

The Old Lady and Old Beardless: Gender, Emotion, and Legitimate Violence in *Njal's Saga*

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“‘What gifts are these?’ said Skarphedin.” Little did he know that the gifts deftly delivered by Hallgerd were the nicknames of “Old Beardless” and “Dung-beardlings” to Njal and his sons. Bergthora mentions these gifts and is met with accusations of being “furious” by her son, the sly Skarphedin. Bergthora hits back, challenging her son: “...If you don’t avenge this, you’ll never avenge any shame.” This causes Skarphedin to grin, with a close reader knowing this as a foreshadowing sign of his mischief, and yet the challenge causes him to blush and sweat at the response.¹

It becomes evident in this exchange in *Njal’s Saga* the sort of merit insults were afforded in saga-age Iceland, especially concerning insults of masculinity. Moreover, this scene illustrates a concept extensively researched by scholars of Scandinavian literature through gendered analysis. This is to say that women during the Viking Age were seen as inciters of violence, often having a place beside the men, whispering words of provocation to serve their own ends. Skarphedin addresses this directly in *Njal’s Saga*, stating, “We’re not made like women, that we become furious over everything.”² It is implied this fury is the impetus for many of the vengeful murders and property destruction inherent to Icelandic sagas. Sure enough, Skarphedin and the rest of Njal’s son exact vengeance on the slight, murdering Sigmund and entrusting his head to a shepherd loyal to Hallgerd.³ Hallgerd bestowed the gifts of “Old Beardless” and “Dung-beardlings” to Njal and his sons; Skarphedin bestowed Sigmund’s severed head to Hallgerd. One ill turn deserves another, thus Hallgerd’s gift was repaid.

This exchange between Skarphedin and his mother Bergthora and the resulting murder may be the most striking example of gendered language about emotion and violence in one of the

¹ *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (Penguin Books, 2002), 74-75.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* 77.

most famous of the Icelandic family sagas, *Njal's Saga*. This saga is focused on a series of feuds that destroy the clan of Njal and culminate in lengthy legal debates, battles, and the brutal assassinations by Kari Solmundarson, one of the survivors of the burning of Bergthorshvoll.⁴ It is significant to note that the feud reached a fever pitch due to several exchanges encompassing this kind of gendered language. Often sharp words clashed before swords and shields did. This is in keeping with theories by Clover in that a man's tongue, sword, and penis are all related to warfare.⁵ This is to say that legitimacy and gender, both in gendered language and social status, are directly tied to the performance of violent acts, such as murder, vengeance, and destruction of property. A propensity for legitimate violence can be seen as more masculine, and women and those who are feminine, un-masculine, and androgynous perpetrate illegitimate violence or abstinence from violence. Women are well researched as inciters of violence in this culture, but perhaps that approach is too narrow.⁶ Instead, by exploring women's roles and the emotions attributed to them, comparing them to men in *Njal's Saga*, and analyzing the sorts of gendered language and insults hurled by both genders, modern scholars may derive a more concise understanding about the societal values of legitimate violence as it related to gender in the Viking Age. Engaging in a gendered analysis of *Njal's Saga* may also demonstrate that gender may not have been seen as a hard binary system in the Viking age, with gender and power being linked to legitimate violence, but as more fluid. It becomes clear in the exchange between Skarphedin and his mother Bergthora as well as the many exchanges between Hallgerd and her minions that gender and emotion is closely intertwined with the performance of legitimate

⁴ Ibid. 278-310.

⁵ Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 384.

⁶ See Sarah Anderson and Karen Swenson, *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) and Jana K. Schulman, "'A Guest is in the Hall': Women, Feasts, and Violence in Icelandic Epic" in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (Pallgrave Macmillan, 2007).

violence, and analyzing these concepts in *Njal's Saga* may reveal much about Viking Age cultural norms.⁷

