Models of Men: The Construction and Problematization of Masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*. It attempts to uncover the dominant model of masculinity that operates in the sagas, outlines how masculinities and masculine characters function within these texts, and investigates the means by which the sagas, and saga characters, may subvert masculine dominance. The thesis applies to men and masculinities in saga literature the same scrutiny traditionally used to study women and femininities.

The first – introductory – chapter reviews the limited scholarship that presently exists on masculinities in Old Norse literature. It then proposes a new model for the critical study of saga masculinities, drawing on sociological theories of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. The second chapter ranges across the entire *Íslendingasaga* corpus in order to demonstrate how masculinity inflects homosocial relationships (and thus virtually all aspects of saga texts). It also suggests that almost all masculine characters have a problematic relationship with masculinity as a result of the intersectional nature of subject formation. The third chapter, focusing on *Njáls saga*, argues that the male body is used to undermine the prevailing model of masculinity. It is argued that the *Njála* author purposefully deploys somatic indices that have gendered significance to show embodied resistance to the demands of masculinity. The fourth chapter examines the representation and treatment of a character (Grettir Ásmundarson) that embodies masculinity to an exceptional degree, but who nevertheless – or perhaps for that reason – experiences a problematic relationship with masculinity. Finally, an epilogue briefly investigates some of the ways in which female characters may undermine and problematize the masculinity of men and the category of masculinity itself. Ultimately, this thesis shows that masculinity is not simply glorified in the sagas, but is represented as being both inherently fragile and a burden to all characters, masculine and non-masculine alike.

[I]t seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past.

–Natalie Zemon Davis[1]

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, '"Women's History" in Transition: The European Case', *Feminist Studies* 3.3-4 (1976), 83-103 (90).

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Authorial Standpoint and Preface

As a prefatory note to this thesis, mainly because I do not wish to fall into the pitfalls of apparent or attempted objectivity on my part as student of medieval gender, it seems only appropriate that I declare the authorial position from which the following analyses are written. I identify as white, male (but not necessarily masculine), British, and gay. I am currently in my mid-twenties, and attended a comprehensive school and state sixth-form college, before being educated at the universities of Durham and Oxford. These are the markers of my racial, sexual, gendered, social, and educational status, and the analyses I put forward will inevitably be influenced by them. Or rather, will be a product of their embodied intersection.

In her reading of the Eddic poem *Skírnismál*, Carolyne Larrington discusses the inevitable uneasiness felt in reading the poem as a female critic, in stark contrast to male critics who seemed to have passed over, and perhaps even been ignorant of, the poem's highly problematic gender dynamic.[2] Reading the *Íslendingasögur* as a gay male critic has, for me, produced a similar sense of unease when presented with the dominant models of masculinity operating in these texts. Such unease perhaps prompts a heightened awareness of attitudes to manliness in these sagas, and it is from this position that this thesis is written. This does not, I hope, mean that I have read gendered implications into texts where none are to be found, but rather that I have simply been attuned to their presence.

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[2] Carolyne Larrington, '"What Does Woman Want?" Mær and Munr in *Skírnismál*', *Alvíssmál* 1 (1992), 3-16 (3).

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ABBREVIATIONS

PRIMARY SOURCES

Bandamanna saga	*Bandamanna saga*, in Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, 1936), 291-363.
Bárðar saga	*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds.), *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), 99-172.
Bjarnar saga	*Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík, 1938), 109-211.
Droplaugarsona saga	*Droplaugarsona saga*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 135-180.
Egils saga	Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933).
Eiríks saga	*Eiríks saga rauða*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds.), *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), 193-237.
Eyrbyggja saga	Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds.), *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935).
Finnboga saga	*Finnboga saga*, in Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 251-340.
Fljótsdæla saga	*Fljótsdæla saga*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 213-296.
Flóamanna saga	*Flóamanna saga*, in Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds.), *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), 229-327.
Fóstbrœðra saga	*Fóstbrœðra saga*, in Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), 119-276.
Gísla saga	*Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), 1-118.

Grettis saga	Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, 1936).
Grœnlendinga saga	*Grœnlendinga saga*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds.), *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), 239-269.
Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls	*Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, in Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 341-379.
Gunnlaugs saga	*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík, 1938), 49-107.
Hallfreðar saga	*Hallfreðar saga*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), 133-200.
Harðar saga	Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds.), *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík, 1991).
Hávarðar saga	*Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, in Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), 289-358.
Heiðarvíga saga	*Heiðarvíga saga*, in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík, 1938), 213-326.
Hœnsa-Þóris saga	*Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík, 1938), 1-47.
Hrafnkels saga	*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 95-133.
Kjalnesinga saga	Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959).
Kormáks saga	*Kormáks saga*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), 201-302.
Kristni saga	*Kristni saga*, in Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote (eds.), *Biskupa sögur* I, Íslenzk Fornrit, 15.2 (Reykjavík, 2003), 1-48.
Króka-Refs saga	*Króka-Refs saga*, in Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 117-160.

