will become even more so if they are treated with hostility or indifference.' Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome children in the sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-Book* 27 (2003), 22.

⁸⁴ Arguably one could also say that sending children into bloodfeuds could be considered orchestrating the physical harm or even death of one's children, but it is not considered direct physical violence.

⁸⁵ On Old Norse infanticide, see Else Mundal, 'Barneutbering', *Norskraft* 56 (1987); Mundal, 'Born og foreldre'; Marianne Hem Eriksen, 'Don't All Mothers Love Their Children? Deposited Infants as Animate Objects in the Scandinavian Iron Age', *World Archaeology* 49, no. 3 (2017).

⁸⁶ While infanticide by exposure was made illegal in the Norwegian laws, this was still legal in Iceland after the Christianisation of Iceland. In fact, it was one out of two pagan habits that were kept, with the other being the consumption of horse meat.

⁸⁷ *Gulapingslög* in *NgL* 4:19; 'Erkebiskop Jons Christenret', ch. 65 in *NgL* 2:385.

⁸⁸ 'Nyere Gulathings-Christenret' in *NgL* 2:328.

⁸⁹ On the topic of *Gísla saga*'s possible commentary on Eddaic revenge and the complexities of familial ties and the murder of children in the name of revenge, see O'Donoghue and Clark: Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 173-174; David Clark, 'Revisiting' *Gísla saga*: Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 4 (2007), 503.

Some trends and patterns with female physical violence

As can be seen from the examples, there is a distinct difference between the depiction of physical violence done by supposedly ‘normal’ and nonmagical women and that of the supernatural witches and troll women who are much more condemned and loathed for their more dangerous and uncontrollable violence. In the cases when regular women are able to cause considerable harm to the men physically, socially, and symbolically, they are rarely presented negatively for this unless they harm people other than free men such as women, children, and slaves. Freyðis killing the captured women in *Grænlandinga saga* stands out in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁹⁰ However despite her grave misdeeds, her gender and relations still prevail over her crimes in terms of repercussions and the ensuing treatment. Furthermore, normal women are generally shown to lack the physical abilities to fully accomplish their goals of harming a man. This in turn could be included to prove the limits of their exceptionalism, and that they remain women with the physical limitations that this implies.⁹¹

Physical violence done by men

As physical violence between men is a key element of any of the *Íslendingasögur* and much scholarship has already been done on the subject of this, I will limit this section of the thesis to look at recurring villainous male character types who are distinct due to their physically violent actions within the *Íslendingasögur*, times where the sagas specifically discuss the behaviour in relation to masculinity or social appropriate norms, as well as the kinds of physical violence that truly stands out as villainous through the lens of the sagas.⁹² The following section will first look at physical violence done to

⁹⁰ In comparison, there are cases of female witches kill other female witches, and implied cases where they may be responsible for the death of other women. Sometimes these cases blur, such as in *Harðar saga* where the witch Þorbjörg Katla jumps and kills the man Þorolfr by crushing his windpipe with her teeth. Both before and after this she is shown to be a dangerous witch, so I read this beastly killing as being more connected with her supernatural identity. *Harðar saga*, ch. 39.

⁹¹ Similarly, in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 37-8, a law is implemented that prevents women and boys below sixteen from prosecuting a murder case. This is said to be a reaction to the murder case of the popular Arnkell not being followed up as vigorously by his two sisters as people had expected. Jochens, ‘Gender symmetry’, 47-8.

⁹² I am not including the type of the physically violent servile man who acts on the behalf of others in this section. Even if they are frequently shown to kill and participate in feuds within the *Íslendingasögur* and may be described as being unbalanced or violent by nature. This is because the saga narratives show that it is ultimately the slave owner’s fault for ordering them kill their foe, and thus the master is the correct target for revenge. Despite this, the revenge killing might still be done to the slave as a revenge by proxy. The closest we get to the slave itself acting with their own agenda in mind may be when they are promised their freedom for it, although this by itself is hardly shown in a negative light by itself, which is

fellow men, and then at physical violence done to women and children to see what difference this makes to see what difference the target makes to how a physically violent act is evaluated.

Physical violence done by men to other men

In the *Íslendingasögur* much of the building of and maintenance of men's masculinity and honour is connected to physical violence and the strength to go through with it. Those who maintain it are frequently depicted in a positive manner, but this raises the question of those who not only fulfil the demands of society's hegemonic masculine ideals, but exceed the expectations of physical violence and in turn struggle to fit within society. A useful term here is hypermasculinity, which has been defined by Kirby Schroeder as 'sets of behaviours and beliefs characterised by unusually highly developed masculine forms as defined by existing cultural values.'⁹³ Associated actions here include assertions of power and dominance, such as through physical violence. In moderation, these are traits are idealised within the Old Norse culture and literature, but when they become excessive, antisocial and unacceptable acts of physical and sexual aggression occur.⁹⁴

The sagas tend to be torn over the demand of the hegemonic masculine ideal and its reality. While masculinity and the traits associated with it are admired, those considered unbalanced men (*ójafnaðamaðr*), outlaws, *berserkir*, and their like are condemned for being unfit for society. This is despite them seemingly being the closest to embodying the depicted society's hegemonic ideals of masculinity. The next section will look at these roles and their depictions in the sagas.

Main types of physically violent male villains

likely due to it being written down by Christians who would generally be positive to the freeing of slaves. Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 112.

⁹³ Kirby Schroeder, 'Hypermasculinity', in *Masculinities: A Social, Cultural and Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Michael Kimmel and Amy Aaronson (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2004).1:418.

⁹⁴ On hypermasculinity and machismo, see Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin, 'Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation', *Journal of Research in Personality* 18, no. 2 (1984); Leonard L. Glass, 'Man's Man/Ladies' Man: Motifs of Hypermasculinity', *Psychiatry* 47, no. 3 (1984). On later research on the usage of the term hypermasculinity, see Richard N. Pitt and George Sanders, 'Revisiting Hypermasculinity: Shorthand for Marginalized Masculinities', in *What's Up with the Brothers?*, ed. Whitney Harris and Ronald T. Ferguson (Harriman: Men's Studies Press, 2010).

The ójafnaðarmaðr

Within the Old Norse culture, self-restraint, moderation, and control of one's mind and emotions are regarded as admirable traits. Those who are unable to act with moderation, and who through impatience, greed, or a certain unbalance here are sometimes called *ójafnaðarmenn* (unbalanced men) in the sagas. These men are negatively portrayed due to their unrestrained, unscrupulous, and disruptive nature, and they regularly feature as troublemakers or outright villains in the sagas.⁹⁵ This also makes them more prone to physical violence, which is here presented in a negative light. Vilhjálmur Árnason describes the *ójafnaðarmaðr* as the opposite of the traditional heroic type. While they are similarly strong and courageous, they use this strength for what he describes as reprehensible objectives, without wisdom and moderation, frequently creating discord and problems within the local society.⁹⁶ In Joanne Shortt Butler's doctoral thesis on the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, she defines the character type as a '[...] narrative catalyst, the *ójafnaðarmaðr* may be considered representative of various non-magical, human threats to a society or narrative setting.'⁹⁷ According to Shortt Butler, the ones referred to as *ójafnaðarmenn* are often also given negative traits referring to their aggressive, unpopular, overbearing, foolish, and dangerous nature.⁹⁸ They are regularly shown to be guilty of criminal actions: robbery or hidden theft, womanising, duelling without recompensating, and the like.⁹⁹ A key point here is still how, unlike *berserkir* or othered disruptive supernatural beings, these men are almost always shown to be completely human, and they can rarely be considered strangers or the other. Their unbalance is instead a part of this familiar humanity even if it is not an admirable trait.¹⁰⁰ While the *ójafnaðarmenn* tend to be villainous or simply troublesome antagonists of the saga, there are also cases where saga protagonists are said to be *ójafnaðarmenn*, such as the

⁹⁵ Scholars like Lönnroth and Andersson have previously used different terms for this kind of character, such as 'rascals', 'troublemakers', to the more direct 'villains' to mention some. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*.

⁹⁶ Vilhjálmur Árnason, 'Ethos in Transformation', 231, 233. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Impetuousness'; Shortt Butler, 'Narrative Structure.'

⁹⁷ Shortt Butler, 'Narrative Structure', 3.

⁹⁸ Shortt Butler, 'Narrative Structure', 61-2.

⁹⁹ Hidden theft by itself is another grave crime, and worse than the open robbery. As William Ian Miller has said, 'No one was lower than the thief, the secret appropriator of another's property.' Andersson has further noted that 'the thief is typically pictured as an outsider, a sorcerer, and a sexual deviant.' See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 250; Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Thief in Beowulf', *Speculum* 59, no. 3 (1984), 502.

¹⁰⁰ Two rare exceptions where those called *ójafnaðarmaðr* appear to be more supernatural are Hallmundr from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and Þorkell Rauðfeldsson.

titular Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, or Grettir Ásmundarson from *Grettis saga*.¹⁰¹ Elsewhere other protagonists may display *ójafnaðarmaðr* behaviour, which tends to be less condemned due to their status as a protagonist.

Challengers

A minor antagonistic character type similar to the *ójafnaðarmaðr* is the challenger. This is a man whom the usually Icelandic saga hero meets on his journeys. These encounters are usually abroad or when the protagonist is visiting others. The challenger here taunts and challenges the hero based on his heritage and origins, youth, or apparent lack of strength.¹⁰² While the hero might initially refuse the taunts of the challenger, he tends to eventually kill him in retribution for this taunting. While that might cause repercussions for him such as getting in trouble with the kin or friends of the challenger, this vengeance killing is not presented negatively as the initial offence has been rightfully repaid. Furthermore, the challenger might himself have initiated the physical violence as a part of the taunting. Here, these challengers are guilty of instigating physical violence. This in turn leaves the target viable to fight back in return, regularly killing the challenger in the process. The challenger's death leads to the hero proving his worth, but may also result in bad blood with those allied with the challenger.

The berserkr

A similarly disposable, although more dangerous and destructive character type is the intruding *berserkr*. These men are valuable in combat for their superior strength, fortitude, and bravery, but because of their unstable and socially disruptive traits they are still regarded as dangerous, villainous, and unwelcome elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁰³ With 14 out of the 40 surviving *Íslendingasögur* mentioning *berserkir*, they represent a recurring threat that must be dealt with by the local society.¹⁰⁴ As was mentioned in the previous chapter on magical violence, while there

¹⁰¹ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ch. 2, *Grettis saga*, ch. 28.

¹⁰² This includes men taunting others for their slave parentage, see for example Glæðir taunting Þorkell krafla (Scratcher) in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 44.

¹⁰³ Lönnroth includes the villain type 'berserk type', as the brutal and more foolish sort of villain, as opposed to the more sly and tactical manipulators. However, this category not only includes *berserkir* but also other rowdy or *ójafnaðarmenn* and *hávaðamenn*. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction*, 64; This also includes the *ulfheðnar*, considering the link between the two terms in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*, as well as in *Haraldskvæði*. See also Roderick Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr* (London: Routledge, 2022); See also Price, *The Viking Way*, 303-19.

¹⁰⁴ Dale, *Viking Berserkr*, 30.

are some overlaps between berserkers and shapeshifters in characterisation, there is still generally a distinction in where their abnormal powers come from. Here the predominant idea is that the *berserkir*'s powers stem from the psychological rather than the more distinctly supernatural.¹⁰⁵ While they too tend to come from more far off and potentially magical parts of the world, such as Northern Norway and Sweden, unlike the shapeshifters they rarely are described as physically changing shape in the same manner.¹⁰⁶ The role of *berserkir* is that of outsiders from outside of Iceland or the local community who disregard the laws and norms of the local society through fighting in duels and succeeding, taking goods and women from 'normal' men and generally causing chaos. As stated in the quote from *Grettis saga*, the *berserkr* is shown to represent a great social threat to the small local communities where foreign *berserkir* are able to fight duels (*hólmganga*) with the locals and even kill them without having to legally pay compensation for it. This way they can legally steal great fortunes, as well as pressure men into giving away their daughters, sisters, or wives. A saga motif is that of the unwelcome *berserkr* suitor, and as Marlene Ciklamini has noted, the common denominator to the depictions of *berserkr* duels is the mention of a woman desired by the *berserkr*.¹⁰⁷ As Ruth Mazo Karras has noted, a majority of rape cases in the sagas are done by foreign *berserkir*.¹⁰⁸ Their presence and actions in the sagas are then to be considered a great threat against not only women, but the social control of women held

¹⁰⁵ Several scholars have made these distinctions between the *berserkir* and the shapeshifters, both from a literate perspective and from a more psychological one. Some, like Jon Geir Høyeren, suggests that the *berserksgangr* is based on a self-induced, dissociative trance, while the latter may be more of a psychosis. Jon Geir Høyeren, 'Berserkene—hva gikk det av dem?', *Tidsskrift for Den norske legeförening* 24, no. 24 (2004), 3249-50; As Merkelbach has noted, there are distinctions between *berserkir* in the different saga genres, such as the *berserkir* not changing shape physically in the *Íslendingasögur*, unlike in the *fornaldarsögur*. Merkelbach, 'Eigi í mannligu eðli', 84; Sometimes there are also *berserkir* who may know of some magic, which muddles the borders further. Examples here include the *berserkr* Vígi from *Kormáks saga*.

For more on the *berserkir*, Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor'; Merkelbach, 'Eigi í mannligu eðli'; Ruiter, 'Berserks Behaving Badly'; Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society*; Merkelbach, 'Dólgri byggðinni'; See also Dale, *Viking Berserkr*.

¹⁰⁶ A majority of *berserkir* are Norwegian and Swedish, which can be a part of the negative regard of them. When it comes to the Norwegian *berserkir*, they often stem from the 'wilder' parts of Norway like Hålogaland. In a similar vein, Peter Foote has pointed out that Swedes are often depicted negatively, either for their cowardice, simple-mindedness, untrustworthiness, and similar traits. See Peter Foote, 'Icelandic Historians and the Swedish image: Comments on Snorri and His Precursors', in *Snorre Sturlasson och de isländska källorna till Sveriges historia: fyra föreläsningar från ett symposium i Stockholm hösten 1988*, ed. Göran Dahlbäck (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Literary Mold of the Hólmgöngumaðr', *Scandinavian Studies* 37, no. 2 (1965), 119. This regard for *berserkir* as uncontrollable robbers is also used as a simile, such as in the þáttir *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, where two robbers are said to kill men for economic gain, and are said to be 'almost like *berserkir*.' *Þáttir Stjörnu-Odda*, ch. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland', in *From Sagas to Society*, 302.

by men.¹⁰⁹ This helps with both further vilifying the *berserkir*, as well as justifying the violence done against them.¹¹⁰

The *berserkir*'s exploitative behaviour and role as a social threat is perhaps specifically problematised in *Grettis saga*. Here it is told that Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson in Norway made a new law outlawing *berserkir* and making duelling illegal in the early 11th century:

Þótti mönnum þat mikill ósiðr í landinu, at úthlaupsmenn eða berserkir skoruðu á hólmgöfga men til fjár eða kvenna; skyldu hvárir ógildir falla, sem fellu fyrir öðrum. Denfu margir af þessu smán ok fjármissu, en sumir líftjón með öllu, ok því tók Eiríkr jarl af allar hólmgöngur í Nóregi; hann gerði ok útlaga alla ránsmenn ok berserk, þá sem með óspekðir fóru.¹¹¹

(People there thought it was a disgraceful practice to allow robbers and berserks to challenge men of high standing to duels for their money or wives, without compensation being paid for the one who was slain. Many had suffered disgrace and lost their money, and some had even lost their lives, so Earl Eirik banned all duels in Norway. He also outlawed all robbers and berserks who caused any trouble.)¹¹²

Despite this legal mention in *Grettis saga*, *berserkir* are only mentioned in *Grágás* out of the older West Norse laws. This law is however similar, where the penalty for falling into a 'berserk's frenzy' is lesser outlawry.¹¹³ Moreover, in the sagas themselves people have a similarly negative regard for *berserkir*, even if they here tend to be something people deal with on their own outside of the *þing*.

While most appear content with travelling around and raiding the local communities, some *berserkir* attempt to settle down and are then shown to still be unwelcome by the local community due to their reputation, action, or traits, and at times their interest in someone's female relatives and wives. Despite this apparent aim to settle down in a more lawful way, the *berserkir* still appear to be unwelcome. When the two Swedish berserkir Halli and Leiknir try to settle down in Iceland, they are handed away as gifts from one brother to the next when they get cross. When Halli requests

¹⁰⁹ Sometimes the *berserkir*'s acts of sexual assault is motivated by revenge rather than desire, the act being an offence directed at the men. An example here is the group of *berserkir* in *Grettis saga* attempting to sexually assault the chieftain Þorfinnr Kársson's wife, daughter, and the other women at his homestead while he and his men are away at a banquet. *Grettis saga*, ch. 40. See also Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor.'

¹¹⁰ Chelsea Grosskopf's comparison between *berserkir* and veteran soldiers on the matter of combat trauma and the reception of it is intriguing. See Chelsea Grosskopf, 'Fear and Loathing in Eyrbyggja Saga: Combat Trauma in Medieval Iceland', in *Combat Stress in Pre-Modern Europe*, ed. Owen Rees et al., (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹¹¹ Dale suggests that this might either suggest that this older Norwegian legislation was not passed to later legislations, or that the legislation instead was a belief held by late 14th century folk tradition. Dale, *Viking Berserks*; *Grettis saga*, ch. 19.

¹¹² 'The Saga of Grettir the Strong', 2:76.

¹¹³ *Grágás* K, §7.

help to find a wife, his first host Vermundr answers that he knows of no women of good standing that would want to marry a *berserkr*.¹¹⁴ When Halli brings the ultimatum of either getting to marry his second host Styrr's daughter, or losing his friendship, Styrr makes the two *berserkir* do several physically demanding tasks to let Halli get her, only to later have both trapped and killed in his bath house.¹¹⁵ Similar to other dangers like the challenger, or the supernatural, when local people are faced with such threats, the saga heroes are able to shine as they stand up to deal with them. This also includes the ones considered social dissidents themselves like the outlaws. Grettir crosses paths with several *berserkir* during his time as an outlaw, and despite his own disruptive nature, fighting and defeating other dangerous men is one way to prove both his worth, as well as show that outlaws like him can have a positive effect on the local communities with their superior strength while simultaneously excluded from them. This he does in comedic ways to play up on the joke of the *berserkir*'s lack of intelligence and animalistic side, such as falsely befriendng a group of *berserkir* with good food and the promise of women before locking them up and killing them, or simply splitting the jaw of a *berserkr* by kicking the shield the *berserkr* was biting into to try to intimidate him.¹¹⁶ In these cases Grettir's use of brute force and deception of *berserkir* is not regarded negatively.

Despite the general criminalisation of *berserkir*, in a rare instance in *Vatnsdæla saga* that status is presented more as a curse or health issue rather than a sign of a criminal. The *berserkr* Þórir seeks aid from his brother Þorsteinn on how to prevent himself from getting berserk attacks, as he states that the attacks happen when he wants it the least.¹¹⁷ Þorsteinn's suggestion is to help an infant from dying by being discarded, and that he will pray to 'who has created the sun' to stop his brother's berserkerisms. This is said to work, and Þórir is freed from his curse due to his good deed and piety.

¹¹⁴ The same story with some differences is told in *Heiðarvíg saga* (ch. 4) and *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 25). While Styrr is not condemned for using the *berserkir* as cheap labour and then kill them in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Heiðarvíg saga* states that people were more displeased by the deed: 'Spurðisk þetta víða, ok ræððu men misjafnt of víg þessi.' (News of this spread and people spoke critically of the killing.) *Heiðarvíg saga*, ÍF 3, ch. 4; 'The Saga of the Slaying of the Heath', *Complete Sagas*, 4:74.

¹¹⁵ He also has them buried in an area of lava out of sight from the road and says a mocking poem about his victory over them. The burial is similar to how witches and their ilk are buried in remote and barren areas. Interestingly enough, Viga-Styrr (Killer-Styrr) is called an *ójafnaðamaðr* himself, and it is his negative traits which makes his brother regard him as a suitable host, or even master of the *berserkir*. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25.

¹¹⁶ The biting of the shield as an intimidation tactic by itself can be considered a show of an animalistic lack of inhibition. *Grettis saga*, ch. 19, 40.

¹¹⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 37.

This example then stands out as this is a case where a man who wishes to get rid of his supernatural powers and the destructive influence they have on him and his surroundings. Of note are also Christian values on display, as both the pagan-associated act of going berserk and infanticide are dealt with through faith and good deeds.¹¹⁸

The negative depictions of *berserkir* appear to be similar to those considered supernatural such as witches and shapeshifters seen in the previous chapter, despite their powers not being considered as magical themselves. Through descriptions and with their names the *berserkir* are presented in animalistic terms, and they are in this way presented as subhuman as well as servile in how they are given away as gifts. As Chelsea Grosskopf notes, they are treated as both superhuman and subhuman, as they are expected to serve who they are given to, but also feared, as the ‘owner’ is advised to keep them content to avoid their wrath.¹¹⁹ The only time they are presented in a more admirable light is when their powers are used for fighting. This is particularly the case in tales depicting the distant past, where they can be heroic *berserkir* on great battlefields, instead of troublemakers in the more grounded Icelandic communities.¹²⁰ In the latter case, they are regarded as disruptive and dangerous, and the act of killing them is an act of cleansing the land and the local society, similarly to the killings of supernatural beings.

Hirðmenn and the Norwegian king

As noted above, the travelling Icelander frequently ends up in trouble while travelling abroad, and sometimes this ends up with him facing the wrath of the Norwegian king. Here the Icelander has been taunted by a Norwegian *hirðmann* working for the crown. These challenging *hirðmenn* are frequently dangerous and unlawful men such as outlaws, *berserkir*, and rapists whose misdeeds may be covered by their friendship with the king. This conflict leads to a fight where the Norwegian inevitably loses and is

¹¹⁸ In *Svarfdæla saga* there is even a *berserkr* protagonist with Klaufi and his bloodline of men displaying *berserkr* traits.

¹¹⁹ In the example of *Eyrbyggja saga*, the two *berserkir* Halli and Leiknir voice their annoyance at being given as gifts from the Swedish king to Hákon jarl, and then to the Icelander Vermundr who gives them to his brother. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25; Grosskopf, ‘Combat Trauma’, 164.

¹²⁰ For example, the *berserkr* Þórir haklangr who fought at the battle of *Hafsfjorðr* on the side of Haraldr hárfagri is described as a large and fearless *berserkr*, he and the other *berserkir* are called *ulfrheðnar*, and iron did not bite on them. At last, it says that he died on his ship with much valour after fighting bravely (Þórir varðist alldjarfliga, ok féll á skipi sínu með mikilli hreysti), which then is unlike the more bestial or disgraceful manners in which those appearing on Iceland are shown to be killed in. *Grettis saga*, ch. 2.

gravely wounded or more likely killed by the Icелander.¹²¹ This in turn can lead to the Icелander being subjected to the wrath of the Norwegian kings or Queen Gunnhildr. Whether the Icелander has acted according to the laws, or not, the narrative is on the Icелander's side as he is the one who reacted to the offence or abuse done by the Norwegian to prove his strength and honour. Depending on the saga's attitude towards the king, he may attempt to have the Icелander killed or otherwise punished, or he may welcome the Icелander to Norway and even his *hirð*. This motif of the Icелander facing the abuse of royal power is possibly tied to the torn contemporary feelings felt towards Norway when the sagas were written.¹²²

The Outlaw: fitting the society's ideal too much to fit within it?

Another character type whose life is filled with physical violence to the detriment of themselves and others is the outlaw. In the sagas they are shown to be too violent to fit within their local society and are made outlaw for this. This forces them to keep fighting for their own survival against society and the supernatural alike. While there are sagas centred around the lives of outlaws with more sympathetic stances, the outlaws found in other sagas are more ambiguously characterised or outright menacing, depending on both their actions and the position of the protagonists. Some of them are still sympathised with and protected from their pursuers, be it by the protagonist, family, or other people who may themselves live alongside the margins of the local community. Other times, the outlaws take an antagonistic and threatening role against the society that banished them.¹²³

Outlaws incapable of 'controlling themselves', and aimless violence

Within the sagas the outlaws are given different reasons for becoming outlaws, and the actions that led them to this point. Some, like the honourable Gísli and Hörðr become outlaws after being morally obligated to take vengeance; other outlaws are shown to

¹²¹ One example here is Arnþórr the treasurer (*féhirðir*) of Gunnhildr, who with his followers taunts and steals the cloak of the Icелander Geirr before his hand is cut off and he dies of blood loss. *Harðar saga*, ch. 13.

