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## Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe

IN CHAPTER 32 OF *Gísla saga*, two bounty hunters come to the wife of the outlawed Gísli and offer her sixty ounces of silver to reveal the whereabouts of her husband. At first Auðr resists, but then, eyeing the coins and muttering that “cash is a widow’s best comfort,” she asks to have the money counted out. The men do so. Auðr pronounces the silver adequate and asks whether she may do with it what she wants. By all means, Eyjólfur replies. Then:

Auðr tekr nú féit ok lætr koma í einn stóran sjóð, stendr hon síðan upp ok rekr sjóðinn með silfrinu á nasar Eyjólfu, svá at þegar stökkur blóð um hann allan, ok mælti: “Haf nú þetta fyrir auðtryggi þína ok hvert ógagn með. Engi ván var þér 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. En þú munt ekki at heldr fá þat, er þú vildir.” Þá mælti Eyjólfur: “Hafið hendr á hundinum ok drepi, þó at blauðr sé.”<sup>1</sup>

In George Johnston’s translation:

Aud takes the silver and puts it in a big purse; she stands up and swings the purse with the silver in it at Eyjolf’s nose, so that the blood spurts out all over him; then she spoke: “Take that for your easy faith, and every harm with it! There was never any likelihood that I would give my husband over to you, scoundrel. Take your money, and shame and disgrace with it! You will remember, as long as you live, you miserable man, that a woman has struck you; and yet you will not get what you want for all that!”

Then Eyjolf said: “Seize the bitch and kill her, woman or not!” [literally, “Seize the dog (masculine) and kill (it), though (it) be *blauðr*”].<sup>2</sup>

Eyjólfur’s men hasten to restrain him, noting that their errand is bad enough as it is without the commission of a *níðingsverk* (rendered by Johnston as “a coward’s work”).

The adjective *blauðr* poses a translation problem.<sup>3</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson’s entries under it and its antonym *hvatr* read as follows:

BLAUDR, adj. Properly means *soft, weak*, answering Latin *mollis*, and is opposed to *hvatr*, ‘brisk, vigorous’; hence the proverb, *fár er hvatr er hrörask tekr, ef í barnæsku er blauðr* [few are *hvatir* in action who are *blauðir* in childhood]. Metaphorically *blauðr* means ‘feminine,’ *hvatr* ‘masculine,’ but only used of animals, dogs, cats, fishes; *hvatr-lax* = *hæingr* = *salmo mas*; [the feminine noun] *bleyða* is a ‘dam,’ and metaphorically ‘a coward, a craven.’ *Blauðr* is a term of abuse, a ‘bitch, coward.’

HVATR, adj. 'Bold, active, vigorous.' II. 'Male,' opposed to *blauðr*, 'female,' of beasts.<sup>4</sup>

Attested in both poetry and prose, *blauðr* occurs most conspicuously in verbal taunts toward or about men, and in such cases it is typically rendered in English as “coward” (earlier “craven”), as in Hallgerðr’s remark in chapter 38 of *Njáls saga*, “Jafnkomit mun á með ykk, er hvárrtveggi er blauðr” (translated in the Penguin edition, “The two of you are just alike; both of you are cowards”), directed to her pacifist husband and his equally pacifist friend Njáll, a man who not only favored Christianity but was unable to grow a beard.<sup>5</sup> When *blauðr* is used in reference to women or female animals, however (as in the *Gísla saga* passage above), it is rendered “woman” or “female”; clearly “coward” will not do in the *Gísla saga* passage. The need in English for two words (*coward* and *female*) where Norse uses one (*blauðr*), and Cleasby-Vigfusson’s brave, but on the face of it hopelessly bedeviled, effort to distinguish “metaphoric” from presumably “real” or “proper” usages, and human from animal, hint at the aspect of early Scandinavian culture, and perhaps Germanic culture in general, that this essay is about: a sex-gender system rather different from our own, and indeed rather different from that of the Christian Middle Ages.

Certainly the *Gísla saga* passage seems a snarl of gender crossings. If her sex qualifies Auðr as *blauðr*, bloodying the nose of a person qualifies her as *hvatr*; and if being a man qualifies Eyjólfur as *hvatr*, having his nose bloodied qualifies him as *blauðr*, and having his nose bloodied by a creature he himself wishes to designate as *blauðr* by virtue of her sex qualifies him as *blauðr* in the extreme—which is, of course, the point of Auðr’s reminder that he has been not only struck in the nose, but struck in the nose by a *woman*. When Eyjólfur calls out his order to have her seized despite the fact that she is *blauðr*, he acknowledges that whatever properties are assumed to attach to her bodily femaleness have been overridden by her aggressive behavior. She wants to be *hvatr*, she gets treated accordingly. And when his men restrain him, saying that they have accumulated enough shame without committing a *níðingsverk*, they in effect redefine her as *blauðr*.<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that the scene, particularly the focus on wifely loyalty, has Christian resonances (like all the Icelandic sagas, this one has roots in the pagan era but was written down during the Christian one), and that some part of its confusion stems from what I shall suggest are different gender paradigms.<sup>7</sup> But the real problem, I think, inheres in the *hvatr/blauðr* term set (presumably ancient) and the inability of the modern languages, and modern scholarship, to apprehend the distinction.

When commentaries on Viking and medieval Scandinavian culture get around (most do not) to the subject of “women” or “sex roles” or “the family,” they tend to tell a standard story of separate spheres.<sup>8</sup> Woman’s, symbolized by the bunch of keys at her belt, is the world *innan stokks* (“within the household”), where she is in charge of child care, cooking, serving, and tasks having to do with milk

and wool. Man's is the world beyond: the world of fishing, agriculture, herding, travel, trade, politics, and law. This inside/outside distinction is formulated in the laws and seems to represent an ideal state of affairs. It is no surprise, given its binary quality, and also given the way it seems to line up with such term sets as *hvatr/blauðr*, that modern speculations on underlying notions of gender in Norse culture should be similarly dichotomous. As labor is divided, in other words, so must be sexual nature: thus we read, in the handbooks, of the "polarity" of the sexes, of an "antithesis between masculine and feminine," of male-female "complementarity," and so on.<sup>9</sup>

But is it that simple, and, more to the point, is it that modern? Let me begin an interrogation of this sexual binary on the female side. From the outset of the scholarly tradition, readers have been startled and not infrequently appalled by the extraordinary array of "exceptional" or "strong" or "outstanding" or "proud" or "independent" women—women whose behavior exceeds what is presumed to be custom and sometimes the law as well. No summary can do them justice, not least because paraphrase (indeed, translation in general) forfeits the tone of marvelous aplomb, both social and textual, that is such a conspicuous and telling aspect of their stories. But for those unfamiliar with the field, the following list should give a rough idea of the parameters. Heading it is the formidable Unnr in *djúpúðga*. The overwhelming majority of Iceland's founding fathers (the original land claimants) were fathers indeed, but a handful—thirteen, according to *Landnámabók*<sup>10</sup>—were women, and one of these was Unnr, who, fearing for her life and fortunes in Scotland after the death of her father and son, had a ship built in secret and fled, taking all her kin and retinue with her, to Orkney, then the Faroes, and finally Iceland, where, in about the year 900, she took possession of vast lands and established a dynasty.<sup>11</sup> ("In every respect," Preben Meulengracht Sørensen observes, "she has taken over the conduct and social functions of the male householder and leader.")<sup>12</sup>

In Scandinavia as in the Germanic world in general, men preceded women as heirs, but women did inherit, and a variety of evidence confirms that women could, and a not-insignificant percentage did, become considerable landholders.<sup>13</sup> They could also become traders and business partners. One of the main Scandinavian ventures on the North American continent was significantly bankrolled by a woman. She undertook the journey herself, and during the American winter, she is said to have driven her husband to murder several companions while she herself took an axe to their wives.<sup>14</sup> It may well be that even that most macho of early Scandinavian business activities, organized piracy ("viking" in the proper sense of the term), was practiced by women. *The War of the Gædhil with the Gaill* refers twice to a "red girl" who headed up a viking band in Ireland and invaded Munster in the tenth century, and as any reader of the literature well knows, there are many other such legends of "fierce and imperious women"—legends so numerous and so consistent that, as Peter Foote and David

Wilson sum it up, they “must certainly have some basis in reality.”<sup>15</sup> More mundane but no less telling, given the “overwhelming maleness” of the enterprise, is the existence of a handful of women skalds.<sup>16</sup> More generally, the sources tell of a number of women who prosecute their lives in general, and their sex lives in particular, with a kind of aggressive authority unexpected in a woman and unparalleled in any other European literature.<sup>17</sup>

Nor was government the exclusive turf of men. It was in principle a male matter, but in practice, if we are to believe the sagas, women could insinuate themselves at almost every level of the process. One source claims that until the year 992, when they were debarred, women in Iceland could bring suit.<sup>18</sup> Normally women were not allowed to serve as witnesses—but exceptions could be made. Likewise service as arbitrators; it was a male business, but we know of at least one woman who “was formally empowered by the disputants to act as an arbitrator in a case.”<sup>19</sup> Normally and ideally households were headed by men, but the laws provide for the female exception, and although the female householder was in principle subject to the authority of male guardians, the sagas give evidence, as William Ian Miller puts it, that “women were more than mere title holders with managerial powers lodged solely with men.”<sup>20</sup> Women were in theory exempt from feud violence, but there are cases of their being specifically included together with able-bodied men as targets of vengeance.<sup>21</sup> In Iceland, not just men but also women were subject to the penalties of outlawry and execution. Only a man could *be a godi*, but it was technically possible for women to *own* the office.<sup>22</sup> A woman’s control over whatever property she might technically own was less a function of her sex than her marital status: an unmarried and underage girl had none; a married woman, little; a widow, however (as Foote and Wilson sum it up), “could have charge of her own property, no matter her age, and administer that of her children; she also had more say in arrangements that might be made for another marriage.”<sup>23</sup> Certainly women’s role, in blood feud, in “choosing the avenger” involved them centrally in the family politics of honor and inheritance, theoretically male terrain.<sup>24</sup> Normally women were buried with “female” grave goods (e.g., spinning implements), but there are enough examples of female graves with “male” objects (weapons, hunting equipment, carpentry tools) to suggest that even in death some women remained marked as exceptional.<sup>25</sup>