Laxdœla saga	Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 5 (Reykjavík, 1934).
Ljósvetninga saga	Björn Sigfússon (ed.), *Ljósvetninga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 10 (Reykjavík, 1940).
Njáls saga	Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík, 1954).
Reykdœla saga	*Reykdœla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, in Björn Sigfússon (ed.), *Ljósvetninga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 10 (Reykjavík, 1940), 149-243.
Svarfdæla saga	*Svarfdæla saga*, in Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík, 1956), 127-211.
Valla-Ljóts saga	*Valla-Ljóts saga*, in Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík, 1956), 231-260.
Vatnsdœla saga	Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík, 1939).
Vápnfirðinga saga	*Vápnfirðinga saga*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 21-65.
Víga-Glúms saga	*Víga-Glúms saga*, in Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík, 1956), 1-98.
Víglundar saga	*Víglundar saga*, in Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 61-116.
Þorskfirðinga saga	*Þorskfirðinga saga eða Gull-Þóris saga*, in Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds.), *Harðar saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), 173-227.
Þorsteins saga hvíta	*Þorsteins saga hvíta*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 1-19.
Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar	*Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 297-320.
Þórðar saga hreðu	*Þórðar saga hreðu*, in Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 161-226.
Ǫlkofra saga	*Ǫlkofra þáttr*, in Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), 81-94.

DICTIONARIES

Cleasby-Vigfússon	Richard Cleasby, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and William A. Craigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1957).
Fritzner	Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over de Gamle Norske Sprog*, 2nd edn., 3 vols. (Kristiania, 1886-96).
OED Online	OED Online [www.oed.com]
Zoëga	Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Tornoto, 2004).

All translations given in this thesis are my own unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Readers of the Old Norse sagas cannot help but be struck by the highly gendered society constructed by these texts.[1] They present a textual world in which masculine status is all, in which there is no worse act than to call another's masculinity into question, in which feuds rage for generations over perceived affronts to masculinity, and in which female characters urge their male kin to act in violent revenge to preserve masculine status.

Wherever we look in the sagas we are presented with images of problematic masculinity. In *Njáls saga* a man is murdered inside his house, along with his entire family, as the culmination of a feud predicated on the exchange of gendered insults. Burning flames engulf the house as repayment for the misjudged peace offering of a silken cloak. In *Grettis saga* we are presented with the biography of a man who is outlawed – and ultimately killed – for his extreme and overbearing form of masculinity. In *Egils saga* we are privy to the highly personal lament of a man bowed and broken by old age. He must mourn the untimely death of his sons, and also the social support that is lost with them. And in *Víglundar saga* we see a woman who, in fear of being raped, adopts the clothes and mannerisms of a male warrior. By performing masculinity she strikes fear into the hearts of her would be assailants who then flee in terror.

Such images of the overwhelming pressures exerted by masculinity are by no means rare in the *Íslendingasögur*, and it is the purpose of this thesis to

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[1] Where I use the term 'saga' without qualification in this thesis I refer to the *Íslendingasögur*.

interrogate the construction, operation, and problematization of saga masculinities. This study therefore takes masculinity as its point of departure, as well as its sustained analytical focus. But before such an analysis may take place, we must first consider what we mean when we use the terms 'gender', 'masculinity', and 'femininity'; briefly review the scholarship on gender in Old Norse literature; discuss the methodology of the study; and finally sketch out the remit and structure of this thesis.

GENDER

'Gender' is to be seen as a social construct that is separate from the concept of 'sex'. While sex is – in some theories at least – to be viewed as a 'fact' of biology, gender is the cultural elaboration of this apparent difference, of which 'masculine' and 'feminine' are the resultant subject positions. As R. W. Connell suggests, 'in its most common usage [...] the term 'gender' means the cultural difference of women from men, based in the biological division between male and female. Dichotomy and difference are the substance of the idea.'[2] But such a simple definition obscures the complexities of gender, including its genesis.

In psychoanalytic accounts, all subjects are, in early childhood, neither masculine nor feminine. Masculinity arises through the repression of femininity that is demanded by the successful navigation of the Oedipal crisis by the male infant. It is through this conflict that the masculine and the feminine come to be seen as oppositional.[3] However, because the Oedipal drama is triangular, nascent

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[2] R. W. Connell, *Gender* (Malden, MA, 2002), 8.