To restate my thesis for sake of clarity and organization, my goal is to perform a gendered analysis of *Njal's Saga* in order to argue that legitimacy of violence is tied directly to gender and emotion in Viking Age culture. *Njal's Saga* will be the centerpiece of this argument and by applying past scholarship pertaining to gender and violence, my hope is to demonstrate a new way to understand the Viking Age cultural norms through saga literature. This will be done in a number of different steps. First off, violence and legitimacy will be defined and how one must understand it in relation to saga literature. Next, I will introduce some past scholarship about gender and how to apply it to the context of *Njal's Saga*. Lastly, the past scholarship about legitimacy, gender, and how violence is understood will all be applied to specific scenes in the saga in the form of a gendered analysis. The analysis will be organized chronologically with events coinciding to an explicitly stated combination of the conceptions of gender, legitimacy of violence, and emotion. Since these concepts are so intertwined, I thought it best to organize it by event and uncover how these concepts could be used to analyze these events. Before delving into the analysis, however, some caveats must be addressed. The difficulty with analyzing the Viking Age is the painful lack of true primary sources. *Njal's Saga*, for instance, is the work of an anonymous compiler around the 13th century, and depicts events and people present in the late 10th century and early 11th century.⁸ Suffice it to say, there leaves a lot of room for issues of translation, author bias, and loss of meaning. The different concepts of masculinity and vengeance may not have been the values of the people attested to in the saga, but the contemporary attitude of the saga author. An attempt will be made to mitigate such issues by

⁷ *Njal*, 74-75.

⁸ *Njal*, viii-xiii.

building off past scholarship and finding the conceptual links between them. These are issues to keep in mind while reading *Njal's Saga* and I found it necessary to address them, as any analysis done must have legitimate consideration of secondary sources to preserve the integrity of my argument.

To start the analysis, we must first understand what violence is in the context of Icelandic sagas. This is luckily rather easy to do, with a whole chapter devoted to understanding violence in William Ian Miller's *Humiliation*. In the chapter, "Getting a Fix on Violence" Miller approaches the rather unexpectedly difficult task of providing a framework of understanding violence with marked ease.⁹ With his background in Icelandic honor culture, much of his argument is directly applicable to *Njal's Saga*. His view of violence being perspectival is important, for instance, he addresses the role of victim is often one of a feminized nature. This offers one way to understand the ledger of violent acts that take place in feud, and the sort of danger feminization has on social standing. This also agrees with the fluidity of gender as addressed by Clover.¹⁰ He also argues that emotional states and gender are highly connected.¹¹ In addition, he argues that violence is a form of boundary breaking, and beyond the obvious breaking of skin or bone, the boundary can be for our purposes, the peace between Njal and Gunnar.¹² The use of the word violent or violence is rarely used in *Njal's Saga*, so we must define what violence must have been seen as during that time. By using Miller's framework as well as Warren Brown's in *Violence in Medieval Europe* we can categorize violence in the context of *Njal's Saga* as direct, personal, and driven by honor and shame.¹³ Violent acts are

⁹ William Ian Miller, *Humiliation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 55.

¹⁰ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 384.

¹¹ Miller, *Humiliation*, 60-65.

¹² *Ibid*, 65.

¹³ Warren Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (London: Pearson Limited, 2011), 1, 2, 12.

integral to personal interactions between, as Miller posits, “free men, and free women, too.”¹⁴

This shows that previous methodological scholarship will aid an argument that committing murder, vengeance, and destruction of property are a level playing field for both men and women with their roles being doled out as actor and inciter, respectively.

At the very start of the feud, we have a rather surprising example of direct language dealing with legitimacy, gender and the perpetration of direct action, in this case, violence. After Thjostolf kills Thorvald, Hallgerd tells him to hide out with her uncle Svan, the sorcerer, a man previously described as vicious and overbearing.¹⁵ Svan claims any man who tries to attack him will be humiliated, and even uses gendered language in reaction to the killing of Thorvald, speaking about the kind of man Thjostolf is, in a positive manner. When Osvif comes to hunt Thjostolf down, Svan casts a spell and plagues Osvif and his men with fog. This is one of the few examples of explicit magic, in comparison to the implicit magical abilities of Njal such as foresight. This is further evidenced by past research that magic and gender are highly correlated in Viking Age society.¹⁶ In addition, in terms of legitimacy and honor, it is argued that anyone who attacks Svan will be humiliated. It can be inferred from other norms that direct combat is much more legitimate, and Osvif confirms that their lack of direct combat brought them no honor.¹⁷ This shows that Svan's use of magic to defend against direct attack is illegitimate, as no honor can be brought fighting against him, only humiliation and shame.¹⁸ Great warriors like Kari or Gunnar perpetrate much of the legitimate violence, but their direct actions brought them fame while Svan's actions seem to have brought him infamy. His views as evidenced by his

¹⁴ Miller, *Humiliation*, 85.