The examples could be multiplied, but even this summary list should suffice to prompt the paradoxical question: Just how useful is the category “woman” in apprehending the status of women in early Scandinavia? To put it another way, was femaleness any more decisive in setting parameters on individual behavior than were wealth, prestige, marital status, or just plain personality and ambition? If femaleness could be overridden by other factors, as it seems to be in the cases I have just mentioned, what does that say about the sex-gender system of early Scandinavia, and what are the implications for maleness? I have no doubt that the “outstanding” women I enumerated earlier were indeed exceptional; that is

presumably why their stories were remembered and recorded. But there is something about the quality and nature of such exceptions, not to say the sheer number of them and the tone of their telling, that suggests a less definitive rule than modern commentators have been inclined to allow. Certainly between women's de jure status and de facto status (as it is represented in literary and even historical texts) there appears to have been a very large playing field, and the woman (especially the divorced or widowed woman) sufficiently ambitious and sufficiently endowed with money and power seems not to have been especially hindered by notions of male and female nature.<sup>26</sup>

The slippage is not only between law and life. It is also between law and law (regional variations pointing to a degree of relativity in the importance of sexual difference), and it is also, on some points, within one and the same law. I turn here to the portion of *Grágás* known as *Baugatal*. A schedule of compensation for slayings, *Baugatal* (literally “ring count”) divides the kindred into four tiers depending on their relationship to the slain person. The first tier is composed of near kinsmen of the slain person (father, son, brother, etc.), who are required to pay (if they are defendants) or collect (if they are plaintiffs) the main “ring” or major share of the wergild. Then comes the next tier, made up of less immediately related kinsmen with a lesser share of the wergild, and so on. The extensive list, which explores all possible permutations of payers and receivers, consists exclusively of men, with one exception.

Sú er ok kona ein er bæði skal baugi bæta ok baug taka ef hon er einberni. En sú kona heitir baugrygr. En hon er dóttir ins dauða, enda sé eigi skapþiggjandi til höfuðbaugs en bœtendr lifi, þá skal hon taka þrímerking *sem sonr*, ef hon tók eigi full sætti at vígsbótum til þess er hon er gipt; enda skulu frændr á lengr taka. Nú er hon dóttir veganda, en engi er skapbœtendi til bœtendi til höfuðbaugs, en viðtakendr sé til, þá skal hon bæta þrímerkingi *sem sonr* til þess er hon kœmr í vers hvílu; en þá kastar hon gjöldum í kné frændum.

[There is also one woman who is both to pay and to take a wergild ring, given that she is an only child, and that woman is called “ring lady.” She who takes is the daughter of the dead man if no proper receiver of the main ring otherwise exists but atonement payers are alive, and she takes the three-mark ring *like a son*, assuming that she has not accepted full settlement in compensation for the killing, and this until she is married, but thereafter kinsmen take it. She who pays is the daughter of the killer if no proper payer of the main ring otherwise exists but receivers do, and then she is to pay the three-mark ring *like a son*, and this until she enters a husband’s bed and thereby tosses the outlay into her kinsmen’s lap.]<sup>27</sup>

In other words, when the slain man has no male relatives in the first tier (no son, brother, or father) but *does* have a daughter (unmarried), that daughter shall function as a son. So compelling is the principle of patrilineage that, in the event of genealogical crisis, even a woman can be conscripted as a kind of pinch hitter. Better a son who is your daughter than no son at all.

That the “surrogate son” provision is of some antiquity in Scandinavia is sug-

gested by the presence of similar statutes on the mainland.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that its implications go beyond the matter of wergild, for insofar as a wergild list ranks an individual's kinsmen according to their degree of relatedness to the slain person, it is also assumed to reflect the schedule of inheritance as well. It is moreover assumed to reflect the schedule of actual feud—the order in which the survivors are obliged to take retaliatory action. Thus the law itself contemplates a situation in which, in the genealogical breach, a woman becomes a functional son, not only in the transaction of wergild, but also in the matter of inheritance and also, at least in principle, in the actual prosecution of feud. (That she must revert to female status upon marriage further underscores the expectation that gender will yield, as it were, to the greater good of survival of the line.) Just where and when and how completely the surrogate son clause obtained we have no idea, although the ubiquity of “maiden warrior” legends—legends of unmarried, brotherless daughters who on the death of their fathers become functional sons, even dressing and acting the part—suggests that the idea was very much alive in the public mind.<sup>29</sup> In either case, what concerns us here is not so much historical practice as legal contemplation—the plain fact that even within one and the same law, the principle of sex is not so final or absolute that it could not be overridden by greater interests. *Baugatal* and similar surrogate son provisions not only allow but institutionalize the female exception. Again, to judge from the presence of “male” objects in the occasional female grave, not even death necessarily undid such exceptionality.

I have hesitated over such terms as “femaleness” and “masculinity” in the above paragraphs, for they seem to me inadequate to what they mean to describe. The modern distinction between sex (biological: the reproductive apparatus) and gender (acquired traits: masculinity and femininity) seems oddly inapposite to the Norse material—in much the same way that Cleasby-Vigfusson's distinction between literal and metaphoric seems oddly inapposite to the semantic fields of the words *blauðr* and *hvatr*. What can be the meaning of biological femaleness in a culture that permits women to serve as juridical men?” If biological femaleness does not determine one's juridical status, what does it determine—and indeed what does it matter? Is this a culture in which “sex” per se is irrelevant and “gender” is everything? Or is it a culture that simply does not make a clear distinction but holds what we imagine to be two as one and the same thing? Something of the sort would seem to be the lesson of the *blauðr/hvatr* complex. Cleasby-Vigfusson proposes (in effect) that the word *blauðr* refers to “sex” when applied to a sex-appropriate being (thus to call Auðr *blauðr* is merely to call her female) but to “gender” when applied to a sex-inappropriate being (thus to call a man *blauðr* is to call him cowardly); but the fact that one word does for both (both “sex” and “gender,” or in Cleasby-Vigfusson's terms both “proper” and “metaphoric”) would seem to suggest that in Old Norse there is no “both” in the modern sense, but a single notion. That this single notion corresponds, at least in the case of the

female, more closely to our sense of gender than to our sense of sex (though I shall suggest later that the Scandinavian sense of “gender” wreaks havoc with the concept of gender as we understand it) is clear from the examples of “exceptional” or “outstanding” women I enumerated above. “Woman” is a normative category, but not a binding one. If a woman is normally *blauðr*, she is not inevitably so, and when she is *hvatr*, she is thought unusual, but not unnatural.

Unusual for the better. Although the woman who for whatever reason plays life like a man is occasionally deplored by the medieval author,<sup>30</sup> she is more commonly admired—sometimes grudgingly, but often just flatly. Certainly *Laxdæla saga* is unequivocal about Unnr in *djúpuðga*: “Hon hafði brott með sér allt frændlið sitt, þat er á lífi var, ok þykkjask menn varla dæmi til finna, at einn kvenmaðr hafi komizk í brott ór þvílíkum ófriði með jafnmiklu fé ok fõruneyti; má a því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna” (She took with her all her surviving kinsfolk; and it is generally thought that it would be hard to find another example of a woman escaping from such hazards with so much wealth and such a large retinue; from this it can be seen what a paragon amongst women she was.)<sup>31</sup> So too Auðr in the same saga, who assumes male dress and arms and goes off to exact the revenge her brothers refused to take on her behalf; although the saga does not say so in so many words, it is clear that her actions are approved of, legal injunctions against transvestism notwithstanding.<sup>32</sup> Lest we doubt the gender implications of such women’s exceptional behavior, it is spelled out for us in the application to them of that most privileged of epithets, *drengr* (*drengiligr*, *drengskapr*, etc.). Defined by Cleasby-Vigfusson as a “bold, valiant, worthy man,” *drengr* is conventionally held up as the very soul of masculine excellence in Norse culture.<sup>33</sup> Yet Njáll’s wife Bergþóra is introduced as “kvenskõrungr mikill ok drengr góðr ok nõkkut skaphõrð” (a woman of great bearing and a good *drengr*, but somewhat harsh-natured).<sup>34</sup> Even Hildigunnr, whose goading of Flosi fuels a feud that might otherwise have calmed down, is so designated: “Hon var allra kvenna grimmust ok skaphõrðust ok drengr mikill, þar sem vel skyldi vera” (She was the sternest and most hard-minded of women but a great *drengr* when need be.)<sup>35</sup> This is a world in which “masculinity” always has a plus value, even (or perhaps especially) when it is enacted by a woman.<sup>36</sup>

If the category “woman” is a movable one, what of the category “man”? Is maleness, too, subject to mutation and “exception,” or is it alone clear and fixed? Much has been said—though far more *could* be said—about Norse notions of masculinity. On the assumption that readers are generally familiar with the ideal, let me proceed directly to that long and broad streak in the literature—a streak that runs through poetry (both mythological and heroic) and prose, Latin and vernacular, legend and history and even law—in which manliness is most garishly contested: the tradition of insulting.