¹²² See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002).

¹²³ Others again are made dependent on people within the local society while still acting out destructive actions, such as those who become assassins by the requests of others.

have other drives which in turn make them too dangerous for society. A particularly pointed example is Grettir, who at one point is given the chance to clear his name as an outlaw by carrying the *járnburðr* (trial of ordeal) across the church floor to prove his innocence for the king and bishop.¹²⁴ As Grettir walks, a rather ugly young boy stops him and calls out the shame and injustice of Grettir being able to clean his reputation with the *járnburðr* despite his previous grievous crimes. He also makes taunting grimaces at Grettir and calls him shameful names like *margýgjusónr* (sea-ogress's son) and others not detailed in the text. This enrages Grettir, and he is said to be unable to stop himself from striking the child underneath his ear with his fist. This strike makes the boy faint at once, and according to some, die.¹²⁵ For this violent act, the king cannot accept Grettir's *járnburðr*, as he is regarded as both violent and a great '*ógæfumaðr*' (man of misfortune). Here the striking of a child is the final damning offence for one being regarded as unfit within society.¹²⁶ After this failed attempt at repentance, Grettir continues down his unlawful path as an outlaw and ultimately succumbs to it.¹²⁷ To return to the beginning, the wording used for Grettir is 'could not stop himself' (gat þá eigi stöðvat sik.) A similar excuse is used by the violent outlaw Þorgeirr from *Fóstbræðra saga* who driven by a whim decapitates a tired shepherd leaning on his staff with his neck bared, an act witnessed by a group of men in the field. This forces his allies to compensate for the kill, and when they demand to know his reasoning, he simply says:

'Eigi hafði hann nokkrar sakir til móts við mig, en hitt var satt, að eg mátti eigi við bindast, er hann stóð svo vel til höggsins.'¹²⁸

¹²⁴ The trial of ordeal here meaning the act of carrying hot iron. *Grettis saga*, ch. 39.

¹²⁵ This also stands in great contrast to Hrútr in *Laxdæla saga*, who proves his strength and dignity by ignoring the dishonouring words of a boy, and gives him a gold ring instead of striking him like his brother Höskuldr did.

¹²⁶ In his monograph, Gareth Lloyd Evans also makes a case study of Grettir Ásmunderson as an example of hypermasculinity, as a man who despite fitting all of the society's ideals and expectations of the hegemonic masculinity, fits them 'too well' to properly exist within said society. Evans, *Men and Masculinities*; See also Hawes, 'Monstrosity of Heroism.'

¹²⁷ Interestingly, the saga says that 'most people' considered the taunting boy to be an evil spirit sent to bring misfortune over Grettir, rather than a real boy. This could possibly be a poetic choice and a way to soften the blow, so to speak, of Grettir so violently striking a child. As has previously been established, hurting and killing women and children is more acceptable and even commendable if they are supernatural. Alternatively, as Heather O'Donoghue suggests, the boy represents Grettir's 'bad luck' (*ógæfa*), similarly to how Þórdís the witch personifies Kormákr's *ógæfa* in *Kormáks saga*. Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative. Verse and Prose in Kormáks Saga*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 68; *Grettis saga*, ch. 39.

¹²⁸ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8.

(He had committed no wrong against me. If you want the truth, I couldn't resist the temptation – he stood so well poised for the blow.')

¹²⁹

Here too an outlaw is seemingly not able to resist the temptation to cause harm, and ultimately causes incorrigible damage for himself as well as his surroundings. However, unlike Grettir, Þorgeirr's sudden violence is not a reaction to an offence but instead a moment of uncontrollable bloodlust that he is not shown to regret afterwards.

Fóstbræðra saga stands out for its depictions of unrestrained physical violence, especially by the titular foster brothers. Here Þormóðr and Þorgeirr are driven by their own whims to terrorise the Icelandic countryside while their honour and strength are praised despite their gaining a negative reputation for being *ójafnaðarmenn*. This has led some scholars, such as Kress and Meulengracht Sørensen to discuss the saga's stance as a heroic saga, and if it instead is a comedic tale parodying the heroic ideal presented in other sagas.¹³⁰ Kress has also noted that most of their acts of physical violence are done as hidden ambushes, and the victims are generally presented as innocent locals.¹³¹ Even at times when they are fulfilling their saga role as 'cleansers of the lands' by vanquishing two other stealing and terrorising *ójafnaðarmenn*, they themselves are hardly any better, as they are said to be both unpopular and feared as they travel around and are given whatever they ask for as the local people are too afraid to refuse them.¹³² Poetically enough, the question of how far the violence can be accepted is answered when Þorgeirr one time asks Þormóðr which one of them would win in a duel. Unintentionally or not, this is a dangerous challenge towards his own foster-brother, which makes Þormóðr break their partnership. Here Þorgeirr shows that he sees no limit when it comes to viable targets of physical violence, but this finally is too far even for Þormóðr. While Þormóðr eventually finds his proper place within the king's *hirð* where his skills and prowess can be used purposefully, Þorgeirr's rejects the king's offer to join the *hirð* in favour of continuing his aimless, antisocial misdeeds. The ways they take in life are also reflected in their deaths, with Þorgeirr being killed in

¹²⁹ 'The Saga of the Sworn Brothers', 2:347.

¹³⁰ While Meulengracht Sørensen reads it as the saga author's critique of the saga-world and its values, Kress reads it more as a satire, tying it to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the 'grotesque.' Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'On Humour, Heroes, Morality, and Anatomy in *Fóstbræðra Saga*', *North-Western European Language Evolution* (1993); Helga Kress, 'The Culture of the Grotesque in Old Icelandic Literature: The Saga of the Sworn Brothers', *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 26 (2019).

¹³¹ Þormóðr also kills several men by ambushing them, the most dishonourable case including both the spirit of King Óláfr and the dropping of Þormóðr's attacker's trousers.

¹³² As Meulengracht Sørensen points out, their act of defeating the fellow *ójafnaðarmenn* was not theirs originally, as the local woman Sigrfljóð was the one to trick and whet them into doing it, thus directing their destructive ways in a useful way. Meulengracht Sørensen, 'On Humour', 402-6.

combat and later reappearing as undead twice, while Þormóðr dies an honourable death fighting on the side of king Óláfr. As Meulengracht Sørensen has said: ‘Þormóðr ends his life fighting in a royal martyr's cause and gets his reward in heaven. Þorgeirr serves demonic powers after his death, and that is the saga author's final judgment on his conduct in life.’¹³³ Another noticeable perspective that is not unique to *Fostbræðra saga* is how it is only outside of Iceland and in a place such as in the Norwegian king's *hirð* that men like Þormóðr and Þorgeirr can make good use of their abilities, where their otherwise uncontrollable and destructive powers can be given direction and a purpose.

The good outlaw and the bad man of the law

While the outlaws are frequently shown to be troublemakers or disruptors of the local society, the more admirable outlaws who are the heroes of their own sagas or sections of sagas are also shown to take up the role of champions of sorts, defeating the people and creatures considered more chaotic, deviant, or otherwise more loathsome than themselves.¹³⁴ This way of putting the outlaw's good traits into perspective can also contrast the outlaw's courage and manliness with the men trying to kill them in the name of the law. Despite the unlawful and violent actions done by several of the outlaw heroes in the sagas, their pursuers and legally righteous killers are frequently depicted as not only antagonistic, but also with negative traits of their own, such as being mocked for failing to apprehend and kill the outlaw, despite having a large group of followers to help kill them, and the cowardice connected with this. Here Gísli and Grettir are particularly noticeable, but it appears to be a consistent theme that the lone outlaw gains sympathy when forced to defend his life against a group of men.¹³⁵ This large group of legally supported people both work to show the lack of strength and bravery of their leader, and show how much the outlaw has of these qualities instead.

¹³³ Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘On Humour’, 411.

¹³⁴ As Benjamin Blaney comments, men like Grettir's feats against the wilderness and the supernatural within contrasts greatly with his senseless antagonism and conflicts with humans. Blaney, ‘The Berserk Suitor’, 287.

¹³⁵ As Miller notes, this sympathy does not reach the outlaws and criminals who are guilty of magical violence and crimes, and as has been shown in the previous chapter, when men gang up on them and execute them it is seen as a success and a purification of the land. Miller, ‘Why Is Your Axe Bloody?’, 169. See also William Ian Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities: Hard Cases, Hard Choices* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 168-9.

Hidden physical violence and ambushes

While the act of fighting a greater number of foes in direct combat is generally idealised and praised, ambushes and hidden assassinations in the *Íslendingasögur* are more ambiguous, and often shown to be the coward's way. As previously stated, there is a clear legal distinction between the publicly declared homicide (*víg* and *drap*) on one side, and the concealed murder (*morð*) on the other side. Within the *Íslendingasögur*, *morð*, along with hidden theft, is frequently considered cowardly and despicable. However, despite the seemingly clear perspective here, there are exceptions and nuances. For one, women attempting to ambush or secretly murder a man is seemingly more acceptable. This is likely because acts of physical violence for them are rare and exceptional, and because they are not judged in the same way for acting cowardly or unmanly. Furthermore, they are rarely shown to actually succeed with the murder.

To make a comparison with the previously mentioned Breeches-Auðr's hidden attack of her ex-husband, there is the fateful murder of Þorgrímr by his brother-in-law, the saga hero and later outlaw Gísli Súrsson. Here Gísli sneaks his way to his home and attacks Þorgrímr in his bed next to Gísli's sister.¹³⁶ Although his deed would otherwise be considered a dishonourable *níðingsverk* according to laws and the viewpoints presented in the sagas, Gísli is otherwise presented as one of the greater and more honourable heroes in the *Íslendingasögur*, and someone more dedicated to the rules of honour than most. Another similarity between these two cases of *mórð* is the oddly sexualised aspect of the violence, both with its setting and its descriptions.¹³⁷ Firstly, both cases have the bed as the location of the attack on the man. This is likely due to the hidden violence aspect of the attack, but symbolically it could also be due to it being a place where a man would be more vulnerable, undressed, lying down, and without his sword. Secondly, there is also Gísli touching the breast of his sister, the wife of another man, which by extension is a form of offence and emasculation directed towards

¹³⁶ See also this motif with the murder of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in his and Guðrún's marital bed in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, str. 24; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in Gísla saga', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 253. Gísli's at times ambiguous behaviour and characterisation have also been noted by several scholars, see Theodore M. Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities in Gísla saga: A Balance Sheet', *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1968); Clark, 'Revisiting' Gísla saga', 498; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Gísli Súrsson—a Flawless or Flawed Hero?' in *Die Aktualität der Saga Festschrift für Hans Schottmann*, ed. Stig Toftgaard Andersen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 169; Jørgensen, 'Code of Honour.'

¹³⁷ Heide has done a thorough breakdown of the symbolic details of the scene with Breeches-Auðr. See Heide, 'Menn til kvinner', 86.

Þorgrímr.¹³⁸ Finally, there is the nailing of the phallic weapon into the bedframe and having it stuck there, showing both the prowess in the attack and its symbolic equivalent.¹³⁹ Similar to Breeches-Auðr then, Gísli attacks his enemy with particularly dishonourable as well as effeminising undertones. Thus, by the definition of laws and common opinion this could be considered a *níðingsverk*. Despite this, Gísli like Auðr is not depicted as dishonourable, suggesting that within the saga's narrative other considerations may still overrule the negative association with revenge-driven ambush or *morð*. Perhaps then, gender may not be sole reason for it not being dishonouring. As Andersson has noted, *Gísli saga* is 'the saga which most clearly borrows heroic forms, [but] also the saga which most clearly questions the transmitted norms of heroic conduct.'¹⁴⁰ Going by this notion, the reason why Gísli is not presented negatively enough for this *morð* is that there is a narrative necessity to present his misdeed as forced and tragic outcome for a hero, rather than simply shameful.

Related to ambushes are murder fires, cases of arson with the distinct goal of burning people inside. The most infamous burning here is the burning of the titular Brennu-Njáll's homestead by Flósi and his men. Here too, Flósi's depiction is not that of an evil man, but rather of someone caught up in circumstances outside of his own control and demands of honour after being whetted by Hildigunnr.¹⁴¹ This kind of ambiguity is also found the *samtíðarsögur*. For example, in 1255, when one of King Hákon's retainers, Finnbjörn Helgason condemns the wretched arsonists (*brennuvargar*) of Flugumýr in Iceland, the Icelandic bishop Heinrek speaks up in

¹³⁸ This touching of his sister's breast has also been a topic of discussion when it comes to Gísli's characterisation. While Meulengracht Sørensen has suggested that it was part of plan to justify his murder on Þorgrímr by finding his sister in bed with him, Vésteinn Ólason deems it an accident done while making sure that he is striking the correct target. Andersson has a more sexually ambiguous reading, based on his jealousy of Þorgrímr's past history with Auðr, while Hermann Pálsson has instead read it as Gísli's incestual interest in Þordís. Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísli saga*', 250; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Flawed Hero?'; Andersson, 'Ambiguities in *Gísli Saga*', 38; Hermann Pálsson, 'Death in Autumn: Tragic Elements in Early Icelandic Fiction', *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1973), 19.

¹³⁹ This motif of the attack on the sleeping victim in a manner that harms or kills them in a seemingly sexual manner can also be found in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, where Þorsteinn kills the sleeping giantess after undressing her, and where, like in the case of Gísli and Auðr, his sword is said to get stuck in the bed. Kirsten Wolf, 'Transvestism in the Sagas of Icelanders', in *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience: Preprints: 10th International Saga Conference, Trondheim, August 3-9, 1997* (Trondheim: Noregs teknisk-naturvitskaplege universitet, 1997).

¹⁴⁰ Andersson, 'Ambiguities in *Gísli Saga*', 42. See also Jørgensen, 'Code of Honour', 37.

¹⁴¹ Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?', 223. See also Harald Müller, "... und gut ist keines von beiden." Gedanken zur Akzeptanz der Brenna in der Njáls Saga', in *Studien zur Isländersaga: Festschrift für Rolf Heller*, ed. Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).

favour of the arsonists by referring to the killings and disgrace that they had had suffered before.¹⁴²

Shame and effeminising violence

Unlike physical violence in the form of combat on equal terms, some acts of physical violence between men are less about the fight itself and instead about intentionally disgracing and effeminising the enemy. Unlike the examples above where the act can bring shame to the attacker, these acts of violence dishonour the victim, but may or may not also affect the assailant negatively.

Klámhött and castration

A type of dishonouring weapon blow found in the *Íslendingasögur* is the *klámhött*. *Klámhött* or shame-strokes ‘done across someone’s buttocks’ are included in *Grágás* in the list of injuries assessed as ‘major wounds’, thus being included amongst wounds such as being blinded, having their nose or ears cut off, having one’s teeth knocked out, having bones broken, and being castrated.¹⁴³ Despite the specific and exaggerated nature of hewing off someone’s buttocks in combat, it is a repeated motif in the *Íslendingasögur*, and it is often done either as a part of combat, or to symbolically emasculate an enemy after their loss.¹⁴⁴ Despite the grave punishment for dealing someone a *klámhött* in *Grágás*, it is often presented in a humorous manner within the *Íslendingasögur* as it is dealt to antagonistic and otherwise wicked characters.¹⁴⁵ In rare instances, it is done to the more positively presented characters, such as Björn Hítadælakappi and Hólmgöngu-Bersi, both considered great fighters and honourable men in their own right, and in these cases the act may be more ambiguous.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² *Porgils saga skarða*, ch. 57. Three house-burnings are known from the *Sturlungaöld* and described in the *Sturlungasögur*. Langahlid in 1197, the burning of Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðing in 1228, and Flugumýr in 1253. See *Guðmundar saga dýra*, ch. 14–5; *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 67, 172–4; Miller, ‘Why Is Your Axe Bloody?’, 223.

¹⁴³ *Grágás* K §86; See also *NgL* 1:66, 171.

¹⁴⁴ One example here is Þorgrímr, who is the hidden witch from *Vatnsdæla saga*. Here he tries to manipulate the swords of his foes to not bite on his allies, until he is caught and given a *klámhött* before he manages to flee. See the previous chapter on magic for more details. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 29.

¹⁴⁵ For example, in a section of *Fóstbræðra saga* found in *Flateyjarbók*, Þormodr cuts off the buttocks of a bragging yet cowardly farmer, who instantly screams loudly. Þormodr then calls him a hypocrite for screaming after having taunted other wounded men. *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 24.

¹⁴⁶ Examples of *klámhött* are: Björn Hítadælakappi in *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa* (ch. 32), The Norwegian in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 24), Sóti in *Hallfreðar saga* (ch. 2), Hólmgöngu-Bersi in *Kormáks saga* (ch. 12), Þorgrímr skinnhúfa in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ch. 29); William Sayers, ‘Steingerðr’s Nicknames for Bersi (Kormáks Saga Implications for Gender, Politics, and Poetics)’, *Florilegium* 12, no. 1 (1993).

Castration (*gelding*) is another form of shameful physical violence, although it is featured much more rarely than the *klámhögg* in the *Íslendingasögur* and is more prevalent in the *samtíðarsögur*.¹⁴⁷ In the *Íslendingasögur* there is only one case, in the *þáttur Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*. Here the Irish slave Gilli is said to have been castrated by his master Þorsteinn for unknown reasons, which later drives Gilli to murder him in his sleep as revenge.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, after the killing of Þorsteinn, Gilli is tortured and killed by Þorsteinn's widow.¹⁴⁹ Interestingly perhaps, despite being regarded as a 'lesser man' due to both being a slave and being castrated, Gilli still manages to kill Þorsteinn in an act of physical violence, thus succeeding where female attackers tend to fail.¹⁵⁰ It is also left unsaid whether or not the motivation for the murder in any way justify his attack. However, he is shown in a more dignified light by how he willingly goes to his death after his revenge, and by the mention of his noble Irish family.

Still, the act of castration was regarded differently depending on the social positions of the participants. In the Norwegian *Frostþingslög* there is the unique inclusion where foreign-born slaves that had attempted to escape had to be punished by castration.¹⁵¹ Even beggars, despite being free, could legally be castrated as they too were considered *úmmenzka* (unmanly).¹⁵² Neither the castration nor the later torture is

¹⁴⁷ See for example the castration and supposed miraculous healing of Órækja in *Íslendinga saga*. Gade, '1236: órækja meiddir ok heill górr'; See also Firth, 'Homicide'; Adams, "He took a stone away"; Lawing, 'Maiming in Sturlunga saga'; Bragg, 'Disfigurement'; An accusation of castration is used as a taunt in the mythological *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, where the man Guðmundr is in a verbal duel with his enemy Sinfjötli. While Sinfjötli accuses Guðmundr of having born offspring like a woman with him as the father, Guðmundr retorts this severe offence by saying that this is impossible, as giant women have castrated Sinfjötli ('sízt þik geldo/fyr Gnipalundi/ þursa meyar') *Eddadigte*, ed. Jón Helgason, 3 ed., vol. 3, Nordisk filologi, (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 1971). st. 41, 42. From a legal perspective, castration is a severe punishment within the Norwegian laws designated for the most despicable acts, such as bestiality. *Gulapingslög* §30.

¹⁴⁷ Bragg, 'Disfigurement', 19. For a different perspective, see Mary A Valante, 'Castrating Monks: Vikings, the Slave Trade, and the Value of Eunuchs', in *Castration and Culture*.

¹⁴⁸ *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*, 326.

¹⁴⁹ Karras suggests that part of the general negative depiction of slaves like Gilli is his Irish background. However, like *Laxdæla saga*'s Melkorka, the choice of including Gilli's Irish genealogy with the mention of his great-great grandfather as a king by the end of the saga suggests a general level of respect that is otherwise rare for slaves. On the other hand, Gilli threatens to curse Yngvildr and her family. While it is uncertain if he was truly able to deal with magic, his foreign, othered background and Yngvildr's fear of leaves it a possibility. Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 58. For more on the trade of castrating slaves to sell them to the Byzantine Empire, see Valante, 'Castrating Monks.'

¹⁵⁰ This is however not unheard of, although noticeable. The possibly most known case here is the slave Þormóðr Karkr who kills his owner Hákon jarl, which is depicted differently in *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*.

¹⁵¹ Unlike the native-born men who would be flogged. Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 123; *Gulapingslög* §30 (*NgL* 1:18) and 2:496.

¹⁵² *Grágás* K §254; Adams, "He Took a Stone Away", 199.

depicted in a negative way by the narrative, and according to the laws, slave owners like Þorsteinn and Yngvildr would be free to kill their slaves without reason.¹⁵³ In the *konungasögur* castration and mutilation is also shown to be as a political tool in Norway in the 1130s during the civil war period, such as the case of king Magnús IV blindi Sigurðarson (1115-1139). According to the *konungasaga* about his life, in 1135 Magnús is blinded, castrated, and maimed by his foe Haraldr gilli's slaves in the conflict that would initiate the Norwegian civil war.¹⁵⁴ Although there were some more cases of this during the 12th and the 13th century in Norway and Iceland, as Bandlien has argued, these political mutilations were rare and likely inspired from abroad rather than part of an older Old Norse tradition.¹⁵⁵

As seen here, both *klámhögg* and castration are specific ways of maiming another man in a particularly dishonourable way and with purpose. Meulengracht Sørensen has suggested that it is the symbolic castration that is the central part, rather than the physical aspect; the goal is to deprive the victim of his masculine identity and social status.¹⁵⁶ While castration is hardly shown to be done to the most despicable of foes in the *Íslendingasögur*, the *klámhögg* is frequently depicted in an almost whimsical manner more similar to some of the more unrealistic and exaggerated acts of violence. In the cases of *klámhögg*, the violator is rarely the one depicted negatively as opposed to their emasculated enemies, while the castrators are more ambiguous.

Sexual violence done to other men

The topic of sexual assault of men is a multi-layered topic within the Old Norse sources, with both sodomy in general and same-sex sexual assault in particular being criminalised and viewed as dishonourable.¹⁵⁷ While there are no laws against homosexual behaviour in the older *Grágás*, laws against it are included in the later Icelandic and Norwegian laws of the 12th and the 13th century.¹⁵⁸ The first provision

¹⁵³ *Grágás* K §111. *NgL* 1:18, 266. As Karras has noted, only in the West Old Norse laws did slave owners have restrictions when it came to killing their slaves, but these were not severe. Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 105-6.

¹⁵⁴ *Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla*, ch. 8

¹⁵⁵ Bjørn Bandlien, 'Kastrering og kongemakt', *Collegium Medievale* 32, no. 2 (2019). See also Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 196; Gade, '1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gorr.'

¹⁵⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 84.

¹⁵⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 84; For a more in-depth look at the district laws and regulations of homosexuality in Norway and Iceland, see Gade, 'Homosexuality'; Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*.

¹⁵⁸ Gade, 'Homosexuality', 126.

against homosexual behaviour was introduced by Magnus Erlingsson in the newer church law inclusion in *Gulapingslög* of 1164:

‘En ef karlar tveir blandasc likams losta saman oc verða kunnir oc sanner at því. þo ero þeir baðer ubotamenn. En ef þeir synia oc er þo heraðrs fleytt. Þa syni með iarnburði. En ef þeir verða sannr at soc. Þa a konongr fe þeirra halft. En biscop halft.’¹⁵⁹

(If two men have sexual intercourse and are identified and convicted of this, then they are both *ubótamenn*. And if they deny (it) while it is still rumoured in the district, let them confirm their denial by carrying hot iron. But if they are found guilty, then the king is owed half of their property, and the bishop the other half.)¹⁶⁰

Úbotamenn here refers to permanent outlawry, people who have lost their rights of peace and property. This is a severe punishment only dealt to the worst kind of people, including thieves, murderers, rapists and abductors of women.¹⁶¹ This addition to chapter 32 is seemingly an isolated occurrence within 12th century Scandinavian and Continental law, and severe punishments for homosexual acts were instead added in the latter half 13th century in most legal codes.¹⁶² A more thorough inclusion is found in the late 13th century Church law of *Gulapingslög*, chapter 33, where it is stated that a man who enjoys the pleasures of flesh with any living being other than a woman and is found guilty of this will be outlawed, with his possessions given to the king.¹⁶³

Instead of the sodomy itself, *Grágás* contains provisions against its use as an insult. Within *Grágás* the three words *ragr*, *stroðinn*, *sorðinn* are severe taunts that refer to men being effeminate and sexually used by another man.¹⁶⁴ These are considered *fullréttisorð*, and the offended person has the right to kill in retaliation, proving the great damage dealt by the accusation alone. A similar sentiment is found in the *Frostapingslög*.¹⁶⁵ Here a provision says: ‘Engi maðr skal þat við annan mæla at hann hafe þegit scömm á sér.’ (No man shall say of another that he has submitted to disgrace.) Emasculating taunts referring to sexual acts or assaults of men by other men are also prevalent in the *Íslendingasögur*, and they are often the cause of conflict and death. In these accusations the offender is accused of having willingly or forcefully

¹⁵⁹ *Gulapingslög* §32.