¹⁵ *Njal*, 24-25.

¹⁶ See Jenny Jochens, “Old Norse Magic and Gender,” in *Scandinavian Studies Vol. 63, No. 3*, (University of Illinois Press, 1991).

¹⁷ *Njal*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

gendered language towards Thjostolf seem to be antithetical to much of the continued discussion on masculinity and by extension, legitimacy. The killing of Thorvald was no small thing like Svan says, and may speak to the norms of legitimate killings of the time.¹⁹

This next event to be analyzed is the classic and rather grisly scene of Hildigunn inciting vengeance on the part of Flosi. By throwing the blood-caked cloak he gifted to Hoskuld, the cloak that Hoskuld died in, on his shoulders, she incites him to avenge their friend.²⁰ One of the most striking things about this event besides the imagery of the clotted blood covering Flosi is the fact that he turns multiple different shades of color in response and rides off almost immediately. This not only keeps with the theme of the woman as the inciter of violence but also shows the norms of reciprocity.²¹ Flosi bestowed this cloak upon Hoskuld and received his gift back from his wife, leading to him jumping to action. The gender roles are obvious, but it also shows that Flosi had to avenge his friend's death. The gift of the cloak not only symbolized the death of his friend that needed to be avenged but that the gift Hildigunn gave to him must be met with a gift: vengeance on her behalf. The violence also becomes legitimate due to the inciting of Hildigunn, with Flosi originally planning to prosecute his friend's killers at the althing. Since Hildigunn could not go off and murder Hoskuld's killers, her role as inciter of violence legitimizes her actions and she achieves the same goal. This evidence reaffirms previous scholarship done about gender norms and reciprocity and eases the application of them in conjunction. Lastly, the display of emotion in response to inciting of violence is evidence that displays of emotions are correlated with the legitimacy of the violence. Rarely do we see acts of murder or vengeance perpetrated legitimately without an emotional display to precede it. This

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Njal*, 194-195.

²¹ See Miller, *Humiliation*, 16-52.

suggest that emotional displays that do not precede violence are illegitimate, seen as whiners in Miller's eyes.²² We will see supporting evidence when examining Thorhall's reaction to the death of Njal later on.

To continue examining gender as it relates to violence, we see many an insult volleyed at Njal, the famous lawyer and namesake of the saga. His prowess is questioned frequently, with many of his peers respecting his knowledge of law but questioning his manliness as an abstainer of violence and elderly man. Much of the insults come from Hallgerd and Flosi, with the epithet of "Old Beardless."²³ In one instance, the epithet precedes a skillful jab by Skarphedin and culminates in the fiery demise of Njal. During the settlement for the murder of Hoskuld, a robe is included amongst the money, which Flosi takes issue with, claiming it is Njal's as it is unisex in nature.²⁴ Skarphedin defends his father and gifts Flosi with a pair of trousers, claiming he would need them as he is the "sweetheart of the troll of Svinafell" and is used as a woman.²⁵ This sort of feminization as an insult has many a precedent in Icelandic saga and addresses the controversial concept of nithing, one who is receptive sexually as well as a victim, as Miller suggests.²⁶ Flosi is insulted, as he would not receive a unisex or androgynous piece of clothing from Old Beardless, this being beneath his manliness. This speaks to norms of social hierarchy as it relates to gender, with being masculine as having higher power and being unmasculine as having less power. It can be suggested as well that with social power being so related to gender, and social power being fluid as it relates to gender, that gender is perhaps more fluid during the Viking Age than our current binary of male and female.²⁷ The breakdown of the settlement

²² Miller, *Humiliation*, 58.

²³ *Njal*, 74-75.

²⁴ *Njal*, 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Miller, *Humiliation*, 55.

²⁷ Clover, *Regardless of Sex*, 377.

occurs due to the exchange of insults, but it is apt, as Skarphedin responds to a gendered slight with another gendered slight. This exchange of words reinforces the relation between gender and legitimacy. Since much of the insults against Njal are the fact that he is not as battle-tested as his friend Gunnar is, this suggests a lack of respect for those without a propensity for violence. Furthermore, there will be other events later on that show illegitimate violence as closely related with lack of manliness and vice versa.