Although insults are most concentrated in those literary set pieces we call flytings (*senna* and *mannjafnaðr*), they can crop up in just about any venue.<sup>37</sup> In terms more or less formal and more or less humorous, the insulter impugns his antagonist's appearance (poor or beggardly); reminds him of heroic failure (losing a battle, especially against an unworthy opponent); accuses him of cowardice, of trivial or irresponsible behavior (pointless escapades, domestic indulgences, sexual dalliance), or of failings of honor (unwillingness or inability to extract due vengeance, hostile relations with kinsmen); declares him a breaker of alimentary taboos (drinking urine, eating corpses); and/or charges him with sexual irregularity (incest, castration, bestiality, "receptive homosexuality"). (Once again, although most insults are traded between men, there are also women in the role of both insulter and insultee—though a woman in either role usually faces off against a man, not another woman, and although she may score lots of direct hits, in the end she always loses. The most frequent charges against women are incest, promiscuity, and sleeping with the enemy.)<sup>38</sup>

Of these, the most spectacular is the form of sexual defamation known as *níð*. Very likely part of the Germanic legacy, *níð* was prohibited by law. The following passages give a sense of the term.<sup>39</sup> The first is from the Norwegian Gulapíng Code and follows the rubric "If a person makes *níð* against someone":

Engi maðr scal gera tungu níð um annan. ne trenið. . . . Engi scal gera yki um annan. æða fiolmæle. þat heiter yki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi ma væra. ne verða oc eigi hever verit. kveðr hann væra kono niundu nott hveria. oc hever barn boret. oc kallar gylvin. þa er hann utlagr. ef han verðr at því sannr.<sup>40</sup>

[Nobody is to make *tungu níð* (verbal *níð*) about another person, nor a *trénið* (wooden *níð*). . . . No one is to make an *yki* (exaggeration) about another or a libel. It is called *yki* if someone says something about another man which cannot be, nor come to be, nor have been: declares he is a woman every ninth night or has born a child or calls him *gylfin* (a werewolf or unnatural monster?). He is outlawed if he is found guilty of that. Let him deny it with a six-man oath. Outlawry is the outcome if the oath fails.]<sup>41</sup>

The second also comes from the Gulapíng Code, in the passage under the rubric *fullréttisorð* (verbal offenses for which full compensation must be paid):

Orð ero þau er fullrettis orð heita. þat er eitt ef maðr kveðr at karlmanne oðrum. at hann have barn boret. þat er annat. ef maðr kveðr hann væra sannsorðenn. þat er hit þriðia. ef hann iamnar hanom við meri. æða kallar hann grey. æða portkono. æða iamnar hanom við berende eitthvert.<sup>42</sup>

[There are certain expressions known as *fullréttisorð* (words for which full compensation must be paid). One is if a man says to another that he has given birth to a child. A second is if a man says of another that he is *sannsorðinn* (demonstrably fucked). The third is if he compares him to a mare, or calls him a bitch or harlot, or compares him with the female of any kind of animal.]

The corresponding provision in the Icelandic *Grágás* establishes lesser outlawry (three years' exile) for *ýki* and *trénið*, but full outlawry (exile for life) for the utterance of any of the words *ragr*, *stroðinn*, or *sorðinn*. Indeed, for these three words one has the right to kill.<sup>43</sup>

The legal profile of *níð* is richly attested in the literature. Two examples suffice to give the general picture: Skarphéðinn's taunting suggestion, in *Njáls saga*, that Flosi would do well to accept a gift of pants, "ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níunda nótt ok geri hann þik at konu" (if you are the bride of the Svínafell troll, as people say, every ninth night and he uses you as a woman)<sup>44</sup> and Sinfjötli's claim to Guðmundr in the eddic *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, "Nío átto við/á nesi Ságo/úlfa alna,/ec var einn faðir þeirra" (Nine wolves you and I begot on the island of Sága; I alone was their father).<sup>45</sup> As the latter example in particular indicates (and there are many more), what is at stake here is not homosexuality per se, for the role of the penetrator is regarded as not only masculine but boastworthy regardless of the sex of the object.<sup>46</sup> The charge of *níð* devolves solely on the penetrated man—the *sorðinn* or *ragr* man. This architecture is a familiar one in the early world and in certain quarters of the modern one as well, but it surely finds one of its most brazen expressions in the Norse tradition of *níð*.

To what extent sodomy, consensual or otherwise, was practiced in early Scandinavia is unknown. What is clear from a survey of *níð* examples is that the charges to that effect are "symbolic" (as Folke Ström would have it) or "moral" (as Meulengracht Sørensen prefers) insofar as they refer not to an act of sex but rather to such "female" characteristics as "a lack of manly courage," "lack of prowess," or "'unmanliness' in both its physical and its mental sense," or "certain mental qualities, not to mention duties that were considered specifically female."<sup>47</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen distinguishes three meanings of the word *argr/ragr* as it refers to men: "perversity in sexual matters" (being penetrated anally), "versed in witchcraft," and "'cowardly, unmanly, effeminate' with regard to morals and character." The second and third meanings derive from the first, in his view, by the logic that "a man who subjects himself to another in sexual affairs will do the same in other respects; and fusion between the notions of sexual unmanliness and unmanliness in a moral sense stands at the heart of *níð*."<sup>48</sup>

Symbolic or no, the *níð* taunts figure the insultee as a female and in so doing suggest that the category "man" is, if anything, even more susceptible to mutation than the category "woman." For if a woman's ascent into the masculine took some doing, the man's descent into the feminine was just one real or imagined act away. Nor is the "femaleness" of that act in doubt. Anal penetration constructed the man who experienced it as whore, bride, mare, bitch, and the like—in whatever guise a female creature, and as such subject to pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. In the world of *níð* (male) anus and vagina are for all imaginary purposes one and the same thing. Men are sodomizable in much the way women are rap-

able, and with the same consequences. The charge may be “symbolic,” but its language could hardly be more corporeal, and although, as I shall suggest below, the separate status of the female body is far from secure, there is no doubt that the body of the *ragr* man looks very much like that of a woman.

But is *níð* really the fundamental truth of early Scandinavian sexual attitudes? It is not surprising that modern scholarship has reified it as such, given its special status in the laws and also given the way, thanks to its occlusion in the scholarly tradition, it has been handed to modern critics as a kind of blank slate.<sup>49</sup> But it is important to remember that *níð* insults are by no means the only sort of Norse insult; that they are typically found interspersed, as if on roughly equal footing, with insults not immediately sexual; and that in this larger context, *níð* insults seem part and parcel of a shame system in which the claim of femaleness is an especially striking, but by no means the only, element.

Men call each other poor or beggardly—and in quite stinging terms—as often as they call each other women. They call each other slaves and captives. They accuse one another of having fled from danger or having failed to take action to protect themselves and their kin. A great number of insults occur in alternation with boasts and turn on some standard oppositions: action vs. talk, hard life vs. soft life, adventurer vs. stay-at-home, etc. In a particularly grandiose flyting from *Örvar-Odds saga*, the legendary Örvar-Oddr brags of having explored warfare when all the insultee explored was the king’s hall; of having fought the Permians while the insultee was safely ensconced at home between linen sheets; of having razed enemy strongholds while the insultee was “chattering with girls”; of having slain eighteen men while the insultee was staggering his way to a bondwoman’s bed; of having brought down an earl while the insultee was “at home wavering between the calf and the slave girl.” Similar is the claim in the eddic *Helgi Hundingsbana I* that while the “flight-scorning prince” Helgi was off feeding the eagles, Sinfjötli was “at the mill kissing slave girls.” Insofar as home-staying (especially when it amounts to combat avoidance) is coded as effeminate (even though the accused may be an active “phallic aggressor”<sup>50</sup> within the realm of the household), these insults, too, are haunted by gender, and they indeed on occasion tip over into *níð*, as in the following stanza from *Örvar-Odds saga*: “Sigurðr, vart eigi, / er á Sælundi felldak / bræðr böðharða, / Brand ok Agnar, / Ýsmund, Ingjald, / Álfr var inn fimmti; / en þú heima látt / í höll konungs, / skrökmálasamr, / skauð hernumin” (Sigurðr, you weren’t on Zealand when I felled the battle-hard brothers Brandr and Agnarr, Ásmundr and Ingjaldr, and Álfr was the fifth—while you were lying at home in the king’s hall, full of tall stories, a *skauð hernumin*).<sup>51</sup> The participial *hernumin* here means “battle-taken” and suggests the sort of victimization to which a prisoner of war was subject. The feminine noun *skauð* means “sheath” and is a word for a fold or crack in the genital area—used in practice to refer to the female genital and to the fold of skin into which a horse’s penis retracts.<sup>52</sup> If *skauð hernumin* defies precise translation, its general sense is clear. The insultee is trebly

accused: of being a draft dodger, of being a prisoner of war and hence subject to whatever abuse that condition may entail, and of having either no penis or one so soft and hidden—so *blauðr*—that it is useless as such.

Whatever else they may be, these are insults preoccupied with power—or, more to the point, with powerlessness under threat of physical force. That sexual difference is deeply imbricated in this concern is clear. The question is which, if either, is primary. Is power a metaphor for sex (so that the charge of poverty boils down to a charge of femaleness), as Meulengracht Sørensen argues, or is sex a metaphor for power (so that the charge of *níð* boils down to a charge of powerlessness)? Modern scholarship has tended to assume the former. I incline toward the latter, or toward a particular version of the latter. The insult complex seems to me to be driven, not by the opposition male/female per se, but by the opposition *hvatr/blauðr*, which works more as a gender continuum than a sexual binary. That is, although the ideal man is *hvatr* and the typical woman is *blauðr*, neither is necessarily so; and each can, and does, slip into the territory of the other.