¹⁶⁰ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 40.

¹⁶¹ ‘The Older Gulathing Law’, 38-39.

¹⁶² Outlawry for sodomy done by clerics was introduced in the Third Lateran Council of 1179. Karras and Pierpont, *Doing Unto Others*, 210; Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 126.

¹⁶³ ‘Sa maðr roc er drygir likams losta vidr nokot kykuende firir vttan konno oc verdr hann kvnr æda sanr at því. Þa er han vtleggr oc fe hans allt vidr konong.’ ‘Gulathings-christenret’, *NgL*, 2:324; ‘Borgarthings-christenret’, *NgL* 2:304. Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 128.

¹⁶⁴ *Grágás* St §376.

¹⁶⁵ See also *Frostapingslög*, V, §22. For more on this phrase and similar laws, see Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 122.

been used sexually by another man in the way of a woman. Oftentimes then, one is also accused of being turned into a woman, be it physically or figuratively, and these accusations tend to be intentionally bizarre, with both supposed male pregnancies and copulations with trolls. Thus, while *Grágás* itself does not feature a specific law against sodomy, the accusation of taking on the passive role of homosexual intercourse is a severe offence, proving the societal fear of the mere suggestion.¹⁶⁶

An ambiguous law is also found in the fourth section of *Frostaþingslög*, paragraph 38, ‘En ef maðr fulltíða kenner þat manni at hann hafe misleicit hann.’¹⁶⁷ (If a man accuses another man of having mistreated him). While the verb *misleika* can refer to some kind of unspecified abuse or mistreatment, Jan Ragnar Hagland and Jørn Sandnes has noted in their Norwegian translation of the *Frostaþingslög* that the inclusion of the phrase ‘at hann hafi misleicit hann í æsco’ in this context can be read as a law against sexual abuse done to a minor. Furthermore, Hagland and Sandnes suggests that this could primarily be a legal matter because it would concern an adult sexually assaulting a vulnerable minor of the same gender.¹⁶⁸ According to this law, if the accused is found guilty of this crime he is to pay *hálfretti* in compensation.¹⁶⁹ However, due to the shame associated with being mistreated in this manner, one can imagine that raising this issue in public as an adult male years later would be difficult, and it is uncertain how frequently this law was in use.¹⁷⁰

Due to the great shame tied to passive homosexual intercourse and sexual assaults done onto other men, cases of it in the *Íslendingasögur* are also very rare and at best ambiguous or simply found in the shape of voiced taunts. Gade has suggested one veiled example of rape in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*.¹⁷¹ Here the two skalds Björn and his rival Þórðr are fighting over the same woman, Óddny, whom Þórðr through trickery

¹⁶⁶ The active ‘sodomiser’ appears to be more ambiguously presented, as there are even cases of those speaking *nið* referring to themselves as the active partner. See for example Sinfjötli and Guðmundr in the Eddaic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, as discussed in Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 53.

¹⁶⁷ *Frostaþingslög* IV, §38.

¹⁶⁸ Jørn Sandnes and Jan Ragnar Hagland, eds., *Frostatingslova* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1994), 221n22.

¹⁶⁹ This is unless he with witnesses can prove that this has previously been settled. *Frostaþingslög*, IV, 38; Sandnes and Hagland, *Frostatingslova*, 221n22.

¹⁷⁰ In general paedophilia is rarely mentioned in the sagas. An exception is the motif Matthew Harold Roby has called the ‘troll-girl revelation’ wherein a young troll girl displays an aggressive yet infantile sexuality. However these troll girls’ supernatural otherness makes these examples less relevant to actual social attitudes and practices. Roby, ‘The “Troll-Girl Revelation” Motif: Female Infantile Sexuality and Pedophilia in Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra and Jökuls þátrr Búasonar.’ While not paedophilic, there are also a few cases of older saga women being unusually forward towards teenage boys. See for example the witches in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

¹⁷¹ Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 134.

had married while Björn was away. This leads to a shameful vengeance done by Björn and their men to Þórðr and his on an island off the coast of Sweden. The following scene is described in a suggestive manner:

Nú lýkr með því, at Björn gefr þeim lífsgrið, en af þeim tók hann fé ok svá knörrinn; síðan fló han Þórð af gripunum, ok gerði hann sem hrakligast ráð hans allt. Þórðr mælti til at hafa gripina ok náði ekki. Síðan lét Björn Þórð ok föruneysi hans allt fara á knarrarbátinn með klæðum sínum ok flytja svá til meginlands. Ok áðr en þeir skiljask, mælti Björn: ‘Þórðr’, kvað hann, ‘nú er þér gör nökkur hneisa ok svívirðing ok fjárskáði, ok er þó at öllu minni en þú ert makligr,[...]’¹⁷²

The end of it was that Bjorn spared their lives, but took their goods from them and the knorr as well; then he stripped Thord of valuables, and made his situation as humiliating as possible. Thord begged to keep the goods, but did not succeed. Then Bjorn made Thord and all his companions get into the boat from the knorr with their clothes, and so cross to the mainland. And before they parted, Bjorn spoke. ‘Thord’, he said, ‘you have been dealt some shame and dishonour and loss, although still less than you deserve in every way.’¹⁷³

As with the cases of sexual assault done to women, it is often not explicitly stated and can instead only be referenced to by veiled allusions. The mention of their clothes suggests that they had previously stripped Þórðr and his men of their clothes, as well as their goods and the ship.¹⁷⁴ While this alone could be considered shameful, the way Þórðr is said to be treated ‘sem hrakligast ráð hans allt’ emphasises this mistreatment further. During the ensuing years of rivalry, many offences and *níð* poems are made about the other, and as their rivalry worsens, Björn reminds Þórðr of this disgraceful event in the form of several *níð* poems, and worse, he raises a *níðstöng* formed to portray two men engaging in penetrative sex.¹⁷⁵

Þess er nú við getit, at hlutr sá fannsk í hafnarmarki Þórðar, er þvígít vinveittligr þótti; þat váru karlar tveir, ok hafði annarr hött blán á höfði; þeir stóðu lútir, of horfði annarr eptir öðrum. Þat þótti illr fundr, ok mæltu men, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² *Bjarnar saga Hitadælakappa*, ch. 7.

¹⁷³ ‘The saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People’, trans. Alison Finlay, in *Complete Sagas*, 1:264. The complex rivalry between Björn and Þórðr has been studied by Alison Finlay where she notes how ‘the focus is relentless on the dealings between Thord and Bjorn’, and how *Bjarnar saga*, like other *Íslendingasögur* ‘concentrate more on the conflict arising out of rivalry in love than on any actual relationship between man and woman.’ Alison Finlay, ‘Níð, Adultery and Feud in Bjarnar saga Hitadælakappa’, *Saga Book* 23, no. 3 (1991), 158; Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 134.

¹⁷⁴ A similar wording is used in the contemporary saga *Guðmundar saga dýra*, when Guðmundr imprisons the priest Björn and his wife Þórunn. In this case, it is said that there was talk of having Þórunn bed some rascal or another, and to do something no less degrading to Björn, (*en gera þat við Björn prest, at þat þætti eigi minni svívirðing*.) Like in the case with Þórðr, no detail is given as to what was planned as the plan is not carried out, but as Meulengracht Sørensen has stated, the comparison with Þórunn implies that his treatment would be a similar form of sexual humiliation Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 82; *Sturlunga saga*, I, 201.

¹⁷⁵ Gade also points out that one poem by Björn has him compare Þórðr to a goat, which according to Fritzner was used to refer to promiscuous women and cowardly or effeminate men, such as the phrase ‘*ragr sem geit*.’ Gade, ‘Homosexuality’, 134.

¹⁷⁶ *Bjarnar saga Hitadælakappa*, ch. 17.

(It is further related that something appeared on Thord's harbour mark which hardly seemed a token of friendship. It represented two men, one of them with a black hat on his head. They were standing bent over, one facing the other's back. It seemed to be an indecent encounter, and people said that the position of neither standing figure was good, and yet that of the one in front was worse.)¹⁷⁷

The offence of the *níðstöng* is later accompanied by a poem spoken by Björn that includes further phallic allusion. Here two lines of it are also missing from the manuscript, possibly omitted due to indecency that could risk legal repercussions.¹⁷⁸ Gade suggests that the imagery of the *níðstöng* is meant to refer to the previous event on the island.¹⁷⁹ Additionally, Gade points to the black hat on one of the men being a reference to Óðinn, a god associated with homosexual behaviour.¹⁸⁰ The rivalry comes to a bloody end when Þórðr at last kills and beheads Björn, but not before after having given him a *klámhögg* by cutting off his buttocks.¹⁸¹ Meulengracht Sørensen has suggested that this is to be considered a symbolic action with a sexual component similar to *níð* where the recipient loses his manhood and could then be the culminative result of their conflict, as a way to return Björn's past offences that too were sexual in nature.¹⁸² Despite all this, Björn is the undisputed hero in the saga. Þórðr is consistently presented as his cowardly and villainous rival who manages to steal Björn's love Oddný, something he later taunts him for. On the characterisation and dynamic between Björn and Þórðr Andersson states: 'The conflict between Björn and Þórðr is not a case of personality contrast but a confrontation of black and white. Björn is cast as the hero and Þórðr just as surely as the scoundrel.'¹⁸³ Alison Finlay also argues that Þórðr's characterisation is more than just a way for the saga author to improve the image of Björn in contrast: 'He attempts to present Þórðr's physical cowardice as a literal reflection of the *ergi* alleged in symbolic form by the hero's satires.'¹⁸⁴ While this example is still ambiguous when it comes to whether an act of sexual assault happened between the two men, Björn still dishonours and emasculates Þórðr severely both through his *níð* and with the cuckoldry done with Óddný.

¹⁷⁷ 'The saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People', 1:276.

¹⁷⁸ Finlay, 'Níð, Adultery and Feud', 170; Gade, 'Homosexuality', 135.

¹⁷⁹ Gade, 'Homosexuality', 134.

¹⁸⁰ Gade, 'Homosexuality', 124.

¹⁸¹ *Bjarnar saga Hitadælakappa*, ch. 32.

¹⁸² Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 68.

¹⁸³ Andersson, *Icelandic Family Saga*, 137.

¹⁸⁴ Finlay, 'Níð, Adultery and Feud', 117.

Men's torture of other men

As previously mentioned, the *Íslendingasögur* have a different relationship with torture than the *samtíðarsögur* where torture is more prevalent.¹⁸⁵ When torture does feature in the narrative, therefore, it appears out of place.¹⁸⁶ Among others, Erik Wahlgren notes the uncharacteristic and un-Icelandic torture of Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða* and points to the saga having been influenced by foreign subject matter, whether oral tales or books.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Guðrún Nordal has compared it to tales of saints, in the way their torture increases Hrafnkell's renown rather than bring him shame.¹⁸⁸

After being ambushed by the men Sámr and Þorgeirr and their followers in his home, Hrafnkell and his eight men are brought to a beam connected between parts of his homestead, reserved for drying clothes. He asks them to let his men go and to kill him as he considers it less dishonourable than torture, but this is to no avail. The ambushers cut holes through the men's heels behind the tendons, thread a rope through the holes, and hang them up on the beam by the rope. When it is his turn, Þorgeirr taunts him, saying: Svá er komit nú kosti yðrum Hrafnkell, sem makligt er, ok mundi þér þykkja þetta ólíkligt, at þú mundir slíka skömm fá af nökkurum manni, sem nú er orðit.¹⁸⁹ (So this is your present situation, and it seems quite fitting, Hrafnkel. You might have thought it unlikely that you would ever receive such shame as this from any man.)¹⁹⁰ This torture here is then more about punishment and disgrace, and something Hrafnkell would rather die than experience. After this torture, he is given the choice to be killed or to leave the area with his life, leaving behind his possessions and land. To this Hrafnkell

¹⁸⁵ According to Miller, there are only 'about three instances' of torture and maiming in the *Íslendingasögur*. Miller here refers to the cases of torture in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (ch. 13), *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (ch. 21), in addition to the described example in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða* (ch. 5). In addition to these cases, I would include the torture of the two slaves Skiði and Yngvildr in *Svarfdæla saga* (ch. 20, 24, 27), and the torture of Gilli in *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 196.

¹⁸⁶ Stefan Thomas Hall, 'Last Laughs: Torture in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Enarratio* 16 (2011); Adams, "He took a Stone Away."

¹⁸⁷ Erik Wahlgren, 'Fact and Fancy in the Vinland Sagas', in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*, ed. Edgar C. Polomé and Paul Schach (University of Texas Press, 1969), 60n70; Hrafnkel's character has been the subject of a lot of discussion. For some of the works, see Fredrik J. Heinemann, 'Hrafnkels Saga Freysgóða' and Type-Scene Analysis', *Scandinavian studies* 46, no. 2 (1974); Peter Hallberg, 'Hrafnkell Freysgoði the "New Man"—A Phantom Problem', *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1975); Fredrik J. Heinemann, 'Hrafnkels Saga Freysgóða': The Old Problem with the New Man', *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1975); Robert D. Fulk, 'The Moral System of Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða', *Saga-Book* 22 (1986); Jan Geir Johansen, 'The Hero of Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða', *Scandinavian Studies* 67, no. 3 (1995), 281; Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*; Joanne Shortt Butler, 'The Best of a Bad Bunch? Hrafnkels saga and Narrative Expectations', in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*.

¹⁸⁸ Guðrún Nordal, 'Trúskipti og písl í Hrafnkels sögu', *Gripla* 9 (1995).

¹⁸⁹ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða*, ch. 5.

¹⁹⁰ 'The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi', trans. Terry Gunnell, in *Complete Sagas*, 5:274.

says that many men would have preferred to be killed instead of accepting these terms and his previous treatment but agrees in the end. When Hrafnkell years later manages to take back his old homestead and his goods, he noticeably does not torture in turn, choosing to let his offenders live. While Hrafnkell himself is said to be a *ójafnaðmaðr mikill* who is forceful and lacking in justice, this punishment by torture still appears unbalanced and shameful, and something out of place of the sagas. Ultimately, it is Sámr, the torturer, who loses his honour through his comeuppance. He also appears as an unbalanced punisher, while Hrafnkell in comparison seemingly has changed for the better.¹⁹¹

The question of torture and retribution is also present in *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*. Here, Ormr's blood-brother Ásbjörn is tortured to death by the troll Brúsi by being disembowelled and being forced to walk around an iron pole to wind the entrails around it.¹⁹² Despite this, Ásbjörn manages to keep his dignity and strength in death by walking in defiance while speaking poems of previous victories. The saga says that Ásbjörn died with great valor and *drengskapr*.¹⁹³ (Síðan let Ásbjörn líf sitt með mikilli hreysti ok drengskap.) In contrast, when Ormr takes revenge on Brúsi by carving a blood-eagle on his back, it is said that Brúsi died with little dignity (með litlum drengskap).¹⁹⁴ Here, the torture with the blood eagle instead appears to be punishment for the dealing of a dishonourable death, so a manner of re-establishing a social balance by giving one shameful death for another. In these cases, this form of torturous death is not looked down upon directly, but it is also not regularly featured in the *Íslendingasögur*, and instead is more frequent in *þáttur*, sagas and chronicles with settings more distanced in time and space unlike the torture of Hrafnkell that happened

¹⁹¹ This too has been a subject of much discussion, particularly with the killing of the seemingly innocent Eyvindr. Heinemann, 'Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða' and Type-Scene Analysis'; Hallberg, 'Phantom Problem'; Heinemann, 'The Old Problem with the New Man'.

¹⁹² A similar deadly torture is given to the viking Bróðir in the battle of Clontarf section of *Brennu-Njáls saga* ch. 157.

¹⁹³ *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, ÍF 13, ch. 7.

¹⁹⁴ *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, ch 9; Blood-eagle was supposedly performed by carving someone's back, cutting all his ribs from one's spine and drawing out the lungs from there. Roberta Frank has argued that the blood-eagle literary phenomenon is just that, without grounding in the Old Norse reality. Examples of the blood-eagle appear in *Haralds saga*, *Orkneyinga saga*, *Norna-Gests þáttur*, *Reginismál*, and in the *Gesta Danorum*, *Ragnars saga*, *Ragnarssona þáttur*, *Knútsdrápa*, as well as the mentioned *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* Roberta Frank, 'Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle', *The English Historical Review* 99, no. 391 (1984); Luke John Murphy et al., 'An Anatomy of the Blood Eagle: The Practicalities of Viking Torture', *Speculum* 97, no. 1 (2022). Hall, 'Last Laughs', 101.

in his own home.¹⁹⁵ A different kind of torture is found in *Grænlendinga saga*, where Leifr Eiríksson is said to have had three of Freydís' followers tortured (*pína*) into revealing the events that took place in Vínland.¹⁹⁶ The full extent of this torturing is not explained besides that it succeeds. This is then followed by Leifr saying that he cannot get himself to punish Freydís as she deserves. Similarly, in *Svarfdæla saga*, the slave Skiði is tortured by Karl the older when he refuses to tell the whereabouts of his allies. To torture it out of him, they tie his legs together and then tie the rope to a horse. They then ride the horse while dragging Skiði through a rough terrain with tree stumps. The word *pína* is again used here, and he is afterwards described to be badly wounded: He is bleeding everywhere, his jawbone ripped off together with his chin, with two teeth missing.¹⁹⁷ This act of torture is not exactly condemned within the narrative, but for his service Skiði is rewarded with his freedom and Yngvildr. The fact that this is not condemned may be due to Skiði's then position as a slave, as the harming and torture of one would not be as serious as that of a free man.¹⁹⁸ In these examples from *Grænlendinga saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*, the torture can be said to have been used as an interrogation technique rather than as punishment as was the case with Hrafnkell and his men.

As demonstrated in this section, acts of physical violence and combat between men both create and break a man in the *Íslendingasögur*. Here physical violence can establish him as a hero who is able to prevail against challenges, foes, and supernatural calamity. On the other hand, it can instead incriminate him if his actions are regarded as excessive or unbalanced. Furthermore, like a man's honour, his strength is not static but something he has to maintain. This in turn makes him vulnerable to challengers and attacks directed by other men.

¹⁹⁵ This is possibly also the case of torture in general in the *Íslendingasögur*, where torture can happen outside of Iceland, or is otherwise done by an Other, such as in the case of Brúsi. Murphy et al., 'Blood Eagle', 31-2.

¹⁹⁶ *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Skiði is rewarded with both his freedom and the marriage with Yngvildr for keeping his silence by his owner, but later sees his children be killed in revenge. *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 20, 25.

¹⁹⁸ Similarly, in *Grettis saga*, the foolish slave Glaumr reveals Grettir's location to his pursuers, whereupon the pursuers reward this betrayal by beating him up so badly that he almost became crippled from it. Although they benefitted from his aid, they still punish the slave's betrayal of a fellow free man. *Grettis saga*, ch. 82.

Physical violence against women

Physical violence and the killing of women

As has been brought up in the previous chapter and earlier this chapter, depictions of men harming and killing of women are rare in the *Íslendingasögur* when excluding the cases of witches and otherwise supernatural feminine characters. Here, violence directed at women is generally considered a great *níðingsverk* and a violation of the norm.¹⁹⁹ As Miller has pointed out, great care is often shown to be put into determining appropriate targets of violence, and this is particularly the case with female targets, and thus those who even consider the action are shown as despicable and dishonourable.²⁰⁰ For example, in *Hárvarðar saga Ísfirðings* when the cruel Þorbjörn voices his intent to harm the woman Bjargey and her companion while they are at sea, his follower reproaches him:

Þá mælti Þorbjörn: 'Kvinna örmust farandi, ok skulum vér þegar róa eptir þeim ok drepa hann, en meiða hana.' Þá mælti Brandr: 'Nú sannar þú enn þat, er mælt er til þín, at þú munir eigi spara flest illt at gera, enda skal ek veita þeim, er ek má; skaltu þá at keyptu komask.' En við umtölur Brands ok þat, er þau váru langt undan komin, þá lét Þorbjörn vera kyrrt ok fór leið sína.²⁰¹

Then Thorbjorn spoke: 'That damned witch, let's row after them and kill him and maim her.' Then Brand spoke: 'Now you are proving once again what people say about you, that there is no evil deed you would not commit, but I am going to help them all I can. It will cost you dearly.' And at Brand's insistence and because they had got far away, Thorbjorn let the matter rest and went on his way.²⁰²

In cases like this, the men being shown to voice this intent are stopped and admonished by their companions. Although their followers might otherwise support them, on this specific issue they appear to be the voice of reason.

Considering the care shown to avoid physical violence against women, unintentional violence and accidental killings of women are also negatively portrayed.

¹⁹⁹ Miller, 'Enormities', 762-3; There are also exceptions from this in the *fornaldarsögur* where supernatural or other exceptional women such as valkyries and shieldmaidens can be killed off. This is particularly striking in the saga of Örvar-Odd, where he throws a shieldmaiden gifted by the king for his protection into a bog after she fails to jump over it three times. Her aid, while treasured by the king, is seen as comedic by Odd, as he smiles and says that women have never been of aid to him, and her inability to fit his expectations is justified with death, as he says that the trolls can take her. This is never mentioned again, seemingly seen as a one-off joke. *Örvar-Odd saga*, ch. 28.

²⁰⁰ See Auðr and Eyjólfir in *Gísla saga*, and the men refusing to kill the women in *Grœnlendinga saga*. A similar aversion against killing or harming women is shown in the *samtíðarsögur*, both in *Guðmundar saga dýra* (ch. 18) and in *Þorgils skarði* (ch. 69). This is particularly expressed by Þorgímr alíkarl in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, ch. 18: 'No one here shall strike either children or women, even though this boy may become the death of us all!' Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 207.

²⁰¹ *Hárvarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ch. 8.

²⁰² 'The saga of Havard of Isafjord', 5:326.

This is for example the case with the house burning type-scene found in the sagas.²⁰³ To prevent the death of those not considered deserving of the burning, the perpetrators can give them quarter to walk out into safety. These people tend to be women and children, sometimes older men, as well as servile people.²⁰⁴ Even seemingly accidental violence against women is regarded negatively when it occurs during combat. This is for example the case when women attempt to break up a fight, or fight on behalf of men. One such case is Auðr from *Eyrbyggja saga*, the wife of Þórarinn, who together with the other women attempt to stop the men fighting by throwing clothes at them.²⁰⁵ Amid the chaos, her hand is cut off by the villainous Oddr.²⁰⁶ This is enough motivation for revenge, but further insult to injury is added when Oddr and his follower Þorbjörn mocks her injury, saying that it was Þórarinn who did it. Þórarinn kills Þorbjörn for this, and both this and Oddr's later execution is approved of within the narrative despite the legal repercussions and outlawry.