[3] Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review* 91.5 (1986), 1053-1075 (1063); Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of*

subjects must, in stages, identify with parents (or, in Lacanian re-readings, structural positions) representing both masculinity and femininity. As a result, subjects are almost invariably an admixture of masculinity and femininity. Either gendered position is rarely found in pure isolation from the other.[4]

Judith Butler, drawing on psychoanalytic insights, also suggests that gendered identity is a social construct. For her, gender is performative, meaning that gendered identity arises through the iteration of acts which have a gendered significance that is already 'socially established' in the context in which they are performed.[5] But these socially established acts are not the expression of a core gender identity. Rather, what appear to be expressions of core identity are in fact the actions that create the appearance of an originary centre.[6] In this formulation, there are no real or true gender identities, but rather gender is to be seen as 'a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real'.[7]

In Butler's account, masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposed, naturalized categories as a result of the projection of the 'cultural pattern of heterosexual couples onto the natural world'.[8] But femininity, in the psychoanalytic tradition of which Butler is a part, is something of an empty category. Unlike masculinity, a structural position which we can regard as having qualifiable attributes, femininity is an empty category, being the structural

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the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works (London, 2001), 12-66 (31-3).

[4] Ros Minsky, 'Psychoanalysis and Gender', in Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender* (Oxford, 2002), 39-63 (46).

[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, 1990), 140.

[6] Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender* (Oxford, 2002), 99; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

[7] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, x.

[8] Connell, *Gender*, 33.

opposite of masculinity. As Butler notes, '[t]he feminine is never a mark of the subject; the feminine could not be an "attribute" of a gender. Rather, the feminine is the signification of lack, signified by the Symbolic, a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference'.[9]

Another important facet of Butler's work on the social construction of gender is the uncoupling of sex from gender. Not only is gender to be seen as a social construct, but also dimorphic sex. The existence of bodies which do not fit neatly into the ostensibly natural categories of 'male' and 'female' indicates that the binary conception of biological sex is an inadequate descriptor of bodily reality.[10] The violence imposed on intersex infants in order to make their bodies align with prevailing cultural models of dimorphic sex and gender, for example, illustrates 'the cultural need to reinforce and defend a gendered binary'.[11] Moreover, male and female themselves do not function convincingly as poles on a gender spectrum. Indeed, as Connell notes, 'the overwhelming conclusion from a hundred years of "sex difference" research is that men and women are not very different at all, across a wide range of traits examined in psychology and related social sciences'.[12] That the genitals are endowed with gendered meaning is a cultural effect rather than an inevitable product of biology. Such meaning could, in theory, accrue to any other bodily trait – for example, height – in which there is difference and variation. If then, we view dimorphic sex as an inadequate description of biological reality, and itself a social construction, the idea that gender is in some way a result of the social elaboration of the categories male

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[9] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 27.
[10] Anne Fausto-Sterling, 'The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are Not Enough', *The Sciences* 33.2 (1993), 20-24.
[11] Minsky, 'Psychoanalysis and Gender', 31.
[12] Connell, *Gender*, 42.

and female is to be seen as fallacious. Rather, in Butler's words, 'gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one'.[13] Masculinity then, while usually associated with bodies that we would view as male, can be – and indeed, is – also embodied by subjects whose physical characteristics would cause them to be judged as female.[14]

Ultimately, in this thesis, gender is to be understood as a performative social construction that is separate from – although seemingly linked to – a notion of biological sex. I have here simply sketched out the outline of a notion of socially constructed gender, influenced by insights from psychoanalysis, but as my analyses progress I will elaborate further on relevant theories of gender and sexuality as necessary.

MASCULINITY IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

A wealth of scholarship exists on the place and function of women – and the feminine – in Old Norse literature and early Scandinavian society.[15] Scholarship

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[13] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.

[14] Judith Halberstam elaborates this observation in *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, and London, 1998).

[15] See, for example: Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, 1995); Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York and London, 2002); Helga Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar: Íslenzk Fornbókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík, 1993); Judy Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2005), 518-35; Carol Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986), 35-49; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991); and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, 2013).

also exists on the concept of gender in Old Norse literature more broadly.[16] There are, however, very few scholarly works on Old Norse literature that take men or masculinities as their focus. Those that do comprise a handful of disparate articles. While there are a number of book-length studies of women in Old Norse literature, as yet no literary critical monograph on men and masculinities has been published.[17]

Perhaps the most influential work which touches upon issues of masculinity in Old Norse literature is Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's study of sexualized insult in saga literature, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*.[18] His study, an investigation into *níð* insults, demonstrates convincingly that Old Norse society and literature are based upon 'an aggressive masculine ethic'.[19] The influence – and indeed, brilliance – of this work cannot be overstated, and it will be referred to several times in this thesis.