If the human body was once taken as the one sure fact of history, the place where culture stopped and biological verities began, it is no longer. Not in the academy, in any case, in which there has arisen a virtual industry of investigating the ways conceptions of bodies, above all sexed bodies, are historically contingent. Of particular interest for students of early Scandinavia are the implications of what Thomas Laqueur calls the “one-sex” or “one-flesh” model of sexual difference that he argues obtained in Western Europe from the Greeks through the early modern period.<sup>53</sup> Unlike the “two-sex” or “two-flesh” model, which emerged in the late eighteenth century and which construes male and female as “opposite” or *essentially* different from one another, the “one-sex” model understands the sexes as inside-vs.-outside versions of a single genital/reproductive apparatus, differing in degree of warmth or coolness and hence in degree of value (hot being superior to cool) but essentially the same in form and function and hence ultimately fungible versions of one another. The point here is not that there is no notion of sexual difference but that the difference was conceived less as a set of absolute opposites than as a system of isomorphic analogues, the superior male set working as a visible map to the invisible and inferior female set—for the one sex in question was essentially male, women being viewed as “inverted, and less perfect, men.”<sup>54</sup>

So the official story, the one told by medical treatises. Popular mythologies were (and to a remarkable degree still are) rather more fluid in their understanding of which parts match which. A millennially popular “set” equates the (male) anus with the vagina—not a correspondence authorized by the medical treatises, but one that proceeds easily from the one-sex body as a general proposition. (The word *vagina* itself, meaning “sword sheath,” was also used in Latin

sources to refer to the anus.<sup>55</sup> Certainly, Norse words or periphrases for the vagina are typically usable for the anus, and it is indeed with deprecating reference to the male that such terms are conspicuously attested.)<sup>56</sup> What is of particular interest for present purposes is not so much the system of homologues *per se*, but the fluidity implied by that system. This is a universe in which maleness and femaleness were always negotiable, always up for grabs, always susceptible to “conditions.” If “conditions” could go so far as to activate menstruation in men or a traveling down of the sexual member in women (eventualities attested by medical authorities throughout the early period), then “conditions” could easily enable gender encroachments of a more moderate sort.<sup>57</sup>

A systematic account of the Norse construction of the body, including the sexed body, remains to be written. I presume that the Scandinavians in the early period had some one-sex account of bodily difference—the conflation of anus and vagina and the charges of male pregnancy point clearly in that direction—but no treatise spells out the terms. I also presume that in the same way that the thirteenth-century authors were cognizant of other medical learning (the theory of humors, for example), they were cognizant of the learned hot/cool model of sexual difference—but they did not insinuate that model into the “historical” texts. One can think of several reasons for this: because they preferred to let tradition overrule science, because for narrative purposes strength stood as the objective correlative of heat, because it is the nature of sagas to naturalize learning. But it may also, and above all, be because the medieval authors knew that in the very social stories they had to tell, actual genitals were pretty much beside the point. The first lesson of the foregoing examples is that bodily sex was not that decisive. The “conditions” that mattered in the north—the “conditions” that pushed a person into another status—worked not so much at the level of the body, but at the level of social relations.

The second lesson has to do with the attenuated quality of the category “female.” The fact that “femaleness” is so frequently invoked with reference to men (far more often than to women, I suspect), the absence of a language for and lack of concern with features exclusive to women, and the consignment of anything that might qualify as women’s sphere to a position virtually outside of history would seem to suggest that what is at stake here is not “femininity” in any modern sense, but simply “effeminacy” or, more to the point, “impotence”—the default category for the person of either sex who for whatever reason fell outside normative masculinity. Scholars who try to distinguish the feminine from the effeminate by suggesting that the female role was ignominious only when it was assigned to a man and that women and female activities as such were not held in contempt are on shaky ground, for the sources point overwhelmingly to a structure in which women no less than men were held in contempt for womanishness and were admired—and mentioned—only to the extent that they showed some “pride” (as their aggressive self-interest is repeatedly characterized in modern

commentaries).<sup>58</sup> Again, it seems likely that Norse society operated according to a one-sex model—that there was one sex and it was male. More to the point, there was finally just one “gender,” one standard by which persons were judged adequate or inadequate, and it was something like masculine.

What finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitably nor exclusively, associated. By the same token, what prompts admiration is not maleness per se, but sovereignty of the sort enjoyed mostly and typically and ideally, but not solely, by men. This is in any case not a world in which the sexes are opposite or antithetical or polar or complementary (to return again to the modern apparatus). On the contrary, it is a world in which gender, if we can even call it that, is neither coextensive with biological sex, despite its dependence on sexual imagery, nor a closed system, but a system based to an extraordinary extent on winnable and losable attributes. It goes without saying that the one-sex or single-standard system (in the sense I have outlined it here) is one that advantaged men. But it is at the same time a system in which being born female was not so damaging that it could not be offset by other factors. A woman may start with debits and a man with credits, but any number of other considerations—wealth, marital status, birth order, historical accident, popularity, a forceful personality, sheer ambition, and so on—could tip the balance in the other direction. (When Hallgerðr of *Njáls saga*, who acted herself so forcefully into history, says to her father that “pride is something you and your kinsmen have plenty of, so it’s no surprise that I should have some too,” she articulates perfectly the economy of the one-sex model, in which, however unequal, men and women are, or can be, players in the same game.)<sup>59</sup> More to the point, because the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall, the potential for sexual overlap in the social hierarchy was always present. The frantic machismo of Norse males, at least as they are portrayed in the literature, would seem on the face of it to suggest a society in which being born male precisely did *not* confer automatic superiority, a society in which distinction had to be acquired, and constantly reacquired, by wresting it away from others.

Let me take this a step further and propose that to the extent that we can speak of a social binary, a set of two categories, into which all persons were divided, the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men). Even the most casual reader of Norse literature knows how firmly drawn is that line, for it suggests itself all over

the lexical and documentary map, including in the laws themselves, which distinguish clearly and repeatedly between *úmegð* (singular *úmagi*), “dependents” (literally, those who cannot maintain themselves: “children, aged people, men disabled by sickness, paupers, etc.”), on one hand, and “breadwinners” (*magi/megð*) on the other.<sup>60</sup> What I am suggesting is that this is *the* binary, the one that cuts most deeply and the one that matters: between strong and weak, powerful and powerless or disempowered, swordworthy and unswordworthy, honored and unhonored or dishonored, winners and losers.<sup>61</sup> Insofar as these categories, though not biological, have a sexual look to them, the one associated with the male body and the other with something like the female one, and insofar as the polarity or complementarity or antithesis that modern scholarship has brought to bear on maleness and femaleness applies far more readily, and with less need for qualification, to the opposition *hvatr/blauðr* or *magi/úmagi*, they might as well be called genders. The closest English comes to the distinction may be “spear side” and “distaff side”—a distinction which, although it is clearly (now) welded to sexual difference, is nonetheless one derived from roles (rather than bodies) and hence at least gestures toward gender (insofar as men are in principle able to spin and women to do battle).

To observe that some such binary is a familiar feature of premodern societies (and at the popular level in modern ones as well) should not detract from its decisive importance in Old Norse.<sup>62</sup> Nor is (for example) the Greek distinction between hoplites and *kinaidoi* as it has been outlined in recent scholarship quite apposite to the Scandinavian one between *magi* and *úmagi*, for the gender traffic in Norse involves not only men, but women, and conspicuously so. What John J. Winkler calls the “odd belief in the reversibility of the male person, always in peril of slipping into the servile or the feminine,” is matched, in Norse, by the odd belief in the reversibility also of the female person, under the right conditions capable of ascension into the ranks of those who master, and that fact has grave consequences for the male side of the story.<sup>63</sup> Not only losable by men, but achievable by women, masculinity was in a kind of double jeopardy for the Norse man. He who for whatever reason became a social woman stood, to put it crudely, to find himself not just side by side with woman, but under her, and, again, it may be just that ever-present possibility that gives Norse maleness its desperate edge. The literature is in any case rich with scenes, both historical and legendary, that turn on male humiliation or defeat at the hands of women—including, as a relatively gentle example, the encounter between Auðr and Eyjólfur with which this essay began.<sup>64</sup>

Let me turn to a stream in the downward gender traffic that I have not yet mentioned, though it is especially privileged in the documents: men once firmly in category A who have slid into category B by virtue of age. In a literature not given to pathos and little interested in the old, these moments—in which former heroes are shown doddering about, or bedridden, or blind and impotent—stand

out in strong relief.<sup>65</sup> We tend to understand the poignancy of such scenes rather straightforwardly in terms of the past, as a kind of northern sounding of the *ubi sunt* or *sic transit gloria* themes so richly developed in Old English verse. Certainly they are that, but with a spin that strikes me as if not uniquely Norse, then characteristically so. For in the Norse examples it is not just the ruination of the once-heroic body that is at stake, but the second-class company such a body is forced to keep.