Sexual violence done to women

More than the shameful acts of physical violence towards women, sexual violence and rape are presented as serious, criminal offences within the Old Norse culture, where the killing of the perpetrator is legally allowed according to *Grágás*:

Sex ero konor þær er maðr avigt vm [...] Þat er mælt. ef maðr kœmr at þar er aNaR maðr brytr kono þa til svefnis er hann a vigt vm. þar a þeim vetvangi oc hafe hann fellda hana oc látet afallaz oc a hann þa vigt vm þar a þeim vetvangi eða sva ef hann fiðr hann i sama sæing konoNe sva at þav huile bæðe saman af því at hann villde misrøðo við hana drygia. oc a maðr þar vigt vm ihvaromtveGia stað þott misrøþan hafe eigi tekiz. Þar er maðr vegr vm þa cono eða viðr a manne er eigi hefir tekiz misrøðan oc var til stýrt þar eigo einir vetvangs bvar at scilia hvartveGia vm vigit eða vm þar a verc sem ero oc sva vm þat er hann vill til ohælge enom vegna lata föra.²⁰⁷

(There are six women a man has the right to kill for. [...] It is prescribed that if a man arrives to find another man forcing a woman to lie with him there, a woman he has the right to kill for, and

²⁰³ Lisa Bennett, “‘The Most Important of Events’: The “Burning-in” Motif as a Site of Cultural Memory in Icelandic Sagas”, Journal Article, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 3 (2007); Yoav Tirosch, ‘Feel the Burn: Lönguhlíðarbrenna as Literary Type-Scene’, *Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne*, no. 13 (2017).

²⁰⁴ In *Brennu-Njáls saga* Helgi Njálsson attempts to use this quarter to sneak out of the burning house while dressed as a woman with a woman cape and a kerchief around his head, only to be killed soon after he has managed to hurt one of the burners. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 129.

²⁰⁵ Women are also said to go between fighting men in other sagas, such as in *Kormáks saga* ch. 24, although they usually do so without coming to harm.

²⁰⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18.

²⁰⁷ *Grágás* K §90 and *Grágás* St §293; *Jónsbók* IV, §2. On concepts of female consent see Jenny Jochens, ‘Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature’, *Scandinavian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1986); Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, ‘Rape in the Icelandic Sagas: An Insight in the Perceptions about Sexual Assaults on Women in the Old Norse World’, *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 4 (2015).

the man has forced her down and lowered himself down upon her, then he has the right to kill on her account there at that place; or likewise if he finds him in the same bed as the woman, so that they lie side by side, because it was his will to have wrongful intercourse with her; then a man has the right to kill on her account in both instances even if intercourse has not taken place.)²⁰⁸

This situation is shown in practice in the *Íslendingasaga Króka-Refs saga*, where the *hirðmaðr* Skálp-Grani (Sheath-Grani) attempts to rape Refr's wife Helga while he is away.²⁰⁹

Hann lézt heita Grani ok vera hirðmaðr Haralds konungs: 'Er ek því hér kominn', segir hann, 'at ek vil mér konu kaupa.' Hon bað hann ganga til þess í annan stað. Grani kvað þat ósæmiligt at gamall maðr ætti unga konu, svá friða ok fagra. Hon kveðst mundu vera fyrir honum sjálfráða. Grani kveðst mundu vera ekki færavandr ok tók til Helgu. Hon sprettr upp ok verst; slær þar í glímu, ok í því kemr Narfi til gluggans ok sér inn. En er Grani sér skuggann bera fyrir gluggann þá slízt hann ór höndum Helgu ok leitar til dyrrnar. Narfi vildi ok komast fyrir dyrrnar. Grani komst þá út fyrr ok hefir þegar á rás.²¹⁰

(He said his name was Grani and that he was one of the king's men. 'I've come here', he said, 'to buy a woman.' She told him to go elsewhere for that. Grani said that it was a shame that an old man had a young woman so fair and beautiful. She said that, for all of him, she would decide that herself. He said he was not going to be fastidious and reached for her. She sprang up and defended herself. It turned into a wrestling match, and at that moment Narfi came to the window and looked in. When Grani saw a shadow falling on the window he tore himself free of Helga and went for the door. Narfi wanted to get in front of the door, but Grani got there and out first and ran for it.)²¹¹

Here Helga's resistance against Grani is clear, and she manages to fight him off until Refr returns to her and ultimately kills Grani.²¹² Grani is perhaps one of the clearest examples of a villainous, human rapist in the *Íslendingasögur*. He is not said to be beastly like the *berserkir*, nor is he driven by revenge against Helga and the other women's male relatives. Instead, he is described as someone who 'liked women and love-making' (*vífinn ok kvensamr*), and the reason that his behaviour was accepted was because he was King Haraldr hardraði's *hirðmaðr*.²¹³ Grani is made even more shameful as he both attempts to flee like a coward and tries to threaten Refr with King Haraldr's wrath. As is often the case when Icelanders attempt to take revenge on Norwegian *hirðmenn* abusing their position or otherwise offending them, Refr is to be

²⁰⁸ *Laws of Early Iceland*, 1:154.

²⁰⁹ Króka-Refr's saga is considered to be one of the latest *Íslendingasögur*, with a suggested dating of the 14th century. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 39; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', 115.

²¹⁰ *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 16.

²¹¹ 'The saga of Ref the Sly', trans. George Clark, in *Complete Sagas*, 3:416.

²¹² An odd addition is how Helga attempts to stop Refr from pursuing Grani by saying that Grani had 'not put a hand on his (Refr's) possession', (*því at han hefir öngri eigu þinni spillt*.) *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 16.

²¹³ *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 16; 'The saga of Ref the Sly', 3:416.

In *Knýtlinga saga* the Danish king Eiríkr inn góði abducts the high-born Bóthildr Þorgautsdóttir, and here she clearly states her unwillingness and how the king did it more out of hate than love (*heipt en ást*). *Knýtlinga saga*, ch. 78.

punished by the king for the murder of Grani. This is despite his action not being presented negatively by the narrative itself, and it goes against *Grágás*'s legal right of killing the would-be rapist.²¹⁴ After Refr has killed Grani, he flees from Norway to escape the king's wrath.²¹⁵

A challenge with looking at the villainous depictions in these cases is keeping in mind is that the question of consent and 'wrongful' intercourse is not generally decided by the participants themselves. As Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist has noted, while rape and sexual violence within the sagas are generally shown to be socially unacceptable, the offence is primarily regarded as directed towards the male relatives of the woman, as the Old Norse code of honour expected male control over female sexuality. The woman's view of the rape is less frequently shown as relevant if mentioned at all.²¹⁶ Instead, frequently the sexual assault or the attempt of it is seen as a tool to disgrace the woman and/or her family as revenge, or to provoke another man into feuding.²¹⁷ This intention is for example stated by the antagonistic Einarr in *Víglundar saga*, who is jealous of Þorgrímr príði and wishes to knock him down a peg:

Þat var einn tíma, at Einarr kom at máli við móður sína: „Illa þykir mér, att Þorgrímr inn príði hefir svá mikil metorð hér í heraðinu; ætla ek at vita, ef ek komumst á muni við Ólofu, konu hans; mundi þá vera annathvart, at hann mundi leita at hefna eða metnaðr hans mundi lægjast, ok er þó óvíst, þó at hann leiti at hefna, at hann beri hæra hlut.' Hon kvað þetta vera vel mælt ok nærri sínu skapi.²¹⁸

(One time it happened that Einar got into a conversation with his mother. 'I'm not pleased that Thorgrim is so highly respected here in the district. I think that if I could seduce his wife Olof, he would have to try to avenge the deed, otherwise his reputation would suffer; and if he were to avenge himself, it is not certain that he would come out ahead.' She said that this was a good idea and in tune with her own thoughts.)²¹⁹

Einarr's plan is primarily meant to harm Þorgrímr, and although Einarr refers to it as seduction, this may just be Einarr's turn of phrase. He and his brother soon visit Ólof while Þorgrímr is gone. After being told of this, Ólof hurries to disguise herself. She

²¹⁴ *Grágás* §70, cf. *Gulapingslög* §32. Outlaws who have presented as having been banished due to sexual assault (*kvennamál* and *konumál*) in the sagas are also presented negatively and ultimately disposable. See *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 36; *Gull-Þóris saga*, ch. 9-10. Ahola, 'Outlawry', 200.

²¹⁵ Refr does not flee before he has confessed the kill, albeit in a roundabout way to avoid the king's wrath before he has had time to sail away. *Króka-Ref's saga*, ch. 16-17.

²¹⁶ Jacob Bell has argued that there are rape cases where the women's resistance and unwillingness ('*að óvilja hennar*') is clearly shown within the narrative. Jacob Bell, 'Ok lá þar at óvilja hennar: A Reconsideration of Sexual Violence in the Old Norse World', *Journal of Family History* (2021), 13; On rape used as revenge directed at other men, see for example Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Kvinner og 'krigsmenn'. Om kønnes stilling på Island på 1100-1200-tallet', (Master Thesis, University of Bergen, 1990); Ljungqvist, 'Rape', 431-2.

²¹⁷ Ljungqvist, 'Rape', 438.

²¹⁸ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 8.

²¹⁹ 'Viglund's Saga' trans. Marianne Kalinke, in *Complete Sagas*, 2:419.

dresses a servile woman up as her, and herself as a man with a sword. She then promises the woman that she will not let him disgrace her (‘en ek skal svá til sjá, at þú fái enga skömm af honum.’)²²⁰ When the men approach the disguised servant woman, a beyond angry (*allreiðuligr*) looking ‘Ottarr’ (Ólof) scares the two men into fleeing by lying about Þorgrímr and his men returning.²²¹ In the end, it is the would-be assailant and his follower who is tricked and shamed. This scene stands out by how it shows two women having to deal with this kind of perceived threat. Ólof’s reassurance here stands in contrast with the disregard of the servile woman’s body autonomy in *Grettis saga*.²²² While her display of rage while disguised could be a part of the plan of scaring the men away, it could also be a rarely shown female reaction to the danger Einarr poses for the one he thinks is her. Furthermore, Ólof crossdressing and brandishing a sword is not depicted negatively here.

Like in the examples above, attempts at rape in the sagas can be prevented either by a male hero or the would-be victim, and there are few explicit depictions or mention of actual cases of rape within the sources. Arve Nedkvitne suggests that the rarity of explicit mentions of rape in the sources may be because it would be disgraceful both for the violator and the violated, as well as their kin.²²³ William Ian Miller partly agrees with this notion of little existing evidence equalling few cases, but also suggests that that rape could have been so common as to rarely be worth mentioning.²²⁴ An alternative view is that as women’s consent did not matter, unless there was family honour involved, rape would not have been treated very seriously.

As mentioned back in chapter 1, a rare case is found with Freydis’s whetting in *Grœnlendinga saga*, where she weaponises the fear and hatred of sexual assault when she falsely accuses two fellow travellers of having hurt her: ‘þeir börðu mik ok léku sárliga’ (they took it so badly that they struck me and handled me very roughly).²²⁵ Despite the rarity of the phenomenon within the *Íslendingasögur*, the fear of a woman falsely accusing a man of sexually abusing her as a form of vengeance or spite is a

²²⁰ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 8.

²²¹ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 8.

²²² Then again, technically Ólof is the one to potentially endanger the servile woman by using her as a decoy.

²²³ Nedkvitne, ‘Katharsis og ære. To Middelalderlige Diskurser om Døden’, in *Døden som katharsis. Nordiska perspektiv på dödens kultur och mentalitetshistoria*, ed. Yvonne Maria Werner et al. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2004), 49.

²²⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 208-9; See also Ljungqvist, ‘Rape’; See also Gade, ‘Homosexuality’; Bell, ‘Óvilja hennar.’

²²⁵ Jochens also reads this scene as a false accusation of molestation. Jenny Jochens, ‘Vikings Westward to Vinland: the Problem of Women’, in *Cold Counsel*, 146.

villainous motif that appears again and again in the folk tales of different cultures. However, differently from what Stith Thompson calls the ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ motif found in Marie de France’s *Lanval* and the similar stories where the woman accuses a man of forcefully having his way with her after rejecting her sexual advances first, here Freydis is shown to instead be motivated by greed.²²⁶

Abduction

Related to sexual assault and the matter of possession is the bridal theft motif where the woman is abducted from her family by a man, generally implying the intention of intercourse if not to also marry her. Within the Old Norse laws, abduction is regarded in a similar manner to sexual assault.²²⁷ This was also the case of continental Medieval Europe, where there was enough conceptual overlap between what we call ‘rape’ and ‘abduction’ that medieval people had one term that covered both, *raptus*.²²⁸ Here there is also the question of whose consent can be more nuanced within the story, and the perspective of the abduction can depend on the one doing it. For example, in *Kjalnesinga saga* the woman Ólof is first kidnapped by the saga protagonist Búi, and later by Búi’s rival, Kólfinnr. In Kólfinnr’s case, the kidnapping is presented negatively, explicitly stating ‘fór Kolfiðr til Kollafjarðar ok tók þaðan á brut Ólofu ina vænu nauðga ok at óvilja föður hennar’, (Kolfinn went to Kollafjord and abducted Olof the fair with force and against the will of her father.).²²⁹ This is unlike the previous case where she says that Búi should decide where she was for a time (Ólof kvad nú Búa mundu ráða sínum vistum at sinni).²³⁰ The woman’s actual irrelevancy is shown here, as Búi hands her back to her father after killing Kólfinnr, as he had now taken revenge for Kólfinnr’s impudence (*djörfung*) towards him, and because he now considers Ólof

²²⁶ Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature*, ‘K2111. Potiphar's wife.’

²²⁷ Grágás K §159, §160; Grágás St §159. Anne Holtsmark, ‘Kvinnerov’, in *Kulturhistoriskt leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid* ed. Finn Hødnebo (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1964), 574-6; Ljungqvist, ‘Rape’, 433-4.

²²⁸ Another word used for rape here was *violatio*. See Karras and Pierpont, *Doing Unto Others*, 170-6, 194-9. An exception is found within Anglo-Saxon law, where rape and abduction are separated as two different crimes. Ljungqvist, ‘Rape in the Icelandic Sagas’, 433.

²²⁹ *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 16.

²³⁰ Another example of ambiguous abductions is Björn Brynolfsson kidnapping the woman Þora without her brother Þorir’s knowledge. Afterwards he is outlawed in Norway but is after a brief consideration accepted by Skallagrím and his son Þorolfr in *Egils saga*, ch. 32; *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 9.

spoiled (*spillt*) by Kólfinnr.²³¹ Here, similar to the offence of sexual assault, the bridal theft is less about the supposed bride and her wants, and more about the dishonourable offence done by and done onto men. This offence must be avenged, while the woman herself can be easily discarded.²³²

When it comes to what kind of men are depicted as rapists, there is not a uniform social group, as warriors, free men, outlaws, jarls, outlaws, and *berserkir* are all shown to do it, or attempt it. Primarily in the *Íslendingasögur* however, the majority are outlaws or otherwise marginalised men, such as *berserkir* or other men who use their physical strength not only to get the goods they want, but also the women.²³³ *Berserkir* and supernatural men are also shown to be threats here, but they are more often either prevented from going through with their intentions by the hero, or soon killed. In other cases, however, as has been shown, rapists are supported either by their companions, their allies or kin, or even the king.²³⁴

Sexual violence as humour or taming

Despite the legal opposition and the occasional displays of resistance and lack of consent chosen for inclusion in the narrative, there are times where sexual assault and abductions are presented in either a neutral way, or, when done by one of the saga heroes or their associates, even without being shown in a negative light.²³⁵ This alone

²³¹ This is despite Búi having abducted her first, and conceived a child with her outside of wedlock, and the logic is not questioned within the narrative, suggesting either that it is considered proper from the author's viewpoint, or that the author is not interested in the meaning. Another peculiar detail with this love rivalry is how both men are pushed into going to woo Ólof by their maternal figures, previously showing no interest in Ólof. This could possibly be intended to lessen the crime of the men both abducting her.

²³² Despite being discarded by Búi for being 'spoiled', Ólof does not suffer as much social disgrace and she is later married. A case where the abduction is presented in a less negative manner is in *Finnboga saga ramma*, where the woman Þorny is proposed to by the man Skiði but her father rejects it. When her father is gone, Skiði is said to abduct her and bring her to Norway with the help of her mother Þorgerdr, and that they live well there, despite her father's anger. While Þorgny and Þorgerdr's relationship is not stated, this could suggest the mother aiding them in eloping after Þorgny's wishes, and here her father's anger and punishment of Þorgerdr is presented negatively. *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 1.

²³³ Blaney, 'Berserk Suitor'; Ruiter, 'Berserks Behaving Badly'; Miller, 'Enormities:', 763; Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality', 302.

²³⁴ Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', 90.

²³⁵ Bell discusses the unclear line between consent and coercion shown in Egill's encounter with the jarl's daughter in chapter 48, where he, despite her previous lack of interest places her by him, and the saga states 'Þá drukku þau saman um kveldit ok váru allkát.' (They drank together that evening and had a great time.) I am here inclined to interpret this to instead be a case of the saga hero proving the haughty highborn woman wrong, not by forcibly having his way with her, but rather by proving his general company to be better than she expected. This is in part due to Bell interpreting the line 'Egill tók til hennar ok setti hana niðr hjá sér' to be 'Egill yanked her to himself and set her down on top of him',

can have several reasons, with the more disconcerting reason being the notion of the act being intended as comedic, or regarded as a satisfying revenge done towards a difficult woman to put her in her place, a socially correcting action done when the woman is acting out of turn.²³⁶ This is more prevalent in the continental and romance inspired *riddarasögur*, where the princely saga heroes' subjugation of wilful women through rape is not condemned, but instead deemed necessary.²³⁷ Of the few examples in the *Íslendingasögur* the perhaps most glaring one is Grettir's dubiously consensual if not outright rape of the servile woman who mocks his according to her disappointing manhood when she sees him sleeping in the nude. Awoken by her laughter and mockery, Grettir in turn taunts her with some poems detailing what he intends to do with her, before tossing her in bed, whereupon the author states: 'Griðka æpti hástöfum, en svá skilðu þau, at hon frýði eigi á Gretti, um þat er lauk'²³⁸ (The servile woman screamed loudly, and it is said that she did not taunt Grettir with it since.) There are different interpretations and resulting translations of this scene, with some translating it as the woman enjoying it in the end.²³⁹ At the heart of the scene, there is the saga hero seemingly proving his questioned manhood by forcing himself upon the servile woman without repercussions. Another detail which may explain this behaviour is the woman

instead of the more neutral 'took hold of her and set her down beside him.', followed by a description of how they drank together and enjoyed themselves (váru allkát). Despite this, it adds to the motif of the male saga hero being shown to be in the right for putting a woman in her place despite her previous disregard. Bell, 'Óvilja hennar.' 8-9.

²³⁶ This motif of 'taming the shrew' within both Eddic poetry and elsewhere in Old Norse literature has previously been discussed by Helga Kress. See Kress, 'Taming the Shrew'; See also Bagerius, 'Mandom och mödom', 180.

²³⁷ This is especially in the case of sagas with maiden-kings who transgress gender roles by acting like men. For more on the maiden-kings, see Bagerius, 'Romance and Violence', 90; Marianne Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Marianne Kalinke, 'Clári saga, Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, and the Evolution of Icelandic Romance', in *Riddarasögur. The Translation of European Court Culture in Medieval Scandinavia*, eds. Karl G. Johansson and Else Mundal (Oslo: Novus, 2014); On rape and torture of women done by men elsewhere in Medieval literature, see for example Kathryn Gravidal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Evelyn Birge Vitz, 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections', *Romanic Review* 88, no. 1 (1997); Amy N. Vines, 'Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance', in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse, and Cory James Rushton (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014); Sarah Baechele, Carissa M. Harris, and Elizaveta Strakhov, eds., *Rape Culture and Female Resistance in Late Medieval Literature* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022).

²³⁸ *Grettis saga*, ch. 75.

²³⁹ This scene has been interpreted as rape by several, including Kress, Ljungqvist, and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, while Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has called it debatable. Kress, *Máttugar meyjjar*, 201n2; Ljungqvist, 'Rape in the Icelandic Sagas', 436; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse literature*, 125; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'How Do You Know If It Is Love or Lust?' On Gender, Status, and Violence in Old Norse Literature', *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, no. 2 (2016), 192n8.

being a slave woman (*griðkona*). While the farmer's daughter is shown to try to stop her and admonish her for her taunts and laughter, the slave woman is shown as indecent and mocking, as they regularly are when described. While she is punished for her insult against Grettir's masculinity, the farmer's daughter runs out of the room unscathed. It is not said that she goes for aid for the servile woman, or whether she fears a similar treatment from Grettir. It is still rare that servile women are shown to be punished for commenting on men's masculinity, as even they are often able to make use of whetting to get their will across without sanctions. Grettir's treatment of the slave woman also contrasts with his own acts of helping women from the threats of being sexually assaulted by *berserkir*. When he is pretending to side with the *berserkir* who wish to rape the homestead's women as revenge for the man getting them outlawed, he compliments their manliness. Considering Grettir's role as an ambiguous saga hero within the corpus, his actions alone are hardly proof for what was deemed appropriate or ideal.²⁴⁰ A more difficult to determine example is that of Kormákr from *Kormáks saga*. His role as an unwelcome suitor of Steingerðr is another example of socially unacceptable advances with the great trouble it causes both her father and brothers, her husbands, and herself. His unwelcome advances include sexual poetry, kissing her six times, and at one point trying to abduct her against her will.²⁴¹ These actions are legally regarded as punishable offences, and in the case of the kissing, he must pay compensation for it.²⁴²

Overall, while rape, sexual assault, and other non-consensual advances in the eyes of the woman or her male relatives are generally a sign of villainous chaos, they are not always admonished or punished within the sagas or in Old Norse literature, and particularly in the more historically and geographically distant sections of the *Íslendingasögur* is there more moral flexibility within the text.

²⁴⁰ *Grettis saga*, ch. 19; Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality.'

²⁴¹ For more on this depiction, see Stephens, 'Unwelcome Suitor', and for more on the sexual assaults done by knights in the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, see Bagerius, '*Mandom och mödom*.'

²⁴² Another case of an ex-lover being targeted by saga heroes with unclear or no consent is Kolfinna in *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskáld* ch. 9. Here Kolfinna is approached by Hallfreðr despite her being married, and Hallfreðr tells his twelve male followers to 'do what they want'. It is then said that they all got themselves a woman for the night. This approach of not only Kolfinna but also the nameless women has been interpreted as non-consensual by Karras and Miller. Karras, 'Servitude and Sexuality', 297; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 208.

Domestic violence by husband on wife

While physical acts of violence may happen within one's homestead, it is not too common to see acts of physical violence done by husband against wife.²⁴³ In *Grágás* K §149, domestic violence between partners that results in major wounds is one of the few reasons acceptable for initiating a divorce.²⁴⁴ In the sagas themselves however, despite divorce appearing to be more easily available, domestic abuse by itself is rarely shown as the reason for the divorce.²⁴⁵ One specific type of domestic violence which becomes a motif in the *Íslendingasögur* is the *kinnhestr*, which is the name given to a particular slap or strike dealt by a husband to his wife.²⁴⁶ This particular strike is described in detail and is shown with particular use of emotions within the limits of the saga genre. Two of the most prominent and imposing female housewives, Guðrún from *Laxdæla saga* and Hallgerðr from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, both are shown to be on the receiving end of the *kinnhestr*, with Hallgerðr being struck one time each by her three husbands. For both women and the sagas they belong to, the *kinnhestr* represents a final split in the relationship between the husband and wife, and down the line it results in the disgrace of the man or even indirectly in his death, such is the case of all three of Hallgerðr's husbands, the first two of whom are killed not long after they have struck her.²⁴⁷ In these scenes the reader gets to see Hallgerðr's pain and sorrow caused by the *kinnhestr*. With the first slap done by her first husband Þorvaldr, it is specified that the strike left her bloodied and with a visibly sore face that encourages her foster-father into taking revenge by killing Þorvaldr.²⁴⁸ With her second husband, she is left the most grief-struck and vulnerable, far away from the woman otherwise shown in the saga:

²⁴³ For more perspectives the topic of domestic violence in Medieval literature, see Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price, eds., *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Anna Kjellström, 'Domestic Violence in the Middle Ages', in *From Ephesos to Dalecarlia. Thoughts on Body, Space and Time in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Cecilia von Heijne et al. (Stockholm: Statens historiska museum, 2009).

²⁴⁴ *Grágás* K §149.

²⁴⁵ Divorces are in the *Íslendingasögur* sometimes shown to be done in the spur of the moment for both men and women, particularly when they have been disgraced by their spouse, or if they have acted particularly dishonourably. Examples include *Pordís* in *Gísla saga*, *Þráinn* in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and *Vigdís* in *Laxdæla saga*; In the *Gulapingslög* on the other hand, it says that a woman had grounds to divorce her husband if he struck her three times in public, and that had to recompense her for each strike. For men, it is said he who wanted to be divorced from his wife had to do so by loudly proclaiming this with his wife and other witnesses present. *Gulapingslög* §54.