To shift away from the standard norms of gender interactions, we later see a change in the role of woman as inciter. Instead of Hrodny using Hoskuld's bloody cap to incite violence like Hildigunn with Flosi, she asks Ingjald to stay his hand, as an act of faith to Njal, who has always been fair to him.²⁸ In this manner, Ingjald seems to know that if he betrays Flosi publicly, he would deserve the shame, speaking again to the concept of social power being tied to legitimate violence. Instead, he instructs his wife to warn Njal and his sons to be on guard.²⁹ The scene seems to uncover a more nuanced view of the role of women as inciters. Here, we see an example of a woman arguing against violence and attempting to prevent it. We also see direct action by a woman to reinforce that attempt at peace. One could argue that this direct action by Hrodny could be more legitimate than Ingjald's public rescission of his oath. In this case, it seems a technicality, like a lie of omission. Again, this speaks to the legitimacy of violence as intertwined with gender and its performance, but offers a more positive spin on the role of woman as peacekeeper.³⁰

As mentioned before, it is important to contrast the connection between manliness and legitimacy and unmanliness with illegitimacy. When Skarphedin discusses the impending

²⁸ *Njal*, 213-214.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 214.

³⁰ See Kathleen Herbert, *Peace-Weavers and Shield Maidens: Women in Early English Society* (Anglo-Saxon Books, 1997).

burning of the farm, he claims that the past chieftains that railed against them had more integrity and would not kill them in such a desperate way.³¹ This shows that certain sorts of violence that were not direct combat, like burning a family in their home, could be seen as illegitimate. This coincides with the previous example of Svan versus Osvif, and continues to support the norm of direct action in the form of combat as more legitimate, being less cowardly and more in line with being masculine. As well, the killing of women in this way could be seen as illegitimate.

Skarphedin admits he does not want to die in such a desperate way, as a victim of such illegitimate violence, but he will die with his father. It may be that Skarphedin is reinforcing the fatalist Viking Age view, but also may prove as an example of the young, able bodied maintaining the honor of the old and feeble.³² Njal goes on to say that he would rather die in his farm, as he does not have the prowess to avenge the killing, and would unknowingly leave that to Kari.³³ One must admire Njal's humility in admitting his lack of strength and prowess while jointly working to promote the honor of his family, up to his death. Manly honor seems to be more important than pride in this saga, and there is evidence to suggest that one must sacrifice pride in order to preserve honor. Helgi escapes the farm by disguising himself as a woman, and is quickly beheaded by Flosi.³⁴ Interestingly enough, Helgi is not admonished for what could be perceived as a shameful and specifically feminizing way of avoiding death. Later on in the trials, there is no mention or admonition of Helgi's actions, only that Flosi was the one who killed him.³⁵ For those familiar with the Poetic Edda, there is a rather humorous tale of Thor disguising himself as Freya in order to regain his hammer Mjolnir in *Thrymskvida*.³⁶ The moral of that story

³¹ *Njal*, 218.

³² Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 385.

³³ *Njal*, 218-221.

³⁴ *Ibid* 221.

³⁵ *Ibid* 252-253.

³⁶ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Henry Adams Bellows (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 175-176.

may be inferred as the ends justify the means. In this case, there is a possible precedent to Helgi's attempt at escape, and his actions could have been to avenge his father's imminent death and restore the family's honor. This inference can be further supported by the fact, as mentioned before; neither the author nor any of the characters cast any judgement on Helgi's actions, only addressing the manner in which he was killed.

To address violence more specifically as it relates to emotion, we turn now to the response to Njal's death. When Thorhall learned Njal had been murdered, he became so upset that blood came out from his ears and he fainted.³⁷ He argued this response was not a manly one and desired to take vengeance for that, but his men argued that no one would find his response shameful.³⁸ This is one of a handful of explicit passages where outward emotion is related to honor. It seems that this vulnerable state he was in, of showing emotion, must be relegated by his usage of violence against his foster-father's murderers. However, this emotion was not deemed illegitimate and was not seen as a shameful response from his men. This reinforces that emotion, in the right context, could be seen as a legitimate precursor to violence, specifically vengeance. Thorhall's immediate instinct to take vengeance against Njal's killers was not directly because of the murder, but instead because of his response to the killing. As mentioned before, Thorhall might have feared being a whiner in the eyes of Miller.³⁹ This fear supports that emotion and violence are related positively. Emotion precedes violence and emotion without immediate violence risks being seen as shameful. To compare another of Njal's allies' emotion and action, we will lastly turn to Asgrim in his hall.

