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PARALLELS AND FOILS BETWEEN THE MEN AND WOMEN  
IN THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

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SCAN-330: Old Norse Sagas

Dr. Peterson

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Short Analytical Essay

PARALLELS AND FOILS BETWEEN THE MEN AND WOMEN  
IN THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

Sagas have had a long history and over that long history they have been told and understood in different ways. The longstanding oral culture of our past is the foundation of the sagas and due to the nature of oral history they have morphed and changed through the voices of many tellers. As literacy began to take hold in the Western world, the sagas were recorded into manuscripts. These manuscripts were many and all varied depending on who was telling the stories and who was recording them. Many of the sagas were influenced by the Christianization of Scandinavia, especially through their recording by the literate religious class of monks. After all these centuries of transformation and translation, modern readers must recognize that their understanding of the sagas and the understanding of the sagas in their own time has also been transformed and translated. Modern readers approach the Icelandic Family Sagas with a stereotyped understanding of the culture and gender roles they came out of. Modern readers read the women in the sagas, just as they do the men, as extraordinary. It is true that these characters are extraordinary, but the strength and power seen as so extraordinary from the women of the sagas—in context of the gender stereotypes the modern reader understands to be true—is actually a misunderstanding of Norse gender roles. Carol Clover (1993) explains the reality of a “one-sex” system in the Viking age and a “two-sex” system from the point of Christianization on. These two systems explain the complexity of understanding Norse gender roles in modern times. The men and women in the Viking era, although not completely equal, maintained rights

which were later taken away; rights such as land inheritance and militaristic leadership. This begs the question, why do all the sagas feature a male as the main character? Although I cannot answer that question, it is clear that women are not altogether forgotten or ignored. The women in many of the sagas serve two purposes: to further the plot and to provide a parallel or a foil to the main character, which advances the stories and adds emphasis to the main characters.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* is one of the most popular and well-known sagas today due to its intriguing story line and its presence in history, such as in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. In this saga there are two strong women, in Gudrun and Brynhild, but Brynhild stands out as the compliment of the main character, Sigurd. Brynhild is the perfect match for Sigurd in every way. Framed as a true match, or, what would have been a proper marriage, the two are described in tandem and compared to each other. The most prevalent commonality between Sigurd and Brynhild is their strength in battle. Sigurd has just come from the slaying of Fafnir when he finds Brynhild and Brynhild is just waking from a slumber induced by Odin after a well fought battle. Brynhild fortifies what Clover defined as the one-sex system by displaying strength in battle, which to the modern reader's two-sex system perspective equals masculinity rather than femininity. When Sigurd first sees her he thinks she is "a man," but when "he removed the helmet from the man's head he saw that it was a woman" (VS 67). The problem of the modern perspective within a "two-sex" system is that the language says power=man and powerless=woman or strength=man and weakness=woman. This two-sex system is restrictive, which is something Kathleen Self recognizes. Kathleen Self (2014) has a modern perspective on Brynhild's character which is a mix between the one-sex system and the two-sex system. She identifies a third sex for valkyries and shield-maidens due to their mix of feminine and masculine traits.

These discussions of valkyries and shield-maidens tend to insert them into a binary of masculine and feminine, wherein they sit somewhat uneasily in the feminine category. Yet, as other scholarship on Old Norse gender and sex has shown, the situation for all persons, not just valkyries, is much more complicated. (Self 2014, 144)

Brynhild, as a shield-maiden or valkyrie, fortifies the perspective of a three-sex system.

Brynhild is a great warrior who ultimately “took a sword and stabbed herself under the arm...”

(VS 92). But Brynhild is also described as a “beautiful woman” (VS 74). Due to all

Brynhild’s traits she sees herself as “superior,” a perfect complement to Sigurd’s superiority over other men (Self 2014, 163). Although fate prevents them from fulfilling their mutual vows of marriage, Brynhild’s actions and declarations of vengeance progress the plot, ultimately leading to Sigurd’s death and her own. Their tandem burning on the funeral pyre shows the pair in great light with Brynhild as Sigurd’s true match and “Sigurd as her ‘real’ husband” (Self 2014, 165).

In this saga, Brynhild is powerful and her power and strength make her an equal match for Sigurd.

In the *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, fate continues to play a large role and the main character, Kjartan, and his true match remain unmarried. Although they never marry, Gudrun provides a good parallel to Kjartan and her actions further the plot. From each character’s introduction they are paired through the saga’s diction in describing their physical appearance. When Kjartan is introduced the narration says: “No fairer or more handsome man has ever been born in Iceland” (LS 321). When Gudrun is introduced the narration says: “She was the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland...” (LS 327). Even when separately introduced they are both described as the most attractive of their gender to ever live in Iceland. The saga goes on to further cement their perfect match by allowing the words of the people to speak. The saga states: “Everyone said that, of all the young people of the time, Kjartan and

Gudrun were best suited for one another” (LS 344). Gudrun and Kjartan solidify the peoples’ view by consistently spending time together, but Kjartan decides to go exploring. When Bolli, Kjartan’s foster brother, returns after years away and tells Gudrun of Kjartan’s straying eyes and hands, she reluctantly decides to marry Bolli. This decision mirrors the betrayal of Kjartan in his relationship with Ingibjorg. This relationship swapping is mirrored again when Kjartan learns of Gudrun’s marriage to Bolli. In response to Gudrun’s actions, Kjartan chooses to marry Hrefna who he finds trying on the headdress which was intended for Gudrun. Gudrun’s actions again progress the plot as she is blamed when the headdress goes missing. She seeks vengeance for herself on Kjartan who was meant to marry her and who was meant to give her that headdress. She goads her brothers into killing Kjartan and cruelly goads Bolli into helping them. This fight, brought about by the goading of Gudrun, ultimately ends in Kjartan’s death by Bolli’s sword. Gudrun’s and Kjartan’s ideal match, prevented by fate, is the source of their constant mirrored actions. Their continual grievances with one another advance the plot and in the long run foster the readers’ constant paralleling between the two.