Consider, for example, just how many of the scenes of Egill Skallagrímsson's old age are played out in the company of women—who cajole, tease, laugh at, advise, and humor him, both figuratively and literally pushing him around. His story could have been told, as others are, with fewer (or indeed none) of these scenes; certainly the preceding 230-odd pages of that text are as woman-free as the Icelandic sagas get. The effect of this cluster of women at the end, I think, is to suggest that Egill has in a sense become one of them—no longer a man of the public world, but a man *innan stokks*. Viewed in this context, his composition, on the death of his son(s), of the lament *Sonatorrek* (Loss of My Sons)—thought by many the most magnificent poem in the language—takes on a new dimension. To judge from the extant literature, emotional lamentations of this woe-is-me sort are very much the business of women in early Scandinavia, so much so that they seem tantamount to a female industry.<sup>66</sup> Thematically, metaphorically, and lexically, Egill's poem resembles nothing so much as Guðrún's lament in the eddic *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvot*,<sup>67</sup> and although his composition is commonly assumed to be prior, the fact that it is the *only* male-composed lament of the woe-is-me type in early Scandinavia, and that it is produced so emphatically *innan stokks* (not only within the house but within the bedchamber, where he lies mourning) and so specifically in the company of women (his daughter induces him to compose it, and the audience for its premier performance consists of “Ásgerðr, þorgerðr, and the household”) leads me to wonder whether some part of its original pathos did not have to do with the gendered circumstances of its production.<sup>68</sup> To pose it as a question: Is it possible that some of *Sonatorrek*'s contemporary force derived from its point of issue on the distaff side and its coding as a “woman's” form?

By way of steadying this suggestion about *Sonatorrek*, let me turn to two proverbs that explicitly link the condition of old men with femaleness. One, which in fact turns on public speech, occurs in a scene in *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings* in which a woman named Bjargey urges a husband too old for battle to take up the role of whetter. “þat er karlmannligt mál,” she moralizes, “at hann, er til engra harðræðanna er fõrr, at spara þá ekki tunguna at tala þat, er honom mætti verða gagn at” (It is manly for those unfit for vigorous deeds to be unsparing in their use of the tongue to say those things that may avail).<sup>69</sup> The saying is doubly telling. It acknowledges the equivalence of old men and women, for tongue wielding (whetting, egging) is a conspicuously female activity.<sup>70</sup> But it also acknowledges the



commensurability of the tongue and the sword. The homology of physical and verbal dueling is a familiar theme in the literature, cropping up in such phrases as “war of words,” “to battle with the voice,” “to wound with words,” or, to reverse the formulation, “quarrel of swords” (= battle). Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* similarly describes Ericus Disertus (Eiríkr inn málsþaki or Eric the Eloquent) as an “argument athlete” (*altercationum athleta*) who is as “valorous in tongue as in hand,” and Gotwar as a woman for whom “words were weapons,” someone who “could not fight” but “found darts in her tongue instead.”<sup>71</sup> The tongue may be a lesser weapon, the “sword” of the unswordworthy, but it is a weapon nonetheless, and one whose effects could be serious indeed (as the legal injunctions against *tungunið* attest). And like the sword it is less than, the tongue is subject to bold use or cowardly unuse, so that even within the category of unswordworthy persons, conspicuously women and old men, the politics of *hvatr* and *blauðr* play themselves out. “It is *manly*,” Bjargey says, for the unswordworthy to use their tongues to make things happen. Better to wield the sword than the tongue, in short, but better to wield the tongue than to wield nothing—in both cases whether one is a man or a woman.

Egill himself states the equation in a pithy half-stanza lamenting the effects of age: “My neck is weak,” he says; “I fear falling on my head; my hearing is gone; and *blautr erum bergis fôtar borr*.”<sup>72</sup> The line in question translates something like: “soft is the bore [= drill bit] of the foot/leg of taste/pleasure,” the bore referring to tongue if one takes *bergis fôtar* to mean “head,” but to penis if one takes the kenning to mean “leg or limb of pleasure.”<sup>73</sup> If one assumes, as I do, that the art of the line lies precisely in its duplicity and that *both* meanings (penis *and* tongue) inhere in it (skaldic verse is nothing if not a poetry of the double entendre), and if one hears the harmonic “sword” that inevitably sounds over these two tones (for penises and tongues are repeatedly figured as weapons),<sup>74</sup> and finally if one adds in the sense of effeminacy/femaleness that attaches to the word *blautr*, “soft” (a word that rhymes both sonically and semantically with *blauðr*), one has in this five-word verse the full chord: when not only one’s sword and penis go limp but also one’s tongue, life is pretty much over. This is not the first we have heard of Egill’s tongue, of course. *Sonatorrek* itself opens with a complaint about the difficulty of its erection (*Mjök erum tregt / tungu at hræra / eðr loptvæi / ljóðþundara*; “It is very hard for me to stir my tongue or the steel-yard of the song-weigher”);<sup>75</sup> and although there is no question of an overt sexual or martial meaning here, the wider system of tongue/sword/penis correspondences invites us to just such associations, which serve in turn to confirm our sense that this poem stems from a point very far down the gender scale—a point at which sword and penis have given way to the tongue, and even the tongue may not be up to the task. (The one-sex reasoning behind the sword/penis/tongue construction, and the value of the categories relative to one another, could hardly be clearer. Worth remembering, on the distaff side, is the figure used to characterize the maiden warrior

Hervör's shift from the female to the male role: she trades the needle for the sword.)<sup>76</sup> Egill's *Sonatorrek* sounds like a female lament, in short, because in some deep cultural sense it *is* one.

The second proverb is untranslatable, and in its untranslatability is crystallized the problem on which this essay turns. It occurs in *Hrafnkels saga* and is invoked by a serving woman in an effort to rouse Hrafnkell from bed as enemies approach the farm: "Svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk"—"Everyone becomes *argr* who [or: as he/she] gets older."<sup>77</sup> Like the entry under *blauðr*, Cleasby-Vigfusson's entry under *argr* (the banned "a" word of the laws) tries to solve the problem by distinguishing a literal meaning ("emasculate," "effeminate") from a figurative one ("wretch," "craven," "coward"). If we elect the latter, we get something along the lines of "Sooner or later, we all end up cowardly" (E. V. Gordon) or "The older the man, the feeble" (Hermann Pálsson), a choice that occludes the sense of gendered degradation that the term *argr* carries with it.<sup>78</sup> If we elect the former, we get something like "Sooner or later, we all end up effeminate." It is clear why translators would prefer "cowardly" here, for "effeminate" jolts: What can it mean if every man eventually becomes it, and do women become it, too? I would argue that (although neither choice is good) "effeminate" is preferable for two reasons: because it captures so succinctly the default social partnership of old men and typical women, and because it reveals in no uncertain terms that, for all its associations with the female body, the word *argr* (*ergi*, *ergjask*, *ragr*, etc.) finally knows no sex. Again, the problem is that Modern English has no language for a system in which the operative social binary *looks* sexual (i.e., is figured in terms of male and female bodies) but is in practice *not* sexual, that is to say, neither exclusively nor decisively based on biological difference (or for that matter *any* inborn characteristic, with the presumable exception of natal defects). What the proverb "Svá eldisk hverr sem eldisk" boils down to is that sooner or later, all of us end up alike in our softness—regardless of our past and regardless of our sex.

It is beyond the scope of this already too synthetic essay to probe the impact on the northern periphery of "medievalization" (the conversion to Christianity and the adoption of European social forms), but by way of ending let me hazard some general propositions. The documentary sources, dating as they do from the Christian period, are notoriously slippery, but no reader of them can escape the impression that the new order entailed a radical remapping of gender in the north. More particularly, one has the impression that femaleness became more sharply defined and contained (the emergence of women-only religious orders is symptomatic of the new sensibility), and it seems indisputably the case that as Norse culture assimilated notions of weeping monks and fainting knights, "masculinity" was rezoned, as it were, into territories previously occupied by "effeminacy" (and other category B traits). (This expansion of the masculine was presumably predicated on just the fixing of the female and her relocation at a safe distance.) It may be, as Laqueur argues on the basis of the medical tradition,

that the one-sex model of sexual difference did not fully yield to a two-sex one until the late eighteenth century with the invention of a separate femaleness with its own organs and characteristics, but that does not mean that the one-sex era was monolithic or static or that the two-sex model did not have its conceptual harbingers. In the northern world, at least, the social organization of Christian Europe must have been perceived as entailing a profoundly different sex-gender system—one that despite its own stories of real and imagined gender crossings (particularly within religious discourse) drew a line of unprecedented firmness between male and female bodies and natures. The new dispensation would by the same token appear to have blurred the line between able-bodied men and aging men: the portrait of Njáll in that most Christian of sagas seems a conscious attempt to recuperate for Christian patriarchy a man under the old order dismissable by virtue of age, and indeed openly accused of effeminacy by his pagan neighbors. (Egill, on the other hand, born just two decades earlier and hence dead before the conversion, can be construed by his medieval biographer as having missed out.) What I am suggesting is that there are one-sex systems and one-sex systems; that early northern Europe “lived” a one-sex social logic, a one-gender model, to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in the west; and that the medievalization of the north entailed a shift of revolutionary proportions—a shift in the direction of two-sex thinking, and one therefore in kind not unlike the shift Laqueur claims for Europe in general eight hundred years later.<sup>79</sup>

It should by now be clear that the problems of translation with which this essay has been preoccupied are not just unrelated lexical glitches, but cognate symptoms of a larger problem of conceptual translation. Whether the early Scandinavian model is exactly as I have outlined it here—I am aware of having barely scratched the surface—is not clear. What is clear is that their system and ours do not line up and that the mismatch is especially obvious, and especially alien, where women and the feminine are concerned. From the outset, scholars have speculated on what unusual notion of womanhood might account for such startlingly strong female figures in a culture that seems otherwise to hold femaleness in such contempt. (It is a speculation that extends all the way back to Tacitus.) I mean in this essay to turn the question inside out and ask whether the paradox—extraordinary women, contempt for femaleness—may not have more to do with the virtual absence of *any* notion of “womanhood” than it does with the existence of some more spacious or flexible notion than our own. The evidence points, I think, to a one-sex, one-gender model with a vengeance—one that plays out in the rawest and most extreme terms a scheme of sexual difference that at the level of the body knows only the male and at the level of social behavior, only the effeminate, or emasculate, or impotent. The case could be made, particularly on the basis of the mythic narratives, that Norse femaleness was a more complicated business than Laqueur’s model would have it,<sup>80</sup> but the general notion, that sexual difference used to be less a wall than a permeable membrane, has a great deal of

explanatory force in a world in which a physical woman could become a social man, a physical man could (and sooner or later did) become a social woman, and the originary god, Óðinn himself, played both sides of the street.