After Njal's murder, Flosi rides to Asgrim to intimidate and show their ill will towards

³⁷ *Njal*, 231.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Miller, *Humiliation*, 58.

him.⁴⁰ Asgrim notes that they are laughing and if they were men like Thorgier, they would not laugh until the death of Njal was avenged. They invite themselves in and eat at his hall, much to Asgrim's obvious chagrin, notably turning red as blood. Asgrim swings at Flosi with his wood axe but is deflected by one of Flosi's hardier men. Flosi stops a counterattack and claims that Asgrim's attack was "what he had to do" and that he and his men had pushed Asgrim to the brink of decency.⁴¹ This shows not only the norms of hospitality, an interesting topic to address in saga culture, but the legitimacy of violence and emotion. The lead-burner Flosi, claiming that he did what he had to do, legitimizes Asgrim's response to Flosi and his men by turning blood red, something that could be seen as unmanly in the case of Thorhall, coupled with his act of violence. It is a very common man's understanding of honor, but it seems to imply he had to repay their gregariousness with his own act of violence. Flosi's honor is definitely up for debate, but him stating that Asgrim's actions were acceptable is perhaps the nearest we get to direct confirmation by a character of the legitimacy of the actions of another character. I end my analysis with this scene as to someone ill versed in saga literature, this exchange may not make logical sense. My hope is that through analyzing *Njal's Saga* through the lens of gender, a scene like this becomes abundantly clear and becomes a crystal example one can use to understand the values of the Viking Age in terms of violent action and the legitimacy of that action as it relates to emotion and gender.

By now, as stated before, my hope is that by analyzing *Njal's Saga* through the framework of a gendered analysis, we may be able to better understand the sort of societal norms and values held by the Viking Age culture. Much of the knowledge and opinion of current popular culture is that Vikings were a bloodthirsty, ruthless people who became extremely angry

⁴⁰ *Njal*, 241-242.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

at the slightest insult. This may be grounded in reality, but *Njal's Saga* shows a much more nuanced society than previously believed when it came to the perpetration of violence and the emotional reaction to insult and murder. To read *Njal's Saga* is to see a society hyper-focused on honor and pride, by both men and women, careful of their next move or word. To see the Viking Age as a time of extreme bloodshed may be a result of us attributing violent action to those we see alien to ourselves.⁴² Murder and warfare were carefully cultivated and calculated actions, with much of the saga only focusing on passing moments of violence, while whole passages are instead devoted to their legal implications and the sort of legitimate responses. The legitimacy of violent action was directly connected to the gendered language attributed to the actor as well as the sort of emotions they displayed; these concepts seem to be more important than just simple bloodshed for its own sake. These concepts are inextricably linked, with most of the events susceptible to a gendered analysis. To be manly was to be ready to perform legitimate violence, and displays of emotion were legitimized by that violence. It is especially important to note that the namesake of the saga is Njal, and that his masculinity is ruthlessly challenged, much with his battle prowess. Njal is prized for his intellect, his cunning, his foresight, and his great counsel. Ironically, these are character traits most often attributed to women in the sagas. This fact alone may suggest that the culture of the Viking Age was not simply highly misogynistic and male-centric, that some feminine characteristics of the society remains. It remains partly in the paradoxical, androgynous character of Njal, and that is still important enough today to research. Societies are entertained by stories of great leaders and warriors, and that is perhaps no more true in the culture of the Vikings. However, the preservation of the story of Njal suggests that lawyers and scholars had their place on the societal pedestal. It also suggests that female characteristics

⁴² Miller, *Humiliation*, 77.

and roles were important to the Vikings, with such characters as Hallgerd, Bergthora, Hildigunn and Hrodny serving as examples of instrumental players in the game of feuding. Much more can be learned about the values and norms of the Vikings, and close-readings of the sagas may be the key to gaining that understanding.

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