In two linked articles, Carl Phelpstead has investigated two facets of Old Norse masculinity, while concurrently establishing the utility of psychoanalytic frameworks for the study of masculinities in saga literature. In 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', Phelpstead investigates the way in which

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[16] See, for example, Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations* 44 (1993), 1-28; and David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford, 2012).

[17] It is necessary here to briefly mention Bjørn Bandlien's 2005 Oslo Dr. Philos. thesis 'Man or Monster: Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society' if only to indicate my awareness of its existence. As his thesis is a work of historical research, it has very different aims to the literary investigation of the present thesis. But it is not just for this reason that Bandlien's work will not be referenced in the rest of this thesis. His thesis is marred by methodological problems – such as the misreading of sociological theories of gender (24) and the use of mythological material to produce a model of historical human masculine identity (*passim*.) – which cast doubt upon his conclusions.

[18] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983).

[19] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 21.

the penis is endowed with gendered significance, and moreover the relationship between male genitalia and masculine identity, in Old Norse literature.[20] Similarly, in 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland' he investigates whether men's hair may be invested with the Symbolic power of the Lacanian phallus, concluding that it may be seen as 'loosely analogous' with it.[21]

In a 2007 article (which will be referenced frequently in chapter 3), Ármann Jakobsson investigates the operation of masculinity in *Njáls saga*. He demonstrates that masculinity is seen as a burden in the text, concluding that the saga problematizes dominant paradigms of masculinity.[22] Similarly, in her discussion of *Fóstbrœðra saga*, Helga Kress has suggested that the saga does not glorify its protagonists for their extreme form of masculinity, but rather 'hún hlær að þeim' (it laughs at them).[23] Both of these articles are important as they each demonstrate that saga literature can subvert and parody hegemonic norms.

In the second chapter of his book *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*, David Clark assesses, and ultimately demonstrates, the applicability of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of homosociality to Old Norse literature through a reading of the Helgi poems of the *Poetic Edda*.[24] In this book Clark also suggests that heroic masculinity, with its taste for revenge, is

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[20] Carl Phelpstead, 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria* 19.3 (2007), 420-37.

[21] Carl Phelpstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 85.1 (2013), 1-19 (15).

[22] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*', *Viator* 38.1 (2007), 191-215.

[23] Helga Kress, 'Bróklindi Falgeirs: Fóstbrœðrasaga og hláturmenning miðalda,' *Skírnir* 161 (1987), 271-86 (275).

[24] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past,* 46-66.
Clark's use of theories of homosociality – and the idea of homosociality more broadly – will be discussed later in this thesis; see especially pages 41-2.

'associated with the past', but nevertheless has a 'stranglehold on the present which is hard to shake off'.[25]

Two articles by Tarrin Wills are also of relevance to this discussion.[26] Although Wills intentionally avoids both 'gender' and 'masculinity' as working concepts, his studies have clear relevance to Old Norse masculinity.[27] In his studies he investigates the relationship between behavioural endocrinology and saga literature, suggesting that the scientifically documented effects of testosterone on physiology and behaviour bear a striking resemblance to portraits of dominant men in sagas. He concludes that 'it is quite likely that there is not only a parallel here but that the sagas are depicting patterns of behaviour which are consistent with the complex interactions between behaviour, social environment and hormone production, albeit realized in fictional or semi-fictional situations'.[28] While Wills' articles differ greatly in their focus from my own literary study, his findings are nevertheless of relevance to this project.

Finally, in an article currently under review, I argue that the *landnám* tradition is inherently biased towards men, suppressing the role of women in the settlement of Iceland.[29] This bias is evident in a number of areas including the proportion of female settlers relative to male settlers as given in the *Landnámabók* redactions (1:6) compared to that suggested by archaeological evidence (1:2), and the propensity for the genealogies given to take the patriline

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[25] *Clark, Gender, Violence, and the Past,* 15.
[26] Tarrin Wills, 'Physiology and Behaviour in the Sagas', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 279-297; Tarrin Wills, 'Testosterone, Aggression and Status in Early Northern Literature', *Northern Studies* 44 (2013), 60-79.
[27] Wills, 'Physiology' 282.
[28] Wills, 'Testosterone', 74-5
[29] Gareth L. Evans, 'Masculine Bias in the Narratives of the Icelandic *Landnám*', under review at *Scandinavian Studies*.

at the expense of the matriline. Following Robert Avis, if we take the *landnám* tradition to be a fundamental social myth of the medieval Icelanders, which