²⁴⁶ The literal translation is 'cheek-horse'.

²⁴⁷ The one who kills her two first husbands Þorvaldr and Glúmr is her foster-father Þjóstólfr whose relationship with Hallgerðr has been questioned by some researchers. For example, Dronke has noted his possibly sexual jealousy. Dronke, *Sexual Themes in Njáls saga*, 17.

²⁴⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 11.

Glúmr drap til hennar hendi sinni ok mælti: 'Ekki deili ek við þik lengr;' - ok gekk á braut. Hon unni honum mikit ok mátti eigi stilla sik ok grét hástøfum.²⁴⁹

(Glum struck her with his hand and said: 'I don't want to deal with you anymore', and went away. As she loved him dearly, she could not calm herself and wept out loud.)

Hallgerðr's grief here is clear, and when Þjóstólfr finds her weeping she tells him not to avenge it. Glúmr is soon killed by Þjóstólfr however, and despite how the narrative has emphasised her grief, the other characters later point her out as the one responsible for both of her husbands' deaths. This is also made the case with her third husband, Gunnarr, after she has had a slave steal food and burn down the storehouse of one of his foes:

Gunnarr reiddisk ok mælti: 'Illa er þá ef ek em þjófsnautr', ok lýstr hana kinnhest. Hon kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mælti. Gekk hon þá fram ok hann með henni, [...]²⁵⁰
(Gunnar got angry and said, 'It's a bad thing if I'm partner to a thief' - and he slapped her on the face. Hallgerd said she would remember this slap and pay it back if she could. She went out, and he went with her.)²⁵¹

More than the physical pain, this blow is a matter of dishonour as it, unlike the two previous ones, is done in public after he has, albeit rightfully, called her a thief.²⁵² The future she has promised comes soon enough during Gunnarr's famous last battle, where he asks her to give him some of her long hair to use for a bowstring for his survival, and here she reminds him of his previous *kinnhestr*, and states that she does not care whether or not he lives. He soon dies in the fight, and Hallgerðr is found responsible for this, and moves away from their farm to escape his mother Rannveig's wrath. Here we are shown the result of what Robert Cook calls the 'failed romance' between Hallgerðr and Gunnarr, with an unhappy marriage characterised by mistrust and disregard reaching its breaking point with a physical strike.²⁵³

Similar to the cases of Hallgerðr, the battery of Guðrún is portrayed as an action that spells the end of her first marriage. Like the case of Hallgerðr's first marriage with her Þorvaldr, Guðrún's Þorvaldr strikes her after she once more has been asking him to buy more jewellery:

²⁴⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 16.

²⁵⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 48.

²⁵¹ 'Njal's saga', 3:57-8.

²⁵² For more on this scene see Miller, 'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?', 59-61.

²⁵³ Cook, 'Gunnarr and Hallgerðr'; Bandlien has also noted how Hallgerðr and Gunnarr's story is an argument against women's consent in marriage automatically resulting in happier and lasting marriages. Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 267-8.

Þat var eitt sinn, at Guðrún beiddi Þorvald gripakaups. Þorvaldr kvað hana ekki hóf at kunna ok sló hana kinnhest. Þá mælti Guðrún: 'Nú gaftu mér þat, er oss konum þykkir miklu skipta, at vér eigim vel at gørt, en þat er litarapti gott, ok af hefir þú mik ráðit brekvísi við þik.'²⁵⁴

(When Gudrun subsequently asked Thorvald to buy her a new treasure, he retorted that there was no limit to her demands and slapped her in the face. To this Gudrun replied: 'Fine rosy colour in her cheeks is just what every woman needs, if she is to look her best, and you have certainly given me this to teach me not to displease you.'²⁵⁵)

When she later meets with her friend and soon to be second husband, he advises her to return the disgrace by accusing him of the wearing feminine clothing. After tricking him into doing so, she uses this as a legitimate reason for divorcing him. Unlike Hallgerðr's men, he is disgraced, and later a much older Guðrún only states: 'Þorvalds get ek at engu' (I have nothing to say of Þorvaldr.) when recounting her past husbands.²⁵⁶

While saga examples like these show both the negative and unfortunate sides of a husband hitting his wife to punish her for her requests, taunts, or misdeeds, this is not necessarily a universal view. In *Flóamanna saga*, Þorgils is married to the much younger Helga, who is shown to oppose the match. One time she flees to her father's farm until Þorgils eventually forcibly brings her back, visibly displeased. Another day while they are sitting outside, they see a rooster attacking a hen:

'Sér þú, Helga, sameign þeira hana ok hænu?' Helga svarar: 'Hvers er þat vert?' segir hon. 'Svá má vera', segir Þorgils, 'annarra viðeign.' Gerast nú góðar samfarar þeira.²⁵⁷

('Helga, did you see the fight between the rooster and the hen?' Helga replied and said, 'What of it?' Þorgils said, 'Perhaps others have been fighting the same way.' Their marriage improved thereafter.)²⁵⁸

Despite this being a thinly veiled threat of physical violence if she does not subjugate herself to his will, this does not have negative repercussions, and they are instead said to get closer and to have a son.²⁵⁹ This then stands in opposition of the other examples of domestic abuse and the threat thereof which are regarded as dishonourable for the man,

²⁵⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 34.

²⁵⁵ While Guðrún's demand for greatness and no half measures in wealth as well as in action is punished here by her first husband, it is also what she is later lauded for by her esteemed peers. 'The saga of the People of Laxardal', 5:47.

²⁵⁶ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 78.

²⁵⁷ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 31.

²⁵⁸ 'The saga of the People of Floi', trans. Paul Acker, in *Complete Sagas*, 3:301.

²⁵⁹ Þorgils is also called a wild man (*hraunskeggjann*), possibly due to his harrowing experiences in Greenland, and while not the first choice for a marriage for the much younger Helga, it is decided that there will be more peace with him as the groom. Helga's opposition is repeatedly mentioned, which is noticeable by itself.

and repaid with disgrace, divorce, or even death.²⁶⁰ The taming of a younger wife with the threat of violence being depicted as righteous is more similar to the contemporary continental and Christian views of handling unruly or otherwise disappointing wives, possibly due to its younger age.²⁶¹

Men's torture and abuse of women

Even if the frequency and severity of torture is less prevalent in the *Íslendingasögur* than in other saga genres and other contemporary works, there are still examples that stand out.²⁶² In fact, although the great majority of violent scenes in the *Íslendingasögur* feature men, one of the most visceral depictions of abuse and arguably torture is that of the woman Yngvildr fagrskinn (fair-cheek) in *Svarfdæla saga*. Yngvildr is a former concubine (*frilla*) who is made wife of the man Klaufi, and as she is deemed responsible for the deaths of him and Karl the older, she is sold several times to large and evil-looking men (*miklir ok illiligrir*) by Karl Karlsson.²⁶³ This is intended as punishment by Karl Karlsson, as he attempts to break her spirit and have her admit defeat, at one point saying: 'Þykki mér því betr [...] sem þú gerir hana vesalli', (The worse you treat her, the happier I will be.)²⁶⁴ In the following years she endures extensive abuse and torture, something that is exceptional in the *Íslendingasögur* and in particular for women. Unlike *Sturlunga saga*, few cases of torture are shown in the *Íslendingasögur*, and here

²⁶⁰ In *Finnboga saga ramma* the man Asbjörn threatens to harm his wife Þorgerdr if she does not carry her soon to be newborn child out to die in the wilderness. Asbjörn is here presented as a man with a bad and dangerous temper, and here it was considered a terrible misdeed to let the child die. *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 2-4.

²⁶¹ See Hilde A. Bliksrud's master's thesis for more on Þorgíls' gendered and transgressive behaviour, Hilde A Bliksrud, 'Mannen som mor: Kjønnsoverskridelse som motiv i Flóamanna saga' (MA Thesis, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2008). In *Landnámabók* there is also the tale of Hallbjörn and his new wife Hallgerðr who refuses to stand up and follow him, and when his voiced demands and hair pulling goes ignored, he at last cuts off her head and rides off. *Íslendingabók*, H 122; This Hallgerðr's hair is also compared with that of the Hallgerðr of *Brennu-Njáls saga* as being the most beautiful in Iceland. The symbolism of a woman's long, loose hair as freedom, and the subjugation of women has been brought up by Helga Kress. See Kress, 'Taming the Shrew', 89-90; Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Föröware och offer: kvinnor, män och våld i det medeltida Island', in *Medeltidens genus*, 111-3.

²⁶² A rare example of sanctioned torture can also be found in *Grágás* itself in K §161: 'If a pregnant woman refuses to name the father of the unborn child, the man prosecuting the case is to call the five closest neighbours to attend as he tortures (*pína*) her into naming the father. The injuries are to not be lasting, nor should visible marks remain'; *Laws of Early Iceland*, 2:79.

²⁶³ While concubines' positions can vary, in the *Íslendingasögur* the term *frilla* is closely connected with slavery. Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 106; *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 26.

²⁶⁴ 'The saga of the People of Svarfadardal', trans. Fredrik J. Heinemann, in *Complete Sagas*, 4:190.

Yngvildr stands out for her gender.²⁶⁵ Also out of these instances, the mentions of abuse, and the physical descriptions of Yngvildr's body are uncharacteristically graphic, including whipping, her being described as nude and bloody all over (*alblóðug öll*), and the way her capturer would rather torment her to death than sell her at a loss ('Eigi nenni ek at selja hana með afföllum, heldr mu nek kvelja hana til dauða.')²⁶⁶ The interesting thing in this story is then how the men that Karl sells her to are considered evil and cruel in their brutal treatment of her, while Karl, the man who sells her to them as punishment for her pride, is not judged negatively for it. The saga seems to not disapprove of his facilitation of the torture. However, similar to the example of Þorgils's threat directed at Helga, this is a rare example that may have more of an influence from continental opinion rather than being native Old Norse sentiments.²⁶⁷

Yngvildr's abuse is presented as being the result of her pride and refusal to submit to her male masters, as well as the punishment for her previous actions such as her whetting. This is expressed several times, such as in the moments where she refuses to say what Karl demands of her, such as when it is stated: 'ok váru skapsmunir hennar inir sömu' (and her attitude was still the same).²⁶⁸ A similar sentiment is stated by her masters: 'Vit börðum hana aldri svá, at hon vili vinna fyrir okkr.' (We could never beat her enough to make her work for us [...]her attitude was still the same.)²⁶⁹ Karl uses this violence done by other, cruel men to Yngvildr to break down her haughtiness. When she finally gives in, he says this to seemingly justify his actions: 'Þá mun ek af leggja heðan í frá, ok svá mundak gert hafa, ef þú hefðir þetta fyrr mælt.' (Then I will stop this, and I would have done so if you had said this earlier). However, after she gives in, Yngvildr is rejected by the men Karl returns her to, including her previous husband. This brings the question of whether her protest was considered the correct action or not in the response to the torture. Still, as the men who are physically responsible for the torture are nameless men who are Swedish and Danish, the worst of the judgement for the torture is seemingly

²⁶⁵ One female example in *Sturlunga saga* is the disfigurement of the beggar-woman Krístrún whose breasts are cut off during an attack. This also happens to Ysja in *Íslendingasaga* (ch. 71), where she loses her breasts and soon after her life after an attack.

²⁶⁶ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 27.

²⁶⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson has commented on *Svarfdæla saga*'s stylistic oddities. While the saga is referenced in *Landnámabók* and thus must have existed in the 13th century, this early version appears to have been rewritten in a 14th century style. The latter part also suggests a foreign origin. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, 244-5.

²⁶⁸ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 27.

²⁶⁹ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 27. For more on Yngvildr's story, see Robin Waugh, 'Misogyny, Women's Language, and Love-Language: Yngvildr fagrinn in 'Svarfdæla saga'', *Scandinavian Studies* 70, no. 2 (1998); Kress, 'Taming the shrew', 88-9.

moved over to them instead of Karl who orchestrates it. Like *Flóamanna saga*, *Svarfdæla saga* is one of the younger sagas, with an assumed dating being sometime between 1350-1400.²⁷⁰ This may then be a reason why the brutal treatment of Yngvildr shares more similarities with the humiliation and torture done to women in the *riddarasögur* and some continental romance stories of this period, rather than the other *Íslendingasögur*.²⁷¹ The same can be said for the frequent violence done against Christian women in translated hagiography, although arguably Yngvildr is here punished because she is someone upholding the older values, not the newer Christian ones.²⁷²

Physical violence against children

As previously mentioned, mistreatment of children is regarded as despicable both according to the laws and within the sagas. Physical violence directed at them is almost universally judged negatively by the assailant's surroundings. One villainous character is judged negatively for this is Þrándr i Götu from *Færeyinga saga*. To avoid their revenge in the future, Þrándr encourages his allies to kill the two young boys Sigmundur and Þori, sons of the two men they had just killed.²⁷³ However, when he is stopped by his brother Bjarni, he pretends he only wanted to see their reactions. He then says he intends to foster them, only to sell them as slaves to a visiting Norwegian man. This man also opposes Þrándr's actions, and while he eventually is paid to take the boys from Iceland, he gives the silver to the boys instead. It is then said that their time with him is good, further solidifying Þrándr's wretched treatment in comparison.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', 115.

²⁷¹ The maiden-king themed *riddarasögur* are riddled with harm being dealt to both the unwanted suitor and particularly to the maiden-king. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'From Heroic Legend to "Medieval Screwball Comedy"? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative', in *The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland press, 2012). See also Larissa Tracy, 'The Uses of Torture and Violence in the Fableaux: When Comedy Crosses the Line', *Florilegium* (2006); Larissa Tracy, *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

²⁷² Brutal violence against women is for example a feature in the female saints' life sagas such as *Agnesar saga*, *Barbörus saga*, *Dóróteu saga*, and *Lúciú saga*. See Dario Bullitta and Kirsten Wolf, eds. *Saints and Their Legacies in Medieval Iceland*. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021), especially Natalie M. Van Deusen's 'St Agnes of Rome in Late Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Verse'; Eileen Marie Harney, 'The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature', (PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 2008).

²⁷³ A previously mentioned example of men killing children is the shapeshifter Þórvaldr Moðskegg from *Finnboga saga ramma* who kills Finnbogi's young sons and is quickly killed in turn. *Finnboga saga ramma*, ch. 29. Other, even further supernatural child killers are Kotkell and his family from *Laxdæla saga* who kill Höskuldr's son. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 37; Hörðr's killers plan to have his young sons killed in *Harðar saga*, ch. 37.

²⁷⁴ *Færeyinga saga* ch. 7; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 8.

While a man hitting a child might not affect him negatively by the act alone, those who withhold their hand still appear to be considered more honourable. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, after the farce that is Hrútr's divorce with Unnr, he and his half-brother Höskuldr see three children act out the events to the entertainment of the people present. Höskuldr gets angry and hits the child pretending to be Hrútr with a staff in his face so that his skin is torn. Despite this violent act, Höskuldr is not told off, but instead Hrútr's act of giving the child a golden ring and asking him to stop shows a more prudent and wise way of stopping the local talk, and the boy lauds him for his *drengskapr*. There are opposing opinions on Hrútr's intentions here. While Byock takes this to be a calculated move to preserve his honour, Kristján Kristjánsson has interpreted it to mean genuine goodness to prove his moral superiority despite his previous disgrace.²⁷⁵

Despite this general negative regard towards child violence and those considered vulnerable, some saga heroes are shown to kill young boys, particularly in order to hurt their parents. A noticeable example here is Egill Skallagrímsson's killing of Gunnhildr and Eiríkr *blóðøx*'s son, Ragnvaldr, who was said to be ten years old. While it is not specified that Egill himself killed the boy together with the twelve other men in his entourage, he is responsible for the attack.²⁷⁶ While this normally would normally be condemned in the sagas, it does not carry the same severity as some other cases of child murder in the sagas, and Egill is famously able to later walk free from King Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's grasp after composing a poem to Eiríkr, despite Gunnhildr's ministrations. Another example is found in *Svarfdæla saga*. Here Karl the younger attempts to pressure Yngvildr into admitting the great wound that Skiði was dealt in his lip during his previous torture.²⁷⁷ Due to Yngvildr's pride, she refuses to admit this wound. This provokes Karl into chopping off the heads of her and Skiði's three sons right in front of her, one for each time she denies it. This act of violence is not condemned. This is however more likely due to this last part of the saga being more inspired by continental literature and its style, rather than being a realistic portrayal.²⁷⁸

The father-son relationship within Old Norse society stands as one of the most important kinships, which makes it more striking in the rare instances where father and

²⁷⁵ Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 226-7; Kristján Kristjánsson, 'Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's Megalopsychia', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1, no. 4 (1998), 415. See also the interpretation of the scene in Miller, 'Enormities', 758-9.

²⁷⁶ *Egils saga*, ch. 58.

²⁷⁷ *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 25.

²⁷⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, 244-5.

son fight in the sagas.²⁷⁹ Egill and his antagonistic relationship with his father Skallagrímr is a prime example here, as Skallagrímr is shown to be dismissive until he one day gets into an uncontrollable rage which kills Egill's friend, his foster-mother, and almost Egill himself when he is twelve.²⁸⁰ Grettir and his father Ásmundr's relationship is another defined by conflict. Grettir is violent towards their farm animals to spite his father, and on one occasion he drags a sharp wool brush down his back as a prank in return for being given the undignified task of massaging his back.²⁸¹ In turn, Ásmundr verbally chastises Grettir but fails to strike him with a stick and does not punish him further despite his other destructive pranks. Fathers then are not shown to regularly punish their young sons, and these few are the results of particularly bad father-son relationships, possibly added to explain the saga heroes' origins and development.²⁸² This does not rule out that children were dealt blows or otherwise physically punished, and it was possibly normalised enough to not be worthy of mention. Still, it may have been considered undignified to mention, and were thus only included to establish character traits and relations or to show the protagonist facing struggles in his youth. If so, this by itself places the father in an antagonistic position.²⁸³

²⁷⁹ For more on the paternal-filial relationship in the sagas, see Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, 'The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons', in *Medieval Family Roles*, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Routledge, 1996), 191; See also Katherine Marie Olley, *Kinship in Old Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2022).

²⁸⁰ *Egils saga*, ch. 40. Another rare case of father and son fighting is found by the end of *Kjalnesinga saga* where Búi fights his twelve-year-old half-giant son Jökull, although he denies his parentage, and ultimately dies. There are several cases where the sagas show a bloodthirsty twelve-year old or even younger wound or even kill, however, this act of violence is generally used to separate children from young men, showing that they were old enough to do such a mature action. These violent children also tend to be saga heroes showing their might at an early age, and their acts of violence are then used to show their exceptionalism. For example, when he is seven years old, Egill kills an older boy with an axe, something that is not punished and instead his mother praises him by calling him a true viking. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 13.

²⁸¹ *Grettis saga*, ch. 14.

²⁸² For more on this, see Rebecca Merkelbach, 'Engi maðr skapar sik sjálf: Fathers, Abuse and Monstrosity in the Outlaw Sagas', in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women*.

²⁸³ It is also noticeable when fathers have an antagonistic relationship with their adult sons. The perhaps most damning one is Þórolfur bægafotr's animosity towards his son Arnkell in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where he even does the almost unheard betrayal of siding with Arnkell's enemy, Snorri goði. This too fits within his characterisation as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Taunting fathers and tense relationships between father and son are also found in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs* and *Vápnfirðinga saga*. In *Sturlunga saga's Þorgils saga skarða*, there is Þorkell priest who refuses to pay the ransom for his son Valgarðr, and instead has his abductor kill him. For more on vicious fathers and father-son relationships, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Specter of Old Age'; Itnyre, 'Fathers and Sons'; To compare, see the chapter on father and son relationships in Norse myth and legend in Olley, *Kinship*.

Chapter conclusions

Like the violence and the fear thereof that have been studied in the past chapters, the physical violence depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* does not mirror the 9th-11th century pagan society, nor the contemporary 13-15th century society. Instead, it depicts an excessive and imagined violent past that is both loathed and admired. Depending on the intent, and the character depicted, the same violent actions may be regarded differently. More than whetting and what was perceived as destructive witchcraft, physical, excessive violence was something the contemporary society was strongly affected by in the *Sturlungaöld*. This complicated relationship with physical violence shows through the sagas themselves, which may both condemn and compliment the acts of violence, depending on both the author and when the respective saga was written.²⁸⁴ By having the acts of physical violence be safely kept in the past, it allows them to be more extreme and to have them play out as both ideals of honour and as entertainment. While many men are shown to be efficiently and brutally killed in the *Íslendingasögur*, these sagas rarely share the more torturous details presented in the contemporary sagas' depictions, nor the same level of understanding when it comes to traumatic responses to these events. Besides the general notion of moderation in violence, Christian notions of mercy are infrequently depicted and then primarily in positive ways. However, if a revenge to an offence is withheld, it may instead be considered cowardly. Generally, while a moderate violent reaction to an offence is regarded as justified, initiating provocative acts is not.

While physical violence is most frequently associated with men and masculinity within the sagas, women are shown not only to instigate violence verbally but occasionally to participate themselves. Most frequently the woman is presented as proving her exceptionalism and honour, but ultimately their efforts rarely prove to be equal to those of men. These failures could then be intended to put the women back in their place, even if this too could vary depending on the independent sagas and their authors.²⁸⁵ Unlike supernatural women like witches and other trollish women, their physical violence is not deemed inherently monstrous by itself, and instead frequently as

²⁸⁴ See also Clark, *Gender, Violence*; M. Mayburd, 'Worlds Emerge, Worlds Collapse: Traumatic Affect in medieval Historiography and the Reception of Sturlunga Saga in the Twentieth Century', in *Emotions as Engines of History*, eds. Rafał Borysławski and Alicja Bemben, (New York: Routledge, 2021). Depictions of combat trauma in the *Íslendingasögur* themselves has been discussed by Grosskopf, 'Combat Trauma'; Jonathan Shay, 'Learning About Combat Stress From Homer's Iliad', *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 4, no. 4 (1991).

²⁸⁵ Turco, "'Enigma'", 288-91.

something novel driven by honour. It is also telling how the cases where physically violent or otherwise threatening women prevail, it is over other women, children, or the Other, namely groups deemed weaker than free men, and besides the category of the Other, these attacks are presented negatively.

Due to the cultural importance placed on balance and moderation, physical violence by men is the most condemned when it comes from a place of unrestrained and disruptive chaos, destructive without a worthy cause. This is shown by how acts of revenge in blood feuds can be presented as justified and controlled unless they go beyond what it is meant to avenge.²⁸⁶ Physical violence as a reaction is thus not necessarily vilified like the initiating act of violence. There is also a notion of fair and unfair physical violence within the sagas, based on who are fighting, and a tendency to side with the outlaw underdog protagonist, even if his actions go against legal and hegemonic moral notions, with the outlaw fitting the old ideal masculinity too well to function within said society. This torn sympathy may also extend to non-protagonist outlaws, such as those who are shown to be aided by others who in turn receive praise for this.

As has been shown in the previous chapter, violence that is otherwise shown negatively tends to be perceived more neutrally or distinctly positively when done as reactions to those considered Other, such as shapeshifters, witches and other supernatural or trollish people. This perception may also be extended to foreigners and racial Others, as well as outlaws, who through their transgressive actions become othered. As the Other are regularly the ones depicted in a villainous or threatening way towards society, the physical violence being targeted towards the other is rarely perceived negatively, even on the occasions when this is done in less honourable or even bestial ways. As for why this is the case, while Christian notions of reconciliation and moderation can be found in different forms in the sagas as well as in other sources from the 13th century, the same goes for ideas of measured revenge. Furthermore, the contemporary fear for both internal and foreign threats in the forms of *ójafnaðarmenn* and cowardly manipulators, the supernatural, and the increasingly involved Norwegian king and his *hirð* could also have shaped what was considered justified targets of physical violence when done by idealised Icelandic heroes.

²⁸⁶ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 260.