*Gisli Sursson’s Saga* is the only saga in which fate does not prevent the marriage of the main character and his true match. Gisli and his wife Aud are a perfect pairing. Aud confirms the strength of the match when offered a new match, after the death of Gisli; Aud states, “I don’t expect...that we’ll reach an agreement on your ability to find me as good a match as this one” (GS 547). Aud and Asgerd play integral roles in the beginning of the saga’s plot when they are gossiping about old lovers. It is not Aud’s place in the plot development though that is most prominent; her biggest contributions to the saga are her shared qualities with Gisli. Her first display of these shared qualities is when Eyjolf comes to her farm to bribe her, with three hundred pieces of silver and a good marriage, to give up her husband’s location. She exhibits

two of Gisli's best qualities: wit and strength. She at first takes the bribe and convinces the group of men that she means to take the bribe and give up her husband. This clever ploy allows the men to let down their guard. She even tricks her young foster daughter who runs to tell Gisli, but Gisli is secure in his true match and says, "Think only good thoughts, for my death will never be the result of Aud's treachery" (GS 547). When the saga returns to Aud and Eyjolf, Aud displays her strength of will and physical strength by bloodying Eyjolf's nose with the bag of silver. Aud has one final scene to parallel her strength of will with Gisli's, during Gisli's last stand. "Eyjolf made his way up in a different place, where he was confronted by Aud, and she struck him with her club so hard on the arm that it took away all his strength, and he staggered back down" (GS 553). Throughout most of Gisli's last stand he fights alongside Aud, even saying at one point, "I might have dispatched them both in the same way," in reference to Aud's strength in attack (GS 553). In the end Gisli says, "I knew long ago that I had married well, but never realized till now that the match was as good as this" (GS 553). At Gisli's death the reader is reminded of Aud's constant parallel in wit and strength, which emphasizes these attributes in Gisli.

In *Egil's Saga* there is not really a question of his true match, as he has little interaction with women, but there is one woman in the saga, Queen Gunnhild, who serves as Egil's parallel. Both characters are bigger than life and display moments of cruelty and dark magic. Queen Gunnhild is cruel and delights in the pain and suffering of others just like Egil, but her focus throughout the saga seems to be to inflict her cruelty mainly on Egil. The saga states that "Gunnhild is your [Egil's] greatest enemy..." (ES 95). During the saga Egil uses dark magic to create a scorn-pole, which curses Queen Gunnhild. Later on in the saga "...Gunnhild had a magic rite performed to curse Egil Skallagrimsson" (ES 109). The two go back and forth with

curses and bad will throughout the saga and although Queen Gunnhild demonstrates many of the same traits as Egil, her purpose in the saga seems to be to allow the reader to despise her for these traits, which allows Egil to get away with a lot of cruel actions and dark magic without acquiring the readers' bad will.

In the case of *Njal's Saga*, there are two main male characters, Gunnar and Njal, and two main female characters, Hallgerd and Bergthora. *Njal's Saga* has a strong focus on Old Icelandic law and justice. Hallgerd and Bergthora embody the old view of this through blood vengeance, whereas Gunnar and Njal embody the new view of peaceful law and justice. Due to the fact that the women represent a different perspective on justice than the men do, the women do not serve as parallels to their husbands but rather they serve as foils. It begins when Hallgerd takes the law into her own hands and has her first and second husbands killed. When Bergthora scorns Hallgerd's beauty, later on in the saga, Hallgerd vows to Bergthora "that we're not finished yet" (NS 57). From this point and into the next few scenes, the women bring chaos and their own sense of justice to the table by goading their servants into killing each other off. Much to the dismay of the women, Gunnar and Njal bring law and order into the saga and allow "self-judgment" of "twelve ounces of silver" to settle the cases (NS 59-60). As the murders continue through the goading of the women, the peaceful settlement is made by the men. The women in the saga aid the progression of blood vengeance, which ultimately leads to the death of both of the men, but their persistence in taking the law into their own hands and causing chaos is a great juxtaposition of Gunnar and Njal's reliance on law and order. This juxtaposition highlights the prevailing goodness of the law in the saga and the will of the men.

Overall, the women in the sagas not only progress the plot, but do a lot to provide parallels or foils to the main male characters to highlight their attributes and qualities, which lead



them to success. The concept of gender—whether in a one, two, or three sex system—is complex today just as it was in the Viking age. To better understand the sagas and the roles of the characters, modern readers must take the time to understand the difference in how gender is viewed today and how it was viewed by the Old Norse. Through a deeper understanding of gender roles in the Viking age, the modern era, as well as in literature, readers can identify patterns such as the pattern of parallels and foils addressed in this paper. Ultimately, the sagas will remain in a position of constant interpretation and to best interpret and understand them the reader must work to see beyond their own modern day perspectives.

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