## Notes

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1. *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit [henceforth cited as ÍF] 6 (Reykjavík, 1958). Translations of Old Norse passages throughout are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. *The Saga of Gíslí*, trans. George Johnston with notes by Peter Foote (Toronto, 1963), 51.
3. Friedrich Ranke has, “Ergreift den Hund und schlägt ihn tot, wenns auch eine Hündin ist!” (*Die Geschichte von Gíslí dem Geächteten* [Munich, 1907], 85; [Düsseldorf, 1978], 64); Hjalmar Alving has, “Lägg hand på den djävulen och slå ihäl henne, fast hon är kvinnfolk” (*Isländska sagor*, vol. 2 [Stockholm, 1936], 66); Vera Henriksen has, “Ta fatt i den bikkja og drep den, selv om det er en tisper!” (*Gíslé Súrssonar saga* [Oslo, 1985], 85); George Webbe Dasent has, “Lay hands on and slay her, though she be but a weak woman” (*The Story of Gíslí the Outlaw* [Edinburgh, 1866], 98); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has, “Grib hunden og dræb den, selv om den er af hunkøn” (*Norrønt nid: Forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer* [Odense, 1980], 94), which translator Joan Turville-Petre renders, “Lay hands on the hound and kill it, even though it is female” (*The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* [Odense, Den., 1983], 76); and Cleasby-Vigfusson (Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* [Oxford, 1957]) has, under the entry *blauðr*, “take the dog and kill it, though it be a bitch.”
4. I have abbreviated and edited the entries. (The definition of the noun *bleyða* as “a craven” comes from the separate entry under that word.) So too Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* (Oslo, 1867; 4th ed., 1973). On *blauðr* (*bleyði*, etc.) see also Margaret Clunies Ross, “Hildir’s Ring: A Problem in the *Ragnarsdrápa*, Strophes 8–12,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 6 (1973): 75–92.
5. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ÍF 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), chap. 38. *Njáls Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1960).
6. “Þá er fór vár helzti ill, þó at vér vinnim eigi þetta niðingsverk, ok standi menn upp ok láti hann eigi þessu ná” (Our errand has been bad enough without our committing this *niðingsverk*; up, men, don’t let him try it!).
7. The relation of the thirteenth-century written sources, especially the Icelandic sagas, to pre-conversion social history is a long-standing point of debate. I am here as elsewhere proceeding on the neotraditionalist assumption that although the written sources may exaggerate or fabricate at some points, there is a large grain of truth in their collective account. For a survey of the relevant literature up to 1964, see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (New Haven, 1964); and from that date through 1983, Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” in

- Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 239–315. On the problem in myth, see John Lindow’s “Mythology and Mythography” in the same volume (21–67).
8. Two recent full-length studies that go some way in redressing the scant attention paid to women in the literature of the Viking Age are Birgit Sawyer’s *Kvinnor och familj i det forn- och medeltida Skandinavien* (Skara, Swed., 1992); and Judith Jesch’s *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Eng., 1991). Both contain useful bibliographies. See also Roberta Frank, “Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 473–84; and Peter G. Foote and David Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London, 1974), esp. 108–16. The fullest modern explorations of the sex-gender system (as opposed to women’s status) are Meulengracht Sørensen’s *Unmanly Man*; his forthcoming *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne*; and Clunies Ross’s suggestive studies of textual cruces in the mythic tradition (“Hildir’s Ring”; “An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirrøðr and His Daughters,” in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. [Odense, Den., 1981], 370–91; and, less directly, “The Myth of Gefjon and Gylfi and Its Function in *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 93 [1978]: 149–65). Because of the synoptic nature of this essay, I have restricted citations to immediately relevant scholarly sources and those recent books and articles that contain more complete and specific bibliographic information. I owe special thanks to Roberta Frank and William Ian Miller for help in need.
  9. Writes Meulengracht Sørensen, for example: “Because gender [*kønnet*] is always a part of the individual and is by nature tied to the most significant areas of human existence, and because physical sex [*seksuelle køn*] takes the form of a complementarity, immediately inviting interpretation as both opposition and totality, sex is perhaps the most dynamic of cultural categories. . . . Not only in the biological and physical sense should a man be a man and a woman a woman; he and she should also live out the ideals set by culture for each sex [*køn*]”; *Fortællingen og ære*, 212–13; my translation.
  10. *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, ÍF 1 (Reykjavík, 1968). The calculation is Judith Jesch’s; *Women in the Viking Age*, 81–83.
  11. *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ÍF 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), chap. 4. The account is borne out in *Landnámabók*, in which she is called Auðr (136–46 and *passim*).
  12. In full: “[Unnr] acted as a man because the men who should have acted on her behalf were dead. This was in accordance with the law, which conferred authority on her in this situation, but it became a literary motive too; specifically in *Laxdæla saga* in her role as the revered and authoritative head of the family, when in every respect she has taken over the conduct and social functions of the male householder and leader”; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 22. On the “transsexualization” of women for legal purposes, see the discussion of the *Baugatal* passage below.
  13. So suggest place names and, in eastern Scandinavia, runic inscriptions. See especially Birgit Sawyer’s *Property and Inheritance: The Runic Evidence* (Alingsås, Swed., 1988); and Barði Guthmundsson’s *Origin of the Icelanders* (Lincoln, Neb., 1967), 36–40 (translation of *Uppruni Íslendinga* [Reykjavík, 1959]).
  14. *Grænlandinga saga*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, ÍF 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), chap. 8.
  15. Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, 110–11. For further bibliography, see Carol J. Clover, “Maiden Warriors and Other Sons,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986): 35–49.
  16. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 161; the following pages detail the women’s poetic

- production. On women's participation in the production of literature more generally, see Else Mundal, "Kvinner og dikting: Overgangen frå munneleg til skriftleg kultur—ei ulykke for kvinnene?," in *Förändringar i kvinnors villkor under medeltiden: Uppsatser framlagda vid ett kvinnohistoriskt symposium i Skálholt, Island, 22.–25. juni 1981*, ed. Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir and Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík, 1983), 11–25; also Helga Kress, "The Apocalypse of a Culture: *Völuspá* and the Myth of the Sources/Sorceress in Old Icelandic Literature," in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Proceedings of the Seventh International Saga Conference (Spoleto, It., 1988), 279–302; and "Staðlausir stafir: Um slúður sem uppsprettu frásagnar í Íslendingasögum," *Skírnir* 165 (1991): 130–56.
17. The locus classicus is the account of al-Ghazal's embassy to what would appear to be a Scandinavian court and his encounter there with a sexually forward queen who claims, in effect, that her people practice open marriage. The historicity of the text is questioned, but as Jesch's prudent point-by-point analysis concludes, "In spite of the literary tricks, there is nothing that is totally incredible in this account and some of it fits with what we already know of Scandinavian society in the Viking Age. . . . If Arabists reject the story of al-Ghazal's embassy as a fiction, this cannot be because of its inherent improbability as a reflection of royal viking life in the ninth century"; *Women in the Viking Age*, 92–96. The sagas famously present a number of women who arrange their sex lives to their own satisfaction, and the theme of female promiscuity and erotic aggression in the legendary sources confirms the sense that the woman with enough social power was not particularly hindered by the usual sexual constraints. The admiration, grudging or plain, extended to these women conflicts with the scholarly claim, based on the handful of *níð* insults applied to women, that promiscuity in women was the shameful equivalent of effeminacy in men. See notes 38 and 59 below.
  18. *Eyrbyggja saga*, chap. 38.
  19. William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), 351. The case in question is recounted in *Þorðar saga kakala*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, vol. 1 (Reykjavík, 1946), chap. 8.
  20. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 27.
  21. *Ibid.*, 207–8.
  22. *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid, udgivet efter det Kongelige Bibliotheks haandskrift*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1852; reprint ed., Odense, Den., 1974), la: 142. *Grágás* la:1–217, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (Winnipeg, 1980). See also Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 24.
  23. Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, 110. See also Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, esp. 27.
  24. William Ian Miller, "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," *Law and History Review* 1 (1983): 159–204; his *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 211–14; and Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, Den., 1986), 141–83.
  25. The lively discussion of grave goods and sex is nicely summarized in Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 21–22, 30; see also Carol J. Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988): 147–88 (reprinted in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen [Bloomington, Ind., 1990]), esp. 165–66.
  26. The discrepancy between women's two "statuses" (in the laws and in the narrative