Conclusions

During the 13th century Iceland would see its greatest social changes since the settlement period, which would move the Icelandic society closer towards continental Europe but would also make it look back to the Commonwealth of the past. In the *Íslendingasögur*, this constructed depiction of the past captures a sense of admiration and idealism for the heroic deeds and the freedom once enjoyed, but also the condemnation of the old pagan ways and those who adhered to them. Finally, these saga depictions show a need to explain otherwise unexplainable events, which is where the villainous characters frequently come into play. With a greater diversity in the kinds of villains depicted than in the more grounded contemporary sagas, the villains of the *Íslendingasögur* instigate conflict and threaten the status quo from both the outside and the inside of the local communities.

In this thesis I have attempted to study the view of gender in late medieval Iceland by analysing the depictions of villainous actions done by characters in the *Íslendingasögur*. This has been done by looking at three distinct forms of violence widely condemned and associated with villainy. While there have been previous separate studies of masculinity or femininity in the sagas and within Old Norse society, this thesis has been an attempt at a larger scale comparison between men and women's negative depictions. It has shown how the character's gender may change the evaluation of a negative action, and in turn how their gender presentation may be changed by the action. The results found can only point out the general tendencies shown in these sagas as well as in the specific instances referenced. This is because the individual *Íslendingasaga* is uniquely affected by its background and the author whose perspective of villainy may differ. Another aspect that has predictably proven influential to the depictions on villainy is the situational or narrative angle, and the relational or otherwise personal ties between the depicted saga characters and the saga authors who imagine them. This is for example visible in how certain male saga heroes are judged less harshly for acts of physical violence that would otherwise be condemned. In even more rare cases, this also includes the male protagonist's use of magic or whetting if he is otherwise able to make up for these actions with other feats.

The findings

Chapter 1 presented the literary action of whetting within the *Íslendingasögur*, and demonstrated the different ways it is used as a way of orchestrating violent actions done by others, including both the more extended type-scene of whetting as well as its less descriptive uses, and how this action is used by different character types representing different positions and genders within the *Íslendingasögur*. The act of whetting stands out as it is an external tool of influence that causes violence. It is not based on the whetter's own social standing or abilities and is therefore something even servile characters are shown to make use of. By opening the definition of the whetting action beyond the described type-scene to include actions done with the verbs *eggja*, *hvetja*, and *frýja*, it shows that male whetters are less rare than what is usually perceived. Both women and men of different social positions are shown to whet and are in turn given the blame for the ensuing events, while others are presented more neutrally. For female whetters, the most negative depictions of whetting are most frequently assigned to wives who are regarded as evil and careless and sometimes even beastly, who due to their own egoistical motivations or disregard for the lives of others send their husbands to their deaths. In these cases, unlike others that side with the whetting women, their sometimes-perceived role as protectors of honour is not brought up, and their lack of loyalty to the narratively 'right' side of the conflict becomes a matter of contempt. In the case of male whetters, the most negatively perceived whetters are able-bodied men who try to make other men fight in their stead, and this display of cowardice and inability to fulfil expectations of strength and vigour is here what makes them villainous and loathsome unless they can prove themselves in other ways. Whetting is most frequently presented negatively or neutrally. However, very rarely, it may be presented as something positive or simply necessary as a way of avenging a dishonour. In these cases, whetting is shown to be a necessary force when dealing with cowardice or effeminacy and is done either by a concerned mother or a man who proves himself active in combat. Whetting is only shown to fail when the men who are subjected to it prioritise peace over honour, or when they acknowledge their own inability, something which in the former's case can be seen as a noble thing, while the latter is pitied and dismissed.

The second chapter of the thesis has shown how magic violence is presented in the *Íslendingasögur*, and how the fear of this unknown danger is mirrored in the wicked way those who practice it are gendered and otherwise presented. Magical violence has

its unique negative association tied to the increasingly negative perception of pagan and dark magic in the 13th century looking back to the 11th century and further. This is also shown in the ways it is depicted in degenerate, sexualised, and dangerous ways, with magical violence being a source of many deaths. From a gendered perspective, magic engenders or possibly even degenders practitioners depending on them being men or women. For women, the more supernatural they are the more often they access a monstrous femininity or go beyond gender itself in the way of turning into proper beasts otherwise foreign from the *Íslendingasögur*. This effect in turn can make them more sexually imposing, appealing, threatening, or revolting, but the fascination remains. This also removes both their humanity and the traditional treatment befitting their gender, making them viable targets of brutal murders otherwise not shown to be done to women in the *Íslendingasögur*. In the case of men, they instead are more frequently regarded as cowardly, effeminate, and deviant, as they make use of degenerate supernatural methods. While the magical methods of the *níð*- associated *seiðr* magic is less mentioned within the *Íslendingasögur*, the male witches' cowardice and inability to fight men in a real manner condemns them and even makes them viable targets of shameful violence in the form of *klámhött* as is shown in a humorous and justifiable way within the narrative even when their form of magic is not directly violent and instead is used to aid the foe. The least negative forms of magic, while rarer than the alternative, is when female witches aid the protagonist male heroes. This is particularly the case when they cast protective spells or give them magically infused items to aid them in battle and on their journeys. Only female witches are shown in this more positive light, while male ones at best are shown in a middling to negative manner.

The third part of the thesis followed the final villainous action, that of physical violence, shown in the *Íslendingasögur*. As the great majority of the events depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* involve violence and the reactions to it, the distinction between good and bad physical violence becomes a question of intent and the framing of the one doing said action. As shown, the most negative forms of physical violence are the actions done with a sense of uncontrollable excess and cruelty, which go against the laws voiced in both the sagas themselves and the legal sources. The harm to the helpless such as harmless and defenceless women, children, and old men, sexual violence, and robbery of local societies done by rowdy men and *berserkir* from the outside world are consequently presented negatively, and only the attackers' deaths are shown to stop them. Undignified violence and torture are also depicted negatively, unless the target is

either a witch and thus guilty of their own crimes, or has previously done similar harm to the person doing said violence. While acceptable, positive, or even idealised violence is tied to it being justifiable or a display of strength following the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, this is also at times shown to be the case with female actors of physical violence. While they almost always are shown to fail at their goal at killing a man, they are still praised by the people in the story or the narrative, or otherwise deemed to be in the right for doing these things as a reaction, even if it is not as expected of them as with their male counterparts. These women can then be said to in some way cross the threshold into a more active masculine sphere in order to re-establish their honour, but at the same time their femininity still protects them from severe physical retribution, unlike their female witch counterparts. A distinction here is sexual or spousal violence. While these things are usually condemned, the ‘taming’ of a woman motif is occasionally presented as just, and the threat of rape can be downplayed or presented as comedy. This is particularly the case if it is done as revenge for a perceived offence done by the victim.

The patterns

With these finds from the previous chapters in mind and within the context of villainy and violence in the *Íslendingasögur*, certain patterns are made clear across the depictions of different actions. Acts of violence are regarded differently based on the circumstances and the way they are performed. Acts of violence done as a measured response towards someone else’s instigated violence are generally perceived more favourably. The same goes for acts of violence done with purpose to regain a sense of balance and to serve the local society and one’s family. On the other hand, the more villainous acts of violence are shown as instigated rather than responsive. They are driven by egoistic and self-serving reasons, are unbalanced, and not justified. They are uncontrollable and can be hidden which makes it both more despicable and more unpredictable. They may threaten the community and in the worst cases target vulnerable and undefendable individuals.

Women

Female characters are frequently judged harshly for their cold-heartedness and lack of loyalty. Despite these chastisements, however, these women are mainly shown to be safe from punishment from their villainous actions unless their transgressions and the danger they represent prove too severe for the local society. Female villainy in the *Íslendingasögur* is shown to primarily be centred around manipulation of men and the elements, disloyalty, and the ability to cause chaos in indirect and supernatural ways. This can be said to play into the societal fears and perceptions tied to women of the 13th-15th century, as well as that of the 10th-11th century, with women being shown to manipulate and create discord due to whims or double loyalties. This fear and in turn depiction of villainy increases in accordance with how othered the villainous woman is, both in magical and physical monstrosity. Her chaotic and uncontrollable otherness and cruelty if extensive enough overrules her gender and make her too dangerous to live, making her a viable target to kill. On the other side of the spectrum, when presenting as masculine she may be lauded for acts of physical violence that could be condemned and regarded as cowardly and punishable for men. Only in the explicit harming of other non-violent groups such as children and women are these women condemned, but still not necessarily punished.

A possible reading of these results then is that across these depictions of female villainy there is a prevailing sense of uncertainty, unreliability and a lack of control, and this manifests in several ways. In the case of whetting, it is shown by how the women may manipulate the man, as well as the uncertainty tied to the woman's double loyalties. In the case of women's magic abilities, this notion manifests in the unknown and hidden dangers a woman who knows many things may cause, and the inability to control or prevent it. Even in the case of women's physical violence, something that either is admired or falls short, the villainy is found when the woman goes beyond the expected limit by harming the weak, and with this becomes something monstrous. In these ways, the villainous woman may not only be an unknown Other living by the edge of society, but also an unaccountable and uncontrollable danger living within a man's own house.

Men

Masculine villainy, unlike feminine villainy, is less about otherness in a physical sense. For saga men, trollish size and strength can be both lauded and feared depending on the way the man in possession of it utilises it, similar to acts of physical violence. Instead,

male villainy appears to a greater extent than female villainy to be about not adhering to the norms and laws of the Old Norse society, and the way these are tied to the concepts of honour and hegemonic masculinity. This is shown in two contrasting ways. For one, the male villain can be presented as cowardly, weak, and treacherous. He is shown to need to depend on other men's prowess through trickery or whetting, or to debase himself with effeminising magical actions such as *seiðr*. While his appearance may not be considered effeminate, his perceived behaviour is not deemed sufficiently manly. These displays of male villainy can be said to share some traits with those of villainous women in the *Íslendingasögur* as they are not playing along the normative expectations. However, while the woman risks becoming something beyond feminine, something monstrous either figuratively or literally, the man's transgressions instead can lead him into becoming something less than a man, not fulfilling the expectations of the hegemonic masculinity. Even in the cases where their actions are not specifically regarded as effeminate or shameful, the antisocial actions still are befitting of a *níðingr*. Alternatively, men can incriminate themselves by surpassing the acceptable limits of this hegemonic masculinity. Here they surpass the ideals of strength, violence, and honour, and may act in self-serving and destructive ways. In this way they make themselves paradoxically too fitting of the societal ideal to be able to function properly within said society, instead creating conflict within said society or showing up as invaders from the outside who ultimately are slain for the betterment of the local community by the hero.

Villainy and gender

This study shows that gender is an important feature in the way villainy is interpreted and acts of violence are perceived in the *Íslendingasögur*. Socially transgressive expressions of gender and sometimes by extension sexuality, implicit or explicit in the text, are recurring features of villainous characters. This together with the villainous actions themselves are part of incriminating the character within the narrative. The society presented in the *Íslendingasögur* makes the villain's gender play a key part in how their actions are received, and whether they are villainous. However, this does not mean that villainy is presented negatively in predictable ways throughout the source material, and there are enough differentiations both among individual sagas, as well as between the different categories of actions, as shown in the thesis. This is partly due to the diversity found within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus and the different anonymous saga

authors, as well as these sagas being written within a timespan of early 13th century to the 15th century in which great societal changes were introduced. However, studying the sagas as individual saga authors' personal perspective would have a greater effect on how these virtues and morals, and their opposites with villainy would be presented. There does not appear to be a common strict chronological development in the perspective of villains, even if some of the later sagas appear to have been more inspired by the contemporary continental literature.

The different depictions of villainy based on gender also suggest that there is a distinct separation between the female and male gender in the *Íslendingasögur*. Like men, women may be lauded for displaying positive traits associated with masculinity, such as being honourable or courageous, or performing physical feats. However, there is a distinct difference in the reactions to men and women found lacking when it comes to these traits. Men perceived as dishonourable, cowardly, weak, or acting in gender transgressive ways are portrayed negatively, while women are not subjected to the same expectations. Women who are capable of performing feats worthy of a man are admired, but these exceptional cases are limited and situational, and they are not representative of the average women's abilities. These exceptional women are not shown to become men, nor to become truly equal in rights and abilities. They may thus be judged more lightly for offensive and violent actions such as whetting and physical attacks, and the latter are frequently shown to fail. Characters may act in gender transgressive ways, but their gender still ultimately helps determine the perception of the character and their actions. Here men and women are shown to be measured against a different baseline, and there is no continuum by which an exceptional, strong woman might become fully male, nor a man truly a woman. These differences go against the theory of the *Íslendingasögur* depicting a one-sex model society, such as the model suggested by Carol Clover. This perception found in the *Íslendingasögur* also differ from certain historical and archaeological interpretations arguing for magic practitioners possessing a 'third gender.' The male witch may be presented as a cowardly *níðingr* for his actions, but he is still referred to as a man, and his descriptions may not be gendered. However, this more binary view may stem from the sagas' later origins, and does not rule out the possibility of a more fluid past.

With more time, this project could have benefitted from widening its scope into including more insight into other saga genres such as the *samtiðarsögur* and the *konungasögur*. These more contemporary sources would have given a better notion of

the contemporary perspective for further comparison. Likewise, other continental medieval sources could have given insight into possible exceptionalisms found in the gendered villainy of the sagas, and how much of the depictions shown bear resemblance to these continental stories. As it stands, this thesis serves as a look into the constructed past of the 13th century Icelanders according to the surviving *Íslendingasögur*, and the ways the people who threatened their ancestors were perceived negatively depending on their gender.

References

Primary Sources

- Ari Þórgilsson. 'Íslendingabók.' In *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag, 1968.
- Austfirðinga Sögur*. Edited by Jón Jóhannesson. Íslensk Fornrit vol. 11. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1950.
- Brennu-Njáls saga*. Edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslensk fornrit vol. 12, Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1954.
- Cleasby, Richard, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary: Based on the Ms. Collections of the Late Richard Cleasby*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874.
- Eddadigte*. Nordisk Filologi. Edited by Jón Helgason. 3 ed. Vol. 3, Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 1971.
- Egils saga*. Edited by Sigurður Nordal. Íslensk fornrit vol. 2. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1933.
- Eyrbyggja Saga*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. Íslensk Fornrit, vol. 4. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935.
- Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Edited by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols. Reykjavík: *Forni*, 1943-4.
- Fritzner, Johan. *Ordbog over Det Gamle Norske Sprog*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1867.
- Frostatingslova*. Edited by Jørn Sandnes and Jan Ragnar Hagland, Oslo: Samlaget, 1994.
- Gulatingsslovi*. Edited by Knut Robberstad and Carsten Lien. 4 ed. Oslo: Samlaget, 1981.
- Soga om Gisle Sursson*. Edited and translated by Jan Ragnar Hagland, Oslo: Samlaget, 1990.
- Harðar saga. Bárðar Saga, Þorskfirðinga Saga, Flóamanna Saga*. Edited by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. Íslensk Fornrit, vol. 13, Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1991.
- Hervarars ok Heiðreks Konungs*. Edited by N. M. Petersen. Copenhagen: Samfundet, 1847.
- Historia Norwegie*. Edited by Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006.
- Hávamál*. Edited by Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads forlag, 1924.
- Jørgensen, Jon Gunnar, and Jan Ragnar Hagland, eds. *Íslendingesagaene. Samtlige sagaer og førtini tættar*. Edited by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, Jan Ragnar Hagland, Viðar Hreinsson. Reykjavík: Saga Forlag, 2014.
- Kjalnesinga saga*. Edited by Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslensk Fornrit vol. 14, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959.
- Konungs Skuggsiá*. Norrøne Tekster. Edited by Ludvig Holm-Olsen. 2 ed. Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institut, 1983.
- The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*. Edited and translated by Frederick L. Attenborough. New York: Russell & Russell, 1922.
- Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás, with Material from Other Manuscripts*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980.
- Laxdæla saga*. Edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslensk Fornrit vol. 5. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934.

- Ljósvetninga saga*. Edited by Björn Sigfússon. Íslenzk Fornrit vol. 10. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940.
- ‘The Older Gulathing Law.’ Edited and Translated by Erik Simensen. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Norges Gamle Love Indtil 1387*. Edited by Rudolph Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch, vol 1-3. Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn, 1846-1848.
- Norges Gamle Love Indtil 1387*. Edited by Gustav Storm, vol. 4. Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn, 1885.
- Norges Gamle Love Indtil 1387*. Edited by Gustav Storm and Ebbe Hertzberg, vol. 5. Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn, 1895.
- Schulman, Jana K., ed. *Jónsbók: The Laws of Later Iceland; the Icelandic Text According to MS AM 351 Fol. Skálholtsbók Eldri*. Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2010.
- Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*. Edited by Finnur Jónsson. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1966.
- ‘Soga um Sigmund Bresteson.’ Edited and Translated by Jørg Reitan. Oslo: Samlaget, 1908.
- Sturlunga saga*. Edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn, and Magnús Jónsson, eds. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946.
- Svenska medeltids-postillor*. Edited by G. E. Klemming, 2 vols. Stockholm: Kungliga Boktryckeriet, 1880.
- Vatnsdæla saga*. Edited by Einar Ól Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit vol. 8. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1958.
- Vestfirðinga sögur*, edited by Björn K. Þórólfsson. Íslenzk fornrit vol. 6. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1943.
- Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*. 5 vols. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997.
- Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid*. 2 vols. Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852.
- , ed. *Grágás: Efter Det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 Fol. Staðarhólsbók*. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879.

Secondary Sources

- Aalto, Sirpa. ‘Neighbour or Enemy at the Gates? Construction of Space between the Sámi and the Norwegians in the Sagas.’ Paper presented at the The Sixteenth International Saga Conference Sagas and Space, 2015.
- Aalto, Sirpa, and Veli-Pekka Lehtola. ‘The Sami Representations Reflecting the Multi-Ethnic North of the Saga Literature.’ *Journal of Northern Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 7-30.
- Acker, Paul, and Carolyne Larrington, eds. *Revisiting the Poetic Edda*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013.
- Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. ‘Hvað Er Seiðskratti?’ *Vísindavefurinn*, February 12, 2006, <http://visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=5565>.
- . ‘The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature.’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007): 277-303.

- , “‘How Do You Know If It Is Love or Lust?’” on Gender, Status, and Violence in Old Norse Literature.’ *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, no. 2 (2016): 189-209.
- . ‘Behind the Cloak, between the Lines: Trolls and the Symbolism of Their Clothing in Old Norse Tradition.’ *European journal of Scandinavian studies* 47, no. 2 (2017): 327-50.
- Adams, Anthony. “‘He Took a Stone Away.’” Castration and Cruelty in the Old Norse Sturlunga Saga.’ *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, edited by Larissa Tracy, 188-209. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2013.
- Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, ‘Kvinner og "krigsmenn." Kjønnenes stilling i det islandske samfunnet på 1100- og 1200-tallet’ (Master Thesis, University of Bergen, 1990).
- . *Property and Virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200-1600*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010.
- Ahola, Joonas. ‘Outlawry in the Icelandic Family Sagas.’ Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Helsinki, 2014.
- Almqvist, Bo. 2000. ‘I marginalen till Sejd.’ In *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning*, edited by Gertrud Gidlund, 237–71. Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag, 2000.
- Allen, Richard F. *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971.
- Amory, Frederic. ‘Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 106 (1991): 57-84.
- Anderson, Carolyn. ‘No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal's Saga.’ *Philological Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2002): 421-40.
- Anderson, Sarah M., and Karen Swenson, eds. *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Andersson, Theodore M. *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964.
- . *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- . ‘Some Ambiguities in Gísla Saga: A Balance Sheet.’ *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1968): 7-42.
- . ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas.’ *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (1970): 575-93.
- . ‘The Thief in Beowulf.’ *Speculum* 59, no. 3 (1984): 493-508.
- . *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*. Ithaca, NY: London: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Andersson, Theodore M., and William Ian Miller. *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga Saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- Ármann Jakobsson. ‘Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002): 145-60.
- . ‘Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders.’ *Saga-Book* 27 (2003): 5-24.
- . ‘The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders.’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 3 (2005): 297-325.
- . ‘Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga.’ *Viator* 38 (2007): 191-215.
- . ‘Two Wise Women and Their Young Apprentice: A Miscarried Magic Class.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 122 (2007): 43-57.
- . ‘The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi in Medieval Iceland.’ *Saga-book* 32 (2008): 39-68.

- . ‘“Egils Saga” and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 80, no. 1 (2008): 1-18.
- . ‘The Impetuousness of Þráinn Sigfússon: Leadership, Virtue and Villainy in Njáls Saga.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 124 (2009): 53-67.
- . ‘Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in “Egils Saga”.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 83, no. 1 (2011): 29-44.
- . ‘Óðinn as Mother.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 126 (2011): 5-16.
- . ‘The Big Black Cats of Vatnsdalr and Other Trolls.’ In *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, edited by Luciana Mabel Cordo Russo and Santiago Francisco Barreiro, 43-51. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021.
- . ‘Watch out for the Skin Deep: Medieval Icelandic Transformations.’ *Arts* 12, no. 1 (2023).
- Ármann Jakobsson, and M. Mayburd, eds. *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Ármann Jakobsson, and Torfi Tulinius, eds. *Miðaldabörn*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005.
- Arnold, Martin. ‘Hvat Er Troll Nema Pat? The Cultural History of the Troll.’ *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey, 111-155. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005): 111.
- Arthur, Susanne M. ‘The Devil in Disguise? Scribal Remarks on Valgarðr Inn Grái in Njáls Saga.’ *Leeds Studies in English* 43 (2012): 1-7.
- Ashby, Steven P. ‘What Really Caused the Viking Age? The Social Content of Raiding and Exploration.’ *Archaeological Dialogues* 22, no. 1 (2015): 89-106.
- Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.’ *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125-33.
- Auður Magnúsdóttir. ‘Kvinnor i fejd. Åra, kön och konflikt i det nordiska medeltidssamhället.’ In *Feider og fred i nordisk middelalder*, edited by Erik Opsahl, 73-84. Oslo: Unipub, 2007.
- Auður Magnúsdóttir. ‘Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120-1400.’ *Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg*, vol. 29, Gothenburg: Historiska institutionen i Göteborg, 2001.
- Auður Magnúsdóttir, ‘Förövare och offer. Kvinnor, män och våld i det medeltida Island.’ In *Medeltidens genus. Kvinnors och mäns roller inom kultur, rätt och samhälle: norden och Europa ca 300-1500*, edited by Auður Magnúsdóttir and Lars Hermanson, 111-44. Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2016.
- Auerbach, Loren. ‘Female Experience and Authorial Intention in “Laxdoela Saga”.’ *Saga Book* 25, no. 1 (1998): 30-52.
- Baechele, Sarah, Carissa M Harris, and Elizaveta Strakhov, eds. *Rape Culture and Female Resistance in Late Medieval Literature*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022.
- Bagerius, Henric. ‘Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk Identitet på det senmedeltida Island.’ PhD thesis, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2009.
- . ‘Romance and Violence.’ *Mirator* 14, no. 2 (2013): 79-96.
- Bagge, Sverre. *En kort introduksjon til Snorre Sturlason: historiker og dikter*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2019.
- . *The Political Thought of 'the King's Mirror'*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1987.

- Bandlien, Bjørn. *Man or Monster?: Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society*. Oslo: Unipub, 2005.
- . *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005.
- . ‘Marginality.’ In *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 253-64. London: Routledge, 2017.
- . ‘Kastrering og kongemakt.’ *Collegium Medievale* 32, no. 2 (2019).
- . ‘History.’ In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 303-17. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Barracough, Eleanor Rosamund. ‘Transforming the Trolls: The Metamorphosis of the Troll-Woman in Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss.’ *Quaestio Insularis*. 9 (2008): 52-62.
- Barreiro, Santiago, and Luciana Cordo Russo, eds. *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
- Bartlett, Robert. *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- Bartusik, Grzegorz. ‘Sarð hann yör Þá eigi agði? Humour in the Sneglu-Halla Þátr.’ *Histories of Laughter and Laughter in History: HistoRisus* (2016): 119-38.
- Batten, Caroline R. ‘Strengði hon elfi: Female Reactions to Male Violence in Eddic Heroic Poetry.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 3 (2019): 289-322.
- . ‘Dark Riders: Disease, Sexual Violence, and Gender Performance in the Old English Mære and Old Norse Mara.’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120, no. 3 (2021): 352-80.
- Beck, Sigríður. ‘I kungens fránvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271–1387.’ PhD thesis, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2011.
- Bek-Pedersen, Karen. ‘Fate and Weaving: Justification of a Metaphor.’ In *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009): 23-39.
- Bell, Jacob. ‘Ok Lá þar at Óvilja Hennar: A Reconsideration of Sexual Violence in the Old Norse World.’ *Journal of Family History* 48, no. 1 (2021): 3-29.
- Bennett, Lisa. “‘The Most Important of Events’: The ‘Burning-in’ Motif as a Site of Cultural Memory in Icelandic Sagas.” *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 3 (2007): 69-86.
- Betancourt, Roland. *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Bjarni Einarsson. *To Skjaldesagaer*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976.
- Blaney, Benjamin. ‘The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1982): 279-94.
- Bliksrud, Hilde A. ‘Mannen som mor: kjønnsverskridelse som motiv i Flóamanna saga.’ MA Thesis, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2008.
- Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Borovsky, Zoe. “‘En hon er blandin mjök.’ Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature.’ In *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 1-14. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Bourns, Timothy. ‘Meat and Taboo in Medieval Scandinavian Law and Literature.’ *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 61-80.
- Boyer, Régis. ‘Paganism and Literature: The So-Called ‘Pagan Survivals’ in the Samtíðarsögur.’ *Gripla* 1 (1975): 135-67.

- Bragg, Lois. 'Disfigurement, Disability, and Dis-Integration in Sturlunga Saga.' *alvissmál* 4 (1994): 15-32.
- Bredsdorff, Thomas. *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001.
- Bullitta, Dario and Kirsten Wolf, eds. *Saints and Their Legacies in Medieval Iceland*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021.
- Burke, Peter. *Varieties of Cultural History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Milton Park: Routledge, 1990.
- Byock, Jesse L. *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- . 'The Age of the Sturlungs.' In *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: A Symposium*, edited by Elisabeth Vestergaard, 27-42. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986.
- . *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- . *Viking Age Iceland*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Bø, Ragnhild M., and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, eds. *The Cult of Saints in Nidaros Archbishopric: Manuscripts, Miracles, Objects*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022.
- Callow, Chris. 'Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society.' In *Children, Childhood and Society*, edited by Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd, 45-55. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007.
- Ciklamini, Marlene. 'The Literary Mold of the *Hólmgöngumaðr*.' *Scandinavian Studies* 37, no. 2 (1965): 117-38.
- . 'Biographical Reflections in "Íslendinga Saga". A Mirror of Personal Values.' *Scandinavian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1983): 205-21.
- Clark, David. 'Revisiting' *Gísla Saga*: Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past.' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 4 (2007): 492-515.
- . *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Clover, Carol J. 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.' *Representations*, no. 44 (1993): 1-28.
- . 'Hildigunnr's Lament.' In *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology. A Collection of Essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 15-54. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Cochrane, Jamie. ' "...Svá slægr maðr sem þú ert kallaðr": Mörðr Valgarðsson, a Monster and His Critics.' In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 116-41. Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses).' In *Monster Theory*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 3-25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- . *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Cole, Richard. 'Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the *Blámaðr*.' *Saga Book-Viking Society for Northern Research* 40 (2015): 21-40.
- Connell, R.W. 'Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.' (1987).
- . *The Men and the Boys*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California, 1995.

- . ‘Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.’ *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-59.
- Conroy, Patricia. ‘Laxdæla Saga and Eiríks Saga Rauða: Narrative Structure.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 95 (1980): 116-25.
- Cook, Robert. ‘Women and Men in Laxdæla Saga.’ *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992).
- . ‘Gunnarr and Hallgerðr: A Failed Romance.’ In *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, edited by Johanna Wolf and Kirsten Denzin, 5-32. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.’ *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-67.
- Culbert, Taylor. ‘The Construction of the ‘Gísla Saga’.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1959): 151-65.
- Dale, Roderick. *The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr*. London: Routledge, 2022.
- Díaz-Vera, Javier E, and Teodoro Manrique Antón. ‘Better Shamed before One Than Shamed before All: Shaping Shame in Old English and Old Norse Texts.’ In *Metaphor and Metonymy Across Time and Cultures: Perspectives on the Sociohistorical Linguistics of Figurative Language*, ed. Javier E. Díaz-Vera, 225-64. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Dillmann, François-Xavier. ‘Seiður og shamanismi í Íslendingasögum.’ *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1993): 20-33.
- . *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.
- Dronke, Ursula. *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981.
- . ‘Narrative Insight in Laxdæla Saga.’ In *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, edited by John Tucker, 206-225. New York and London: Garland, 1989.
- Durrenberger, E Paul, and Jonathan Wilcox. ‘Humor as a Guide to Social Change: Bandamanna Saga and Heroic Values.’ In *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gísli Pálsson, 111-24. London: Hisarlik, 1992.
- Einar Ól Sveinsson. *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, translated by Jóhann S. Hannesson. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953.
- . *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method*. Text Series (Viking Society for Northern Research). Vol. 3, London: University College, 1958.
- . *Njáls Saga: Kunstverket*. Translated by Ludvig Holm-Olsen. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1959.
- . *Njáls saga: a literary masterpiece*. Edited and translated by Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.
- Ellis, Caitlin. ‘Remembering the Vikings: Violence, Institutional Memory and the Instruments of History.’ *History Compass* 19, no. 4 (2021): 1–15.
- Elortza Larrea, Beñat. *Polity Consolidation and Military Transformation in Medieval Scandinavia: A European Perspective, C.1035–1320*. Leiden: Brill, 2023.
- Eriksen, Marianne Hem. ‘Don’t All Mothers Love Their Children? Deposited Infants as Animate Objects in the Scandinavian Iron Age.’ *World Archaeology* 49, no. 3 (2017): 338-56.

- Esmark, Kim, Lars Hermanson, Hans Jacob Orning, and Helle Vogt. *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia*. Vol. 16, Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Evans, Gareth Lloyd. *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- . ‘Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders.’ In *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock, 59-76. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020.
- Ewing, Thor. “‘Í litklæðum’—Coloured Clothes in Medieval Scandinavian Literature and Archaeology.’ Paper presented at the Thirteenth Annual International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 2006.
- Falk, Oren. ‘Did Rannveig Change Her Mind? Resolve and Violence in Þorsteins Þáttur Stangarhogg.’ *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005): 15-42.
- . *Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland: This Spattered Isle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Fechner-Smarsly, Thomas. *Krisenliteratur: Zur Rhetorizität Und Ambivalenz in Der Isländischen Sagaliteratur*. Bern: P. Lang, 1996.
- Finlay, Alison. ‘Níð, Adultery and Feud in Bjarnar Saga Hítðelakappa.’ *Saga Book* 23, no. 3 (1991): 158-78.
- Firth, Hugh. ‘Coercion, Vengeance, Feud and Accommodation: Homicide in Medieval Iceland.’ *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 2 (2012): 139-75.
- Fleck, Jere. ‘The Knowledge-Criterion in the Grímnismál: The Case against Shamanism.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 86 (1971): 49-65.
- . ‘Óðinn’s Self-Sacrifice—a New Interpretation: I: The Ritual Inversion.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 43, no. 2 (1971): 119-42.
- Foote, Peter. ‘Icelandic Historians and the Swedish Image: Comments on Snorri and His Precursors.’ In *Snorre Sturlasson och de isländska källorna till sveriges historia. Fyra föreläsningar från ett symposium i Stockholm hösten 1988*, edited by Göran Dahlbäck, 9-42. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1993.
- Frank, Roberta. ‘Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle.’ *The English Historical Review* 99, no. 391 (1984): 332-43.
- Frauman, Ali. “‘Um ǫll níðingsverk þín’: Femininity and Cowardice in the Hvot Episodes.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 3 (2019): 269-88.
- Fulk, Robert D. ‘The Moral System of Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða.’ *Saga-Book* 22 (1986): 1-32.
- Gade, Kari Ellen. ‘Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature.’ *Scandinavian Studies* (1986): 124-41.
- . ‘1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gorr.’ *Gripla* 9 (1995): 115-32.
- Gallo, Lorenzo Lozzi. ‘The Giantess as Foster-Mother in Old Norse Literature.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 78, no. 1 (2006): 1-20.
- Gilmore, David D., ed. *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987.
- . ‘Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor.’ In *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, edited by David D. Gilmore, 2-21. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987.
- Gísli Sigurðsson. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. Translated by Nicholas Jones. Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature. Cambridge, MA: Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, 2004.
- Glass, Leonard L. ‘Man’s Man/Ladies’ Man: Motifs of Hypermasculinity.’ *Psychiatry* 47, no. 3 (1984): 260-78.
- Glauser, Jürg. ‘Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and *þættir* as the Literary Rep-

- resentation of a New Social Space.’ In *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Edited by Margaret Clunies Ross, 203–20. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Glauser, Jürg, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, eds. *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Glendinning, Robert James. ‘Saints, Sinners, and the Age of the Sturlungs: Two Dreams from ‘Íslendinga Saga’.’ *Scandinavian studies* 38, no. 2 (1966): 83-97.
- Goodich, Michael, ed. *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Grambo, Ronald. ‘Unmanliness and Seiðr: Problems Concerning the Change of Sex.’ In *Shamanism Past and Present: Part 1*, edited by Mihály Hoppály and Otto von Sadvoszky, 103-13. Budapest: Ethnographic Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1989.
- Gravdal, Kathryn. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Grosskopf, Chelsea. ‘Fear and Loathing in Eyrbyggja Saga: Combat Trauma in Medieval Iceland.’ In *Combat Stress in Pre-Modern Europe*, edited by Owen Rees, Kathryn Hurlock and Jason Crowley, 151-69. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- Gräslund, Anne-Sofie. ‘Kristnandet ur ett kvinnoperspektiv.’ In *Kristnandet i Sverige. Gamla källor och nya perspektiv*, edited by Bertil Nilsson, 313-34. Uppsala: Lunne böcker, 1996.
- Gunnar Karlsson. ‘Goðar og bændur.’ *Saga Book* 10 (1972): 7-8.
- Göransson, Eva-Marie Y. ‘Bilder av kvinnor och kvinnlighet: genus och kroppsspråk under övergången till kristendomen’ PhD Thesis, Stockholm University, 1999.
- Hadley, Dawn. ‘Viking Raids and Conquest.’ *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500–c. 1100*, edited by Pauline Stafford, 193-211. New Jersey: Blackwell, 2009.
- . *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Hagen, Rune Blix. ‘Witchcraft and Ethnicity: A Critical Perspective on Sami Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Northern Norway.’ *Writing Witch-Hunt Histories. Challenging the Paradigm*, edited by Marko Nenonen and Raisa Maria Toivo, 141-66. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014.
- . ‘“I Hurl the Spirits of Gandul”. Pleasure, Jealousy, and Magic: The Witchcraft Trial of Ragnhild Tregagaas in 1325.’ In *Myths and Magic in the Medieval Far North: Realities and Representations of a Region on the Edge of Europe*, edited by Stefan Figenschow, Richard Holt and Miriam Tveit, 143-55, Turnhout: Brepols, 2020.
- . ‘Seventeenth Century Persecution of Sorcery and Witches in the High North.’ *The Protracted Reformation in the North*, edited by Sigrun Høgetveit Berg, Rognald Heiseldal Bergesen and Roald Ernst Kristiansen, 62-87. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Hagland, Jan Ragnar. ‘The Troll and Old Norwegian-Icelandic Law.’ In *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition*, edited by Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, 175-87. Turnhout: Brepols, 2018.
- Hahn, Daniela. ‘Expanding the Repertoire. Theft as a Means of Whetting in the Sagas of Icelanders.’ In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 144-71. Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.

- Hahn, Daniela, and Andreas Schmidt, eds. *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*. Munich: Utzverlag, 2017.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Hall, Stefan Thomas. 'Last Laughs: Torture in Medieval Icelandic Literature.' *Enarratio* 16 (2009): 97-111.
- Hallberg, Peter. *The Icelandic Saga*. Translated by Paul Schach. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.
- . 'Hrafnkell Freysgoði the 'New Man'—a Phantom Problem.' *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1975): 442-47.
- Hammond, Dorothy. 'Magic: A Problem in Semantics.' *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970): 1349-56.
- Harney, Eileen Marie. 'The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature', PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 2008.
- Harper, Elizabeth. 'Teaching the Potiphar's Wife Motif in Marie De France's Lanval.' In *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 128-37.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 'Northern Barbarians: Icelandic Canons of Civilisation.' *Gripla* 20 (2009): 109-36.
- Haugen, Per Kristian and Lars Nygård. '..... Alder held meg, men ungdom deg.....' *Gamle i saga og på folkemunne*. Oslo: Norsk gerontologisk institutt, 1984.
- Hawes, Janice. 'The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider.' *Scandinavian Studies* 80, no. 1 (2008): 19-50.
- Hedenstierna-Jonson, Charlotte. 'Warrior Identities in Viking-Age Scandinavia.' In *Vikings across Boundaries*, Vikings Across Boundaries, edited by Hanne Lovise Aannestad, Unn Pedersen, Marianne Moen, Elise Naumann, Heidi Lund Berg, 179-94. Vol. 2 *Viking-Age Transformations*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Heide, Eldar. 'Kvinner som gjer menn til kvinner i Laxdæla Saga.' *Nordlit: Tidsskrift i litteratur og kultur* 5, no. 1 (2001): 79-96.
- Heinemann, Fredrik J. 'Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða' and Type-Scene Analysis.' *Scandinavian studies* 46, no. 2 (1974): 102-19.
- . 'Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða': The Old Problem with the New Man.' *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1975): 448-52.
- Heiniger, Anna Katharina. 'On the Threshold: The Liminality of Doorways.' *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and M. Mayburd, 109-29. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Helgi Þorláksson. 'Virtir menn og vel metnir.' In *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*, edited by Gunnar Karlsson, Helgi Þorláksson, Sólborg Una Pálsdóttir, Sverrir Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius, 15-22. Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001.
- Helle, Knut. 'Hvor står den historiske sagakritikken i dag?' *Collegium medievale* 24 (2011): 50-86.
- Heller, Rolf. *Die Literarische Darstellung Der Frau in Den Isländersagas. Saga: Untersuchungen Zur Nordischen Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*. Vol. 2, Halle: Niemeyer, 1958.
- Heng, Geraldine. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Hermann, Pernille. 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature.' *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 3 (2009): 287-308.
- . 'The Horror of Vinland: Topographies and Otherness in the Vinland Sagas.' *Scandinavian Studies* 93, no. 1 (2021): 1-22.

- Hermanson, Lars, and Auður Magnúsdóttir. *Medeltidens genus. Kvinnors och mäns roller inom kultur, rätt och samhälle: Norden och Europa ca 300-1500*. Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2016.
- Hertzberg, Ebbe. 'Spuren Von Konträrsexualität Bei Den Alten Skandinaviern.' *Jahrbuch Für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung Der Homosexualität*, 4 (1902): 244-63.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 'Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral Systems.' *Man* 15, no. 2 (1980): 339-51.
- Heß, Cordelia, and Jonathan Adams, eds. *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Holm, Poul. 'Between Apathy and Antipathy: The Vikings in Irish and Scandinavian History.' *Peritia* 8 (1994): 151-69.
- Holtmark, Anne. 'Kvinneov.' In *Kulturhistoriskt leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid* edited by Finn Hødnebo, 574-76. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1964.
- Hultkrantz, Åke. 'Scandinavian and Saami Religious Relationships: Continuities and Discontinuities in the Academic Debate.' In *Kontinuitäten Und Brüche in Der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift Für Anders Hultgård Zu Seinem 65. Geburtsdag*, edited by M. Stausberg, 412-23. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.
- Høyersten, Jon Geir. 'Berserkene—hva gikk det av dem?'. *Tidsskrift for den norske legeförening* 24, no. 24 (2004): 3247-50.
- Itnyre, Cathy Jorgensen. 'The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons.' In *Medieval Family Roles*, edited by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, 173-96. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Jesch, Judith. *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991.
- . 'Women and Identities.' In *Kvinne i vikingetid. Vikingatidens Kvinnor*, edited by Nancy L. Coleman and Nanna Løkka, 269-86. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014.
- Jochens, Jenny. 'Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature.' *Scandinavian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1986): 142-76.
- . 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?'. *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17 (1986): 35-50.
- . 'The Female Inciter in the Kings' Sagas.' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987): 100-19.
- . 'Old Norse Magic and Gender: Þáttur Þorvalds ens víðförla.' *Scandinavian Studies* 63, no. 3 (1991): 305-17.
- . 'Gender Symmetry in Law?: The Case of Medieval Iceland.' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 108 (1993): 46-67.
- . *Women in Old Norse Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- . *Old Norse Images of Women*. Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- . 'Old Norse Motherhood.' In *Medieval Mothering*, edited by John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, 201-22. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- . 'Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion through Arbitration in 1000.' *Speculum* 74, no. 3 (1999): 621-55.
- . 'Race and Ethnicity in the Old Norse World.' *Viator* 30 (1999): 79-104.
- . 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 2: Gender Relations.' In *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, edited by Russell Gilbert Poole, 309-32. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

- . ‘Vikings Westward to Vinland: The Problem of Women.’ In *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 129-58. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. ‘Hygginn ok forsjál. Wisdom and Women's Counsel in Hrólfs Saga Gautrekssonar.’ In *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, edited by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, 69-84. London: University College London, 2010.
- . ‘From Heroic Legend to “Medieval Screwball Comedy”? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative.’ In *The Origin and Development of the Fornaldarsögur*, edited by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson, 229-49. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012.
- . *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- . *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Johansen, Jan Geir. ‘The Hero of’ Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 67, no. 3 (1995): 265-86.
- Jolly, Karen. ‘Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices.’ In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 3: The Middle Ages*, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, 1-72. London: Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Jón Viðar Sigurðsson. *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*. The Viking Collection. Vol. 12, Odense: Odense University Press, 1999.
- . ‘Becoming ‘Old’, Ageism and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland C. 900–1300.’ In *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, 227-42. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- . *Den vennlige vikingen. Vennskapets makt i Norge og på Island Ca. 900-1300*. Oslo: Pax, 2010.
- . *Det norrøne samfunnet. Vikingen, kongen, erkebiskopen og bonden*. Oslo: Pax, 2008.
- . *Viking Friendship: The Social Bond in Iceland and Norway, C. 900-1300*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2017.
- Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, and Henrik Vigh. ‘Who Is the Enemy? Multipolar Micropolitics.’ In *Medieval and Modern Civil Wars: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Hans Jacob Orning, 34-61. Leiden: Brill, 2021.
- Jónas Kristjánsson. ‘Tólf álna garn.’ In *Festskrift til Ludvig Holm-Olsen på hans 70-årsdag den 9. juni 1984*, edited by Einar Lundebj and Bjarne Fidjestøl, 207–14. Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1984.
- . *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*. Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988.
- Jørgensen, Jon Gunnar. ‘Code of Honour under Debate in Two Icelandic Sagas.’ In *Literature and Honour*, edited by Aasta Marie Björvand Björkøy and Thorstein Norheim, 37-56. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017.
- Kalinke, Marianne. *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- . ‘Clári Saga, Hrólfs Saga Gautrekssonar, and the Evolution of Icelandic Romance.’ In *Riddarasögur. The Translation of European Court Culture in Medieval Scandinavia* edited by Karl G. Johansson, Else Mundal, 273-92. Oslo: Novus, 2014.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.

- . ‘Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 62, no. 2 (1990): 141-62.
- . ‘Servitude and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland.’ In *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gísli Pálsson, 289-304. London: Hisarlik Press, 1992.
- . *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press:, 2003.
- . *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo, and Katherine E Pierpont. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 4 ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. 2 ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Kinck, Hans E. *Sagaenes ånd og skikkelser*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1951.
- Kjellström, Anna. ‘Domestic Violence in the Middle Ages.’ In *From Ephesos to Dalecarlia. Thoughts on Body, Space and Time in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Cecilia von Heijne, Kjellström Anna, Elisabet Regner and Laila Åhfeldt Kitzler, 145-160, Stockholm: Statens historiska museum, 2009.
- Korecká, Lucie. *Wizards and Words: The Old Norse Vocabulary of Magic in a Cultural Context*. Munich: Utzverlag, 2019.
- Krag, Claus. *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga. En studie i historiske kilder*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1991.
- Kress, Helga. ‘Manndom og Misogyni: Noen Refleksjoner Omkring Kvinnesynet I Njáls Saga.’ *Gardar* 10 (1976): 35-51.
- . ‘Ekki höfum vér kvennaskap. Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu.’ In *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. Júlí 1977*, edited by Einar G. Petursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, 293-313, 2 vols. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977.
- . ‘Meget samstættet má det tykkast deg. Om kvinneopprör og genretvang i sagaen om Laksdölene.’ *Historisk tidsskrift* (1980).
- . *Máttugar Meyjar: Íslensk Fornbókmenntasaga*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993.
- . ‘Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature.’ *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 81-92. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- . ‘Saga mín er sönn en smá: Um ævikvæði kvenna.’ *Són* 6, 2008.
- . ‘The Culture of the Grotesque in Old Icelandic Literature: The Saga of the Sworn Brothers.’ *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 26 (2019).
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Kristján Kristjánsson. ‘Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's Megalopsychia.’ *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1, no. 4 (1998): 397-422.
- Kroesen, Riti. ‘Ambiguity in the Relationship between Heroes and Giants.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111 (1996): 57-71.
- Kværness, Gunhild. *Blote kan ein gjere om det berre skjer i løynd. Kristenrettane i Gulatingslova og Grágás og forholdet mellom dei*. Oslo: Noregs forskningsråd, 1996.
- Langeslag, P. S. ‘The Dream Women of ‘Gísla Saga’.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 1 (2009): 47-72.

- Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Larrington, Carolyne. *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature*. York: York Medieval Press, 2015.
- Lassen, Annette. *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003.
- Lavender, Philip. 'Whatever Happened to Illuga Saga Gríðarfóstra? Origin, Transmission and Reception of a Fornaldarsaga.' Phd Thesis. Department of Nordic Research, University of Copenhagen, 2014.
- Lawing, Sean. 'Victims of Maiming in Sturlunga Saga: Worse Off Living Than Dead?'. *Mirator* 20, no. 2 (2021): 54-72.
- Lees, Clare A, Thelma S. Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara, eds. *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Lewis-Simpson, Shannon, ed. *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Lindow, John. *Trolls: An Unnatural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014.
- Livesay, Jennifer. 'Women and Narrative Structure in 'Eyrbyggja Saga'.' *Folklore Forum* 21, no. 2 (1988): 181-93.
- Ljungqvist, Fredrik Charpentier. 'Rape in the Icelandic Sagas: An Insight in the Perceptions About Sexual Assaults on Women in the Old Norse World.' *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 4 (2015): 431-47.
- Louis-Jensen, Jonna. 'A Good Day's Work: Laxdæla Saga, Ch. 49.' *North-Western Language Evolution* 21-22, no. 1 (1993): 267-81.
- Lönnroth, Lars. 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas.' *Scandinavian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1969): 1-29.
- . *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Magnus Magnusson, and Hermann Palsson, eds. and trans. *Njal's Saga*, London: Penguin, 1960.
- Males, Mikael. 'Den Avhängiga: kvinnoförakt som förutsättning för ett enda genus på 1200-talets Island?'. *Collegium medievale* 19 (2006): 65-82.
- Maraschi, Andrea. 'Taboo or Magic Practice?: Cannibalism as Identity Marker for Giants and Human Heroes in Medieval Iceland.' *Parergon* 37, no. 1 (2020): 1-25.
- Marold, Edith. 'Mansögr—a Phantom Genre?'. In *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, edited by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, Tarrin Wills, 239-62, Turnhout: Brepols, 2007.
- Maxwell, Ian R. 'Pattern in Njáls Saga.' *Saga-Book* 15 (1957): 17-47.
- Mayburd, M. 'Worlds Emerge, Worlds Collapse: Traumatic Affect in Medieval Historiography and the Reception of Sturlunga Saga in the Twentieth Century.' In *Emotions as Engines of History*, edited by Rafał Borysławski, Alicja Bembien, 132-152, New York and London: Routledge, 2021.
- McCreesh, Bernadine. 'Grettir and Glámr: Sinful Man Versus the Fiend: An Allegorical Interpretation of a Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Saga.' *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 51, no. 2 (1981): 180-8.
- . 'The Structure of Vatnsdœla Saga.' *Saga-Book* 34 (2010): 75-86.
- McKinnell, John. *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005.