- sources) is much discussed. See in particular Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas* (Halle, Ger., 1958); Jenny Jochens, "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?," *Viator* 17 (1986): 35–50; the same author's "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature," *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 142–76; and my "Politics of Scarcity," esp. 147–50 and 182.
27. *Grágás* 1a:200–201. Translation from *Laws of Early Iceland*, 181; my italics.
  28. See my "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons" for the passages from the *Gulaping* and the *Frostaping* laws (46, n. 30) and for an inventory of the relevant literary passages and a bibliography. On the politics of women's becoming "men" in early Christianity, see especially Elizabeth Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Staub (New York, 1991), 29–50.
  29. In nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Albania (a blood feud society remarkably similar to that of saga Iceland), such surrogate sons did indeed assume the male role (taking up pants, rifles, cigars and moving in the male sphere). For a summary discussion of the theme, with relevant bibliography, see my "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons."
  30. Hallgerðr of *Njáls saga* is perhaps the only "exceptional" female figure who is more or less roundly condemned by her author, whose voice is the most consistently misogynist in Icelandic literature. See Helga Kress, "Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap: Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu," in *Sjötiu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Petursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1977), 293–313; and, for a more moderate view, Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in "Njáls Saga"*, The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies (London, 1980). English-speaking readers of that saga should be aware that Hallgerðr comes off rather worse in translation than she does in the original.
  31. *Laxdæla saga*, chap. 4; translation from Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1969). The word *afbragð*, here rendered as "paragon," means a superior, exceptional, surpassing person. Although *Landnámabók's* more historical account of Auðr/Unnr does not comment on her character, its length and detail confirm the esteem in which she was held. *Laxdæla saga's* interest in (and approval of) "strong" women has long been noted, and Helga Kress has argued that it demonstrates "a feminine consciousness" that may point to female authorship; "Meget samstævet má det tykket deg," *Historisk Tidsskrift* (1980): 279. There is no doubt that *Laxdæla's* representation of women is extraordinary, but I would suggest that the claim of "feminine (or female) consciousness" for that text is compromised by the fact that it is their exceptional (that is, ideally masculine) qualities that qualify its women for history, as it were. What does it mean to speak of "feminine consciousness" in a world in which femininity is for all practical purposes synonymous with effeminacy? The same question may be asked of Foote and Wilson's suggestion that "outstanding women, real or legendary, must have done something to lift the status of women in general"; *Viking Achievement*, 111.
  32. *Laxdæla saga*, chap. 35. See Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 22.
  33. Cleasby-Vigfusson derives the word from *drangr*, "jutting rock," "cliff," or "pillar." See Foote and Wilson's discussion of the term and concept in *Viking Achievement*, 105–8, 425–26, with bibliography.
  34. *Njáls saga*, chap. 20, my translation. Magnússon and Pálsson have, "She was an exceptional and courageous woman, but a little harsh-natured."

35. *Njáls saga*, chap. 95, my translation. Magnússon and Pálsson have, “She was harsh-natured and ruthless; but when courage was called for, she never flinched.”
36. The “masculine ideal” that underwrites such attitudes is often noted (see, for example, Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 20–22; and Sawyer, *Kvinnor och familj*, 74–75). In her “Forholdet mellom born ok foreldre i det norrøne kjeldematerialet” (*Collegium medievale* 1 [1988]: 2–28), Else Mundal proposes that it is the belief in bilateral genetic inheritance (that is, the belief that the child, regardless of sex, stands to get as much of its character from the mother as from the father) that accounts for the approval the “strong” woman seems to enjoy: her “masculinity” can be seen as an investment for unborn sons of the future (esp. 24). In my “Maiden Warriors and Other Sons,” I speculated similarly that “the idea of latent or recessive features, physical or characterological, was undeveloped [in early Scandinavia]; inherited qualities seem to manifest themselves in some degree in every generation. The qualities that Angantýr now bestows [on his daughter Hervör] as the ‘legacy of Arngrím’s sons,’ *afl* and *eljun* [strength and powerful spirit], are emphatically ‘male’ qualities. They may ultimately be ‘intended’ for Hervör’s future sons and their sons on down the line . . . but in the meantime they must assert themselves in Hervör herself (as indeed they already have)” (39). The very notion that, say, passivity can be inherited from the father and martial propensities from the mother bespeaks a far more tenuous connection between sex and gender than modern ideology would have it.
37. On the flyting, see Joseph Harris, “The *Senna*: From Description to Literary Theory,” *Michigan Germanic Studies* 5 (1979): 64–74; Carol J. Clover, “The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,” *Speculum* 55 (1980): 444–68; and Clover, “*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce,” *Scandinavian Studies* 51 (1979): 124–45; and Karen Swensen, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature* (Columbia, S.C., 1991), which contains an especially useful bibliography.
38. Applied to a woman, the noun *ergi* (adjective *ørg*) “is virtually synonymous with nymphomania, which was a characteristic as much despised in a woman as unmanliness was in a man,” according to Folke Ström, *Nið, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London, 1973), 4; for Meulengracht Sørensen, the female use means that she “is generally immodest, perverted or lecherous” (*Unmanly Man*, 18–19). The fact that charges toward women to this effect are so few and far between would seem to suggest that the female use is a secondary formation and a rather unstable one at that. Nor, although space does not permit me to make a full argument here, am I convinced that the *ørg* female is as fundamentally different from the *argr* male as these scholars suggest; again I suspect a modern contamination. See note 17 above.
39. For a detailed account of these and other legal references, see Bo Almqvist, *Norrøn niddiktning: Traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi*, 2 vols. (Uppsala, 1965–74), esp. 38–68. See also Kari Ellen Gade, “Homosexuality and the Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature,” *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 124–41. On *nið* generally, see (in addition to Meulengracht Sørensen and Almqvist) Ström, *Nið, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*; Erik Noreen, “Om niddiktning” in his “Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning II,” in *Uppsala Universitets årsskrift: Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper* 44 (1922): 37–65; and Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, “Studies on the Function and Context of the *Senna* in Early Germanic Narrative” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1976).
40. *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, ed. R. Keyser, P. A. Munch, G. Storm, and E. Herzberg (Christiania, 1846), 1:57. Translations from the laws pertaining to *nið* are adapted from Meulengracht Sørensen’s *Unmanly Man* (14–32).



41. *Trénið* is the plastic equivalent of *tungunið* (tongue *nið*). The classic example is the carved effigy in *Gísla saga* of one man sodomized by another (chap. 2), but the term may also refer to a pole of the sort described in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, ÍF 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), chap. 57. For a fuller discussion, see Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, esp. 51–61; Ström's *Nið, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, 10–14; and Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning*, passim.
42. *Norges gamle love*, 1:70.
43. *Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)*, 2a:392.
44. *Njáls saga*, chap. 123. Notes Meulengracht Sørensen, "Nobody has suspected Flosi of being homosexual. The charge is symbolic" (*Unmanly Man*, 20). Virtually the same insult occurs in two other sources (*Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* and *Króka-Refs saga*).
45. Stanza 38 in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, vol. 1, *Text*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 5th rev. ed. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1983).
46. On this pattern in cultures present and past, and on the distinction between person and act, there is an abundant literature. See especially David M. Halperin, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality," in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York, 1989), esp. bibliography on p. 159, n. 21; and p. 162, n. 52; and, for another perspective (and for the most up-to-date bibliography on the discussion), David J. Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), esp. chap. 7, "Law, Social Control, and Homosexuality in Classical Athens." Mention should be made, on the Norse side, of the passage in chap. 22 of *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* (ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, in *Borgfirðinga saga*, ÍF 3 [Reykjavík, 1938]), which suggests that the position of the aggressor may have been rather more compromised than tradition would have it.
47. Ström, *Nið, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, 17.
48. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 19–20.
49. The first full-fledged treatment of the subject was an anonymous essay entitled "Spuren von Konträrsexualität bei den alten Skandinaviern," in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität* 4 (Leipzig, 1902), 244–63.
50. Meulengracht Sørensen, following T. Vanggaard (*Phallos* [Copenhagen, 1969], trans. by the author as *Phallos: A Symbol and Its History in the Male World* [London, 1972]), sees in "phallic aggression" the organizing principle of the early Scandinavian sex-gender system (*Unmanly Man*, esp. 27–28).
51. In *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1959).
52. Horse genitalia, both male and female, loom large in the obscene literature of Old Norse, and the pattern is presumably Germanic. See especially Pizarro, "Function and Context of the *Senna*." The sense of *skauð* is echoed in the noun *hrukka* ("fold" or "wrinkle," referring also to the female genital), related to the verb *hrøkkva* ("fall back, recoil, retreat, cringe"); see Zoe Borovsky, "Male Fears, Female Threats: Giant Women in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, May 1991). See also Torild W. Arnoldson, *Parts of the Body in Older Germanic and Scandinavian* (Chicago, 1915; reprint ed., New York, 1971), 175; and Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, esp. 58–59.
53. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990).
54. *Ibid.*, 26. More particularly, penis and vagina are construed as one and the same organ; if the former happens to extrude and the latter to intrude (in an inside-out and upward-extending fashion), they are physiologically identical, and the same