- Merkelbach, Rebecca. 'The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of the Icelanders.' *Quaestio Insularis* 15 (2014): 22-37.
- . 'Engi maðr skapar sik sjálfr: Fathers, Abuse and Monstrosity in the Outlaw Sagas.' In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 59-93, Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.
- . 'Eigi í mannligu eðli: Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Íslendingasögur.' In *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, 2018.
- . *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland*. De Gruyter, 2019.
- . 'Dólgri byggðinni: Meeting the Social Monster in the Sagas of Icelanders.' In *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and M. Mayburd, 263-276. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*. The Viking Collection. Studies in Northern Civilization. Odense: Odense University press, 1983.
- . 'Some Methodological Considerations in Connection with the Study of the Sagas.' In *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gisli Pálsson, 27-42. Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992.
- . *Fortælling og ære: Studier i Islændingesagaerne*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995. First published 1993 by Aarhus Universitetsforlag (Copenhagen).
- . 'On Humour, Heroes, Morality, and Anatomy in Fóstbrœðra Saga.' *NOWELE: North-Western European Language Evolution* (1993): 21-22.
- Mhaonaigh, Máire Ní. 'Bréifne Bias in Cogad Gáedel Re Gallaib.' *Ériu* 43 (1992): 135-58.
- Miller, William Ian. 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England.' *Law and History Review* 1, no. 2 (1983): 159-204.
- . 'Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud.' *Scandinavian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1983): 316-44.
- . 'Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland.' *Scandinavian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1986): 101-23.
- . 'Beating up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources.' *Mercer L. Rev.* 39, no. 3 (1988): 753-66.
- . *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Eye for an Eye*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- . *'Why Is Your Axe Bloody?': A Reading of Njáls Saga*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- . *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities: Hard Cases, Hard Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Millet, Victor, and Heike Sahm, eds. *Narration and Hero: Recounting the Deeds of Heroes in Literature and Art of the Early Medieval Period*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.
- Mitchell, Stephen. 'Nordic Witchcraft in Transition: Impotence, Hersery and Diabolism in 14th-Century Bergen.' *Scandia: Tidskrift för historisk forskning* 63, no. 1 (1997): 17-33.
- . 'Learning Magic in the Sagas.' Paper presented at the Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2000.

- . *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- . ‘Heresy and Heterodoxy in Medieval Scandinavia.’ In *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft*, edited by Louise Nyholm Kallestrup and Raisa Maria Toivo. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, 35-56. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Morris, Guy. ‘Violence and Late Viking Age Scandinavian Social Order.’ In *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, edited by Guy Halsall, 141-56. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998.
- Morris, Katherine. *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991.
- Mosher, Donald L., and Mark Sirkin. ‘Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation.’ *Journal of Research in Personality* 18, no. 2 (1984): 150-63.
- Motz, Lotte. ‘The Divided Image: A Study of the Giantesses and Female Trolls in Norse Mythology and Literature.’ *Mankind Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1987): 463–78.
- Mundal, Else. *Sagadebatt*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977.
- . ‘Køld eru kvenna ráð.’ In *Kvinner og bøker. Festskrift til Ellisiv Steen på hennes 70-årsdag 4. februar 1978*: Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978.
- . ‘Barneutbering.’ *Norskraft* 56 (1987).
- . ‘Forholdet mellom born og foreldre i det norrøne kjeldematerialet.’ *Collegium medievale* 1 (1988): 7-26.
- . ‘The Perception of the Saamis and Their Religion in Old Norse Sources.’ *Shamanism and Northern Ecology* 36 (1996): 97-116.
- . ‘Symbol og symbolhandlingar i sagalitteraturen.’ In *Middelalderens Symboler*, edited by Ann Christensson, Else Mundal and Ingvild Øye, 53-69, Bergen: Senter for europeiske kulturstudier, 1997.
- . ‘Kong Harald Hårfagre og samejenta Snøfrid: Samefolket sin plass i den norske rikssamlingsmyten.’ *Temahefte i norrøn filologi* (1997): 39-53.
- . ‘Kvinnesyntet og forståinga av biologisk arv i den norrøne kulturen.’ In *Atlantisk dåd og drøm*, edited by Asbjørn Aarnes, 153-70. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998.
- . ‘Androgyny as an Image of Chaos in Old Norse Mythology.’ *Maal og minne* 1 (1998): 1-9.
- . *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013.
- Mundal, Else, Odd Einar Haugen, Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen, and Jonas Wellendorf. *Fjöld veit hon fræða. Utvalde arbeid av Else Mundal*. Bibliotheca Nordica. Oslo: Novus, 2012.
- Mundal, Else, Erik Opsahl, Jørn Øyrehagen Sunde, and Miriam Tveit, eds. *Landslova av 1274: rett, politikk og samfunn i norsk mellomalder*. Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 2023.
- Mundt, Marina. ‘Kvinnens forhold til ekteskapet i Njáls Saga.’ *Edda*, no. 1-2 (1976): 17-26.
- Murphy, Luke John, Heidi R. Fuller, Peter L. T. Willan, and Monte A. Gates. ‘An Anatomy of the Blood Eagle: The Practicalities of Viking Torture.’ *Speculum* 97, no. 1 (2022): 1-39.
- Murray, Jacqueline. *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*. New York: Garland, 1999.
- Müller, Harald. ‘“... Und Gut Ist Keines Von Beiden.” Gedanken Zur Akzeptanz Der Brenna in Der Njáls Saga.’ In *Studien Zur Isländersaga: Festschrift Für Rolf*

- Heller, edited by Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel, 198-207. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000.
- Nedkvitne, Arnved. 'Katharsis og ære. To middelalderlige diskurser om døden.' In *Döden som katharsis. Nordiska perspektiv på dödens kultur och mentalitetshistoria*, edited by Yvonne Maria Werner, Inga Floto, Kristian Gerner, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, Arnved Nedkvitne, Birgitte Bøggild Johannsen, Ann-Sofie Arvidsson and Jukka Kekkonen, 39-59: Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2004.
- . *Lay Belief in Norse Society: 1000-1350*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009.
- . *Ære, lov og religion i Norge gjennom tusen år*. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2011.
- Netterstrøm, Jeppe Büchert, and Bjørn Poulsen, eds. *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007.
- Neville, Jennifer. 'Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry.' *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, eds. K. E. Olsen, L.A.J.R. Houwen, 103-22. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.
- Nielssen, Alf Ragnar. *Landnám fra nord*. Oslo: Orkana akademisk, 2012.
- Nordal, Guðrún. 'Trúskipti og písl í Hrafnkels sögu.' *Gripla* 9 (1995): 97-114.
- Norseng, Per. 'Law Codes as a Source for Nordic History in the Early Middle Ages.' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 16, no. 3 (1991): 137-66.
- Nye, Joseph S. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic books, 1990.
- . 'Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept.' *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1-3.
- O'Donoghue, Heather. *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- . 'Women in *Njáls Saga*.' In *Introductory Essays on Egils Saga and Njáls Saga*, edited by John Hines and Desmond Slay, 83-92. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992.
- . *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Olley, Katherine Marie. *Kinship in Old Norse Myth and Legend*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2022.
- Orning, Hans Jacob. 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the Fornaldarsögur.' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 35, no. 1 (2010): 3-20.
- . 'Conflict and Social (Dis) Order in Norway, c. 1030–1160.' In *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia*, 45-82. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- . 'Violence, Conflict and Order in Medieval Norway.' *Global Intellectual History* (2023): 1-15.
- Orri Vésteinsson. *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . 'Patterns of Settlement in Iceland.' *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 1-29.
- Oswald, Dana M. *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010.
- Otto, Beatrice K. *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Pálsson, Hermann. 'Death in Autumn: Tragic Elements in Early Icelandic Fiction.' *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1973): 7-39.

- . ‘Úr landnorðri: Samar og ystu rætur íslenskrar menningar.’ Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1997.
- . ‘The Sami People in Old Norse Literature.’ *Nordlit*, no. 5 (1999): 29-53.
- Parpola, Asko. ‘Old Norse Seið(r), Finnish Seita and Saami Shamanism.’ In *Etymologie, Entlehnungen und Entwicklungen: Festschrift für Jorma Koivulehto zum 70. Geburtstag*, edited by Irma Hyvärinen, Petri Kallio and Jarmo Korhonen, 235-73. Helsinki: Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, 2004.
- Perron, Anthony. ‘Saxo Grammaticus’s Heroic Chastity: A Model of Clerical Celibacy and Masculinity in Medieval Scandinavia.’ In *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, 113–35. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Pettit, Kent. ‘The New Faith Vs. The Undead: Christmas Showdowns.’ *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and M. Mayburd, 227-243. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Phelpstead, Carl. ‘In Honour of St Ólafr: The Miracle Stories in Snorri Sturluson’s *Óláfs Saga Helga*.’ *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 292-306.
- Pitt, Richard N, and George Sanders. ‘Revisiting Hypermasculinity: Shorthand for Marginalized Masculinities.’ In *What’s up with the Brothers?*, edited by Whitney Harris and Ronald T. Ferguson, 33-51. Harriman: Men’s Studies Press, 2010.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. ‘Honour and Social Status.’ *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, edited by John George Peristiany, 19-78. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, Basil Arnould. ‘Búi and the Blámaðr: Comprehending Racial Others in *Kjalnesinga Saga*.’ *postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (2020): 442-50.
- Price, Neil. *The Viking Way. Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. 2 ed. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019.
- Price, Neil, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, Anna Kjellström, Jan Storå, Maja Krzewińska, Torsten Günther, *et al.* ‘Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj. 581.’ *antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 181-98.
- Propp, Vladimir Jakovlevič, *Morphology of the Folktale*. Translated by Laurence Scott, Bloomington, 2 ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Psaki, F. Regina. ‘Women’s Counsel in the Riddarasögur: The Case of *Parcevals Saga*.’ In *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 201-24. New York: Routledge, 2002.”
- Puhvel, Martin. ‘The Mighty She-Trolls of Icelandic Saga and Folktale.’ *Folklore* 98, no. 2 (1987): 175-79.
- Raudvere, Catharina. *Föreställningar om maran i nordisk folktro*. Vol. 1, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993.
- . ‘Trolldómr in Early Medieval Scandinavia.’ In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 3. The Middle Ages*, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, 73-172. London: Athlone Press, 2002.
- . *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition: mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003.
- . *Narratives and Rituals of the Nightmare Hag in Scandinavian Folk Belief*. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

- Reichborn-Kjennerud, Ingjald. *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin*. Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1928.
- Roby, Matthew. 'The Licit Love Visit: Masculine Sexual Maturation and the "Temporary Troll Lover" Trope.' In *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock, 37-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- . 'The "Troll-Girl Revelation" Motif: Female Infantile Sexuality and Pedophilia in Hálfðanar Saga Brönufóstra and Jökuls Páttir Búasonar.' *Scandinavian Studies* 93, no. 4 (2021): 553-85.
- Ruiter, Keith. 'A Deviant Word Hoard: A Preliminary Study of Non-Normative Terms in Early Medieval Scandinavia.' In *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, Jakub Morawiec, Aleksandra Jochymek and Grzegorz Bartusik, 201-12. York: Arc Humanities Press, 2019.
- . 'Berserks Behaving Badly: Manipulating Normative Expectations in Eyrbyggja Saga.' In *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia*, 171-84, 2020.
- . 'Mannjafnaðr: A Study of Normativity, Transgression, and Social Pragmatism in Medieval Scandinavia.' PhD Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2018.
- Salisbury, Eve, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price, eds. *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.
- Sandmo, Erling. *Voldsamfunnets undergang. Om disiplineringen av Norge på 1600-tallet*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1999.
- Sauckel, Anita. 'Brennu-Njáls Saga: An Old Icelandic Trickster (Discourse)?'. In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 94-115. Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.
- Sayers, William. 'Clontarf, and the Irish Destinies of Sigurðr Digri, Earl of Orkney, and Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson.' *Scandinavian Studies* 63, no. 2 (1991): 164-86.
- . 'Steingerðr's Nicknames for Bersi (Kormáks Saga Implications for Gender, Politics, and Poetics.' *Florilegium* 12, no. 1 (1993): 33-54.
- Schippers, Mimi. 'Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony.' *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 85-102.
- Schjødt, Jens Peter. 'Wilderness, Liminality, and the Other in Old Norse Myth and Cosmology', in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, edited by Laura Feldt, 183-204. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.
- Schmidt, Andreas. 'Hinn verstí maðr á qllum Norðrlöndum', or House of Cards in the Faroe Islands: Conceptualising the 'Bad Guys' in Færeyinga Saga.' In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 273-316. Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.
- Schmidt, Andreas, and Daniela Hahn, eds. *Unwanted: Neglected Approaches, Characters, and Texts in Old Norse-Icelandic Saga Studies*. Munich: Utzverlag, 2022.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Parerga and Paralipomena: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*. Translated by T. Bailey Saunders. New York: Cosimo, 2007. 1893.
- Schroeder, Kirby. 'Hypermasculinity.' In *Masculinities: A Social, Cultural and Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by Michael Kimmel and Amy Aaronson, 417-19. Santa Barbara: ABC-Clío, 2004.

- Schulte, Michael. 'From Pagan Charms to Pious Prayers? A Case Study of Two Runic Formulas.' *Maal og minne* 1 (2022): 85-121.
- Schulz, Katja. *Riesen: Von Wissenschütern Und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda Und Saga*. Vol. 20: Heidelberg: Winter, 2004.
- Scott, Forrest S. 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of Eyrbyggja Saga.' *Parergon* 3, no. 1 (1985): 73-91.
- . *Eyrbyggja Saga: The Vellum Tradition*. Editiones Arnarnæmæ. Vol. 18, Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003.
- Sellebold, Berit Jansen, Else Mundal, and Gro Steinsland, eds. *Fokus på kvinner i middelalderkilder. Rapport fra symposiet "Kilder till kvinnehistoriske studier i nordisk middelalder," Isegran, September 1990*. Skara: Viktoria, 1992.
- Shahar, Shulamith. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain'*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Shay, Jonathan. 'Learning About Combat Stress from Homer's Iliad.' *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 4, no. 4 (1991): 561-79.
- von Schnurbein, Stefanie. 'Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: A Theory between Ideological Camps.' *History of religions* 43, no. 2 (2003): 116-38.
- Shortt Butler, Joanne. 'Narrative Structure and the Individual in the *Íslendingasögur*: Motivation, Provocation and Characterisation' Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Cambridge, 2016.
- . 'The Best of a Bad Bunch? Hrafnkels Saga and Narrative Expectations.' In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, Munich: Utzverlag, 2016. 317-55.
- Simpson, Jacqueline. 'Olaf Tryggvason Versus the Powers of Darkness.' In *The Witch Figure*, edited by Venetia Newall, 165-87. London: Routledge, 1973.
- Smith, Kevin P. 'Landnám: The Settlement of Iceland in Archaeological and Historical Perspective.' *World Archaeology* 26, no. 3 (1995): 319-47.
- Solli, Brit, 'Odin the Queer? On Ergi and Shamanism in Norse Mythology.' In *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum-en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh*, edited by A. Gustafsson & H. Karlsson, 341-349. Gothenburg: University of Gothenborg, 1999.
- . *Seid. Myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid*. Oslo: Pax, 2002.
- . 'Queering the Cosmology of the Vikings: A Queer Analysis of the Cult of Odin and "Holy White Stones".' *Journal of Homosexuality* 54, no. 1-2 (2008): 192-208.
- Sparre, Cornelia Spjelkavik. 'The Miracles of Medieval Norway.' In *The Cult of Saints in Nidaros Archbishopric: Manuscripts, Miracles, Objects*, edited by Ragnhild M. Bø and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 161-94. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2022.
- Steinsland, Gro. *Det Hellige Bryllup Og Norrøn Kongeideologi: En Analyse Av Hierogami-Myten i Skirnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*. Oslo: Solum, 1991.
- . 'Husfruer, Gydjer Og Volver.' In *Hun - En antologi om kunnskap fra kvinners liv*, edited by Gjertrud Sæter, 81-93. Oslo: Spillerom, 1996.
- . *Norrøn Religion: Myter, Riter, Samfunn*. Oslo: Pax, 2005.
- Stephens, John. 'The Unwelcome Suitor: Patriarchal Norms, Masculine Inefficiency, and Negative Modelling in the Old Icelandic Kormáks Saga.' *Parergon* 10, no. 2 (1992): 155-66.
- Stewart, Charles. 'Honor and Shame.' *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by James D. Wright, 181-84. 2 ed. Oxford: Elsevier, 2015.

- . *Honor and Shame*. International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Vol. 11, Oxford: Elsevier, 2015.
- Stewart, Frank Henderson. *Honor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Straubhaar, Sandra Ballif. 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large: Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the 'Fornaldar Sögur.''' *Scandinavian studies* 73, no. 2 (2001): 105-24.
- Ström, Folke. *Nid, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes: The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies Delivered at University College, London, 10 May, 1973*. Viking Society for Northern Research for the College, London: University College London, 1974.
- Strömbäck, Dag. *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*. Translated and annotated by Peter Foote. Viking Society for Northern Research. London, 1975.
- Strömbäck, Dag. *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*. Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag. 1935.
- Syvertsen, Simen. 'The Price of Integrity.' In *Literature and Honour*, edited by Aasta Marie Bjorvand Bjørkøy and Thorstein Norheim. Books, 57-80. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017.
- Sverrir Jakobsson, 'All the King's men. The incorporation of Iceland into the Norwegian Realm', in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 46, no. 5 (2021), 571-92.
- Sørensen, Preben Meulengracht. 'Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in Gísla Saga.' In *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, edited by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, 235-63. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986.
- Thompson, Stith. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958.
- Tirosh, Yoav. 'The Fabulous Saga of Guðmundr inn ríki. Representation of Sexuality in Ljósvetninga Saga.' Master Thesis, University of Iceland, 2014.
- . 'Argg Management: Vilifying Guðmundr Inn Ríki in Ljósvetninga Saga.' In *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, 240-72. Munich: Utzverlag, 2016.
- . 'Feel the Burn: Lönguhliðarbrenna as Literary Type-Scene.' *Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne*, no. 13 (2017): 30-44.
- . 'On the Receiving End: The Role of Scholarship, Memory, and Genre in Constructing Ljósvetninga Saga.' PhD Thesis, University of Iceland, 2019.
- Titlestad, Torgim. *Sagasyn*. Stavanger: Saga bok, 2013.
- Tracy, Larissa. 'The Uses of Torture and Violence in the Fabliaux: When Comedy Crosses the Line.' *Florilegium* 23, no. 2 (2006): 143-68.
- . *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity*. Cambridge, MA: D. S. Brewer, 2012.
- Tranter, Stephen Norman. *Sturlunga Saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler*. Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1987.
- Tuczay, Christa Agnes. 'Into the Wild — Old Norse Stories of Animal Men.' In *Werewolf Histories*, edited by Willem de Blécourt, 61-81. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

- Tulinius, Torfi H. 'Honour, Sagas and Trauma: Reflections on Literature and Violence in 13th Century Iceland.' In *Literature and Honour*, 81-94. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017.
- . 'Trauma Studies.' In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 251-55. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Turco, Jeffrey. 'Gender, Violence, and the "Enigma" of Gísla Saga.' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 115, no. 3 (2016): 277-98.
- Turner, Victor, 'Liminality and Communitas' in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (New York: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94-113, 25-130.
- Tuten, Belle S., and Tracey L. Billado, eds. *Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2010.
- Tveit, Miriam. "'Otherness' Within? The Sámi in Medieval Scandinavian Law.' In *'Otherness' in the Middle Ages*, edited by Hans-Werner Goetz and Ian N. Wood, 437-55. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021.
- Tveit, Miriam, Mia Korpiola, Else Mundal, and Helle Vogt. "'En kvinne skal straffes for alle forbrytelser som en mann' kjønsspesifikke straffer i nordisk middelalderlovgivning ca. 1100–ca. 1300.' *Historisk tidsskrift* 101, no. 4 (2022): 299-324.
- Úlfar Bragason. 'The Word and the World: A Resonant Textual Fragment of Íslendinga Saga.' Translated by Anna H. Yates. In *Sagas and Societies: International Conference at Borgarnes, Iceland, 5.–9 September 2002*.
- Valante, Mary A. 'Castrating Monks: Vikings, the Slave Trade, and the Value of Eunuchs.' In *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, edited by Larissa Tracy, 174-87. Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013.
- Van Deusen, Natalie M. 'Sworn Sisterhood?: On the (near-) Absence of Female Friendship from the Íslendingasögur.' *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 1 (2014): 52-71.
- . 'St Agnes of Rome in Late Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Verse.' In *Saints and Their Legacies in Medieval Iceland*. Edited by Dario Bullitta and Kirsten Wolf, 307-23. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021.
- Veisland, Jørgen. 'The Women of Njal's Saga: An Ethics of Ambiguity?' *Sociology and Anthropology* 6, no. 4 (2018).
- Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998.
- . 'Gísli Súrsson—a Flawless or Flawed Hero?' in *Die Aktualität der Saga. Festschrift für Hans Schottmann*, ed. Stig Toftgaard Andersen, 163-75. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999.
- . 'Family Sagas.' In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk, 101-18. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Vilhjálmur Árnason. 'An Ethos in Transformation: Conflicting Values in the Sagas.' *Gripla* 20 (2009): 217-40.
- Vines, Amy N. 'Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance.' In *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, edited by Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton, 161-80: Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014.
- Vitz, Evelyn Birge. 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections.' *Romanic Review* 88, no. 1 (1997): 1-26.

- Vohra, Pragya. 'Creating Kin, Extending Authority: Blood-Brotherhood and Power in Medieval Iceland.' In *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, edited by Christopher Fletcher, Sean Brady, Rachel E. Moss and Lucy Riall, 105-31. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Wahlgren, Erik. 'Fact and Fancy in the Vinland Sagas.' In *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*, edited by Edgar C. Polomé and Paul Schach: Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969.
- Waugh, Robin. 'Misogyny, Women's Language, and Love-Language: Yngvildr Fagrinn in 'Svarfdæla Saga.''' *Scandinavian Studies* 70, no. 2 (1998): 151-94.
- Whaley, Diana. 'Miracles in the Sagas of Bishops: Icelandic Variations on an International Theme.' *Collegium medievale*, 7 no. 2 (1994): 155-84.
- Wik, Sigrun Borgen. 'The Voice of Reason or Unintended Protest? Whetting by Servile Women in the *Íslendingasögur*.' In *Gender and Protest: On the Historical and Contemporary Interrelation of Two Social Phenomena*, edited by Frank Jacob and Jowan A. Mohammed, 29-46. Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2023.
- . 'Women as Hosts and Protectors of Outlaws in the Sagas of Icelanders.' In *Guests, Strangers, Aliens, Enemies: Ambiguities of Hospitality in the Latin Middle Ages, 1000-1350*, edited by Wojtek Jezierski and Lars Kjær. Turnhout: Brepols, (forthcoming).
- Willumsen, Liv Helene. *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Wolf, Kirsten. 'Amazons in Vinland.' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95, no. 4 (1996): 469-85.
- . 'Transvestism in the Sagas of Icelanders.' In *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience: Preprints: 10th International Saga Conference, Trondheim, August 3-9, 1997*. Trondheim: NTNU. Senter for middelalderstudier, 1997.
- . 'The Color Blue in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature.' *Scripta Islandica* 57 (2006): 55-78.
- . 'The Color Grey in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature.' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 2 (2009): 222-38.
- Wærdahl, Randi Bjørshol. *Norges konges rike og hans skattland. kongemakt og statsutvikling i den norrøne verden i middelalderen*. Det Historisk-Filosofiske Fakultet. Trondheim: NTNU, 2006.
- . '"... Vær da så lenge hos kongen som du kan..." Hirden, hoffet og kongens menn på Island i siste halvdel av 1200-tallet.' *Heimen* 1, no. 01 (2015): 5-14.
- Øyrehagen Sunde, Jørn. 'De Skal Vera Samde Menn—Ei Vitskapleg Fundering Og Spekulasjon over Den Eldste Norske Prosessen.' *Eftersyn och eftertanke. de lege-juridiska fakulteten i Uppsala årsbok* (2007): 305-22.
- Ásdís Egilsdóttir. 'Kolbítur verður karlmaður', In *Miðaldabörn*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi Tulinius, 87-100. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005.