- words did for both. Likewise testes (the male ones outside and the female ones inside, again with the same words doing for both), and so too genital fluids (menstrual and seminal emissions being cooler and hotter versions of the same matter).
55. On the correspondence, see *ibid.*, 159 and 270, n. 60. According to psychoanalysis, the one-sex model is alive and well in the unconscious—in the form, for example, of penis envy on the part of females and, on the part of males, fantasies of anal intercourse, pregnancy, and birth. In my *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), I have argued that the one-sex model is also alive and well in popular culture; it is in any case an obvious feature of horror movies, which commonly turn explicitly or implicitly on the idea that males and females are essentially the same, genitally and otherwise.
  56. On the conflation of vagina and (male) anus, see Clunies Ross, “Hildir’s Ring”; and for a discussion of the equivalence in the modern context, see Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1989), 194–222. For lexical listings, see Arnoldson’s *Parts of the Body in Older Germanic and Scandinavian*, and William Denny Baskett’s *Parts of the Body in the Later Germanic Dialects* (Chicago, 1920). Unavailable to me is the unpublished manuscript “Verba Islandica obscaena,” by Ólafur Davíðsson (Reykjavík, Landsbókafsafrun Íslands, MS 1204, 8vo).
  57. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 122–34 and *passim*.
  58. For example, *níð* “did not require that women or female activities were held in contempt as such, of course, no more than was a woman’s sexual role or her maternal capacity. The female role was ignominious when it was assigned to a man”; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 24.
  59. Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen’s claim (in the chapter entitled “Mænds og kvinders ære” in his forthcoming *Fortælling og ære*) that men’s and women’s honor systems were essentially different. His construction proceeds to a considerable extent from the evidence of *níð* insults, which seem to bespeak a double standard (men are accused of being women, women of being promiscuous). As I have suggested above, a reading of *níð* in context (both the context of other insults and the context of praise- and blameworthy deeds in general) leads to a rather different conclusion—a conclusion buttressed by the paucity and apparent instability of references to female *níð*. See also notes 17 and 38 above. The “one-sex” argument in this and the preceding sections was presented in short form in my review of Meulengracht Sørensen’s *Norrønt níð*, in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1982): 398–400.
  60. Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. “úmagi.” Related terms (also deriving from *mega*, “to have strength to do, avail”) are *úmeginn*, “impotent,” *úmegin*, “unmight, a swoon,” *úmætr*, “worthless, invalid,” and *úmætta*, “to lose strength, faint away”—as opposed, on the positive side, to terms like *megin*, *megn*, “strong, mighty.”
  61. The equation of women and old men is also evident in the norms governing the appropriateness of the vengeance target in feud. “The underlying idea,” writes Miller, “is that people not socially privileged to bear arms were excused from having arms brought to bear on them” (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 207).
  62. See esp. John J. Winkler, “Laying down the Law: The Oversight of Men’s Sexual Behavior in Classical Athens,” in his *Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990). “The logic of a zero-sum calculus underlies many of the most characteristic predicates and formulae that were applied to issues of sex and gender,” Winkler writes. “Thus, not to display bravery (*andreia*, literally ‘manliness’) lays a man open to symbolic demotion from the ranks of the brave/manly to the opposite class of women” (47).

63. *Ibid.*, 50.
64. For example, Egill, mocked and pushed around by women in his old age (*Egils saga*, chap. 85); Þorkell, tongue-lashed into submission by his wife Ásgerðr (*Gísla saga Súrs-sonar*, chap. 9); Þorðr Ingunnarson, assaulted in bed by his angry, pants-wearing former wife with a short sword—a gesture loaded with sexual meaning and one that had permanent effect (*Laxdæla saga*, chap. 35); and, of course, any number of heroes' battles with giantesses and warrior women in the *fornaldarsögur* and related traditions. Along different but not unrelated lines, Clunies Ross notes the special ability of women in the mythological sources to humiliate men. The passages she analyzes “reveal the conviction that a dominant woman was more to be feared than a man, for she was able to strengthen herself magically in order to usurp male roles and reduce the men in her power to physical and mental debility, to make them *ragr*. . . . The insult of showing the ‘ring’ to Høgni is a verbal equivalent to Hildir’s destructive and debilitating powers, for it accuses him of weakness and effeminacy. It is particularly vicious that, having adopted a masculine role herself, she should accuse her own father of having lost his manhood” (“Hildir’s Ring,” 92).
65. For a new account of emotional expression in Norse literature, see William Ian Miller’s forthcoming *Humiliation and Other Essays in Social Discomfort* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993). On the social place of aging men, see his *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 207–10.
66. For a discussion of female lamenting and its role in feud, see my “Hildigunnr’s Lament,” with notes.
67. Common features include (in addition to the characteristic mix of lament and revenge) the theme of the withering family line and, in that connection, the use of the extremely rare word *þátrr* (in the meaning “strand,” as of a rope); the elegiac conceit of a tree as an image of human growth and ruin; the “chain-of-woes” construction; the self-pitying woe-is-me tone; the ecstatic “now I die” conclusion; and the final authorial remarks on the cathartic effects of lamenting. See Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, *Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969), 183–89; and my “Hildigunnr’s Lament,” 153–62. The “difference” of *Sonatorrek* in the context of Egill’s other poetry is often noted. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, for example, writes that the poem “gives a clear insight into the mind of Egill in his advancing years, showing him as an affectionate, sensitive, lonely man, and not the ruffianly bully which he sometimes appears to be in the Saga”; *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), 24.
68. Worth remembering in this connection is the unnamed old man to whom the *Beowulf* poet compares the old king Hreðel, father of a fratricide (lines 2441–65). Overcome by grief, and unable to take revenge, old Hreðel can do no more than the “old man” who “goes to his bed, sings his cares over [*sorh-leoð*, “sorrow song”], alone, for the other” and then dies. Again we seem to have a male whose lamentation is precisely the effect of disabled masculinity; the other two funeral-lamenters in *Beowulf* are both women (lines 1117–18 and 3150–55). Text and translation from Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977). For an especially useful and bibliographically detailed discussion of elegy and death lament (especially reflexive) in the Germanic tradition, see Joseph Harris, “Elegy in Old English and Old Norse: A Problem in Literary History,” in *The Vikings*, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), 157–64; as well as his “Beowulf’s Last Words,” *Speculum* 67 (1992): 1–32.
69. *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ÍF 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), chap. 5.
70. See Miller, “Choosing the Avenger”; and *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 212–14. The

synonyms *hvetja* and *eggja* mean “whet” in both senses (to sharpen or put an edge on a blade, and to goad or egg on a person).

71. See my “Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,” esp. 451–52, for a more complete list and source references.
72. “Vals hefk vófur helsis; / váfallr em ek skalla; / blautr erum bergis fótar / borrh, en hlust es þorrin” (*Egils saga*, chap. 85).
73. See Noreen, “Studier i västnordisk diktning” (above, note 39), 35–36; and *Egils saga*, 294, note on stanza 58. Roberta Frank points out that the duplicitous reading has medieval authority, in the “Third Grammatical Treatise” of Óláfr hvítaskáld, who observes that Egill’s *bergis fótar borrh* works both as a penis kenning and a tongue kenning; *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), 162. The author of the “head” interpretation of *bergifótr* is, of course, Finnur Jónsson, who thought it “en af Egils dristige kenningar”; *Lexicon poeticum* (Copenhagen, 1931; reprint ed., 1966). For other examples of such wordplay, see Kari Ellen Gade, “Penile Puns: Personal Names and Phallic Symbols in Skaldic Poetry,” *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* 6 (1989): 57–67.
74. “Vápn þat er stendr milli fóta manna heitir sverð” (That weapon which stands between a man’s legs is called a sword), Snorri declares (*Snorra-Edda*, ed. Rasmus Rask [Stockholm, 1818], p. 232, line 19). For literary examples and a discussion of the sword/penis figure, see Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 45–78; and Clunies Ross, “Hildir’s Ring.” As for the tongue: “Tvnga er opt kavllvð sverþ mals e(ða) mvnz” (Tongue is often called sword of speech or of mouth; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 191). Consider, for example, *góma sverð* (sword of the gums) and *orðvápn* (word-weapon); see Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn, 1921; reprint ed., Hildesheim, Ger., 1984), 133–34.
75. Text and translation from Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, 28–29.
76. *Saga Heiðreks ins vitra/The Saga of King Heiðrek the Wise*, trans. and ed. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), 10.
77. *Hrafnkels saga*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, ÍF 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), chap. 8. The word *ergisk* is the middle-voice verbal form of the adjective *argr* (to become *argr*). The word *hverr*, “everyone,” is a masculine pronoun usable for a male entity or for the universal person.
78. E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford, 1927; 2nd ed. rev. by A. R. Taylor, 1957), 342 (under *ergjask*); and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *Hrafnkel’s Saga and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1971), chap. 17.
79. That the older system did not die at once, but lived in odd ways well into the Christian era, is suggested by, for example, the anomalous practice of priest marriage in Iceland, a practice that suggests the tenacity not only of the clan system but also of certain pre-Christian notions of masculinity. Writes Miller, “Sexuality and marriage were a part of the world of manly honor and no one thought to mention that divinity and dalliance need be sundered until the episcopate of Thorlak Thorhallson (1178–93). Thorlak zealously attempted to enforce ecclesiastical strictures dealing with sexual practices, but even he did not tackle clerical celibacy, confining himself instead to separating priests and spouses who had married within the prohibited degrees . . . or who kept concubines in addition to their wives”; *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 37–38; see also his bibliographic references. Consider, too, such historical details as the one recorded in *Jóns saga helga* to the effect that the cathedral school at Hólar in the year 1110 saw fit not only to admit a girl, one Ingunn, but to permit her to tutor her fellow pupils in

Latin; *Jóns saga helga*, chap. 27, in *Byskuþa sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík, 1948; 2nd ed. Akureyri, 1953), 43, 153.

80. Especially important in this connection is the work of Clunies Ross, especially “An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirrøðr and His Daughters.” See also Borovsky, “Male Fears, Female Threats.” That the bodies in question are female (e.g., menstruating giantesses) is clear. What is less clear is what femaleness means in a world in which (at least in the learned tradition) the female body and its fluids may have been understood as deformations of male ones (e.g., in which menstrual fluid was construed as cooled-down semen); see Laqueur, *Making Sex*, esp. 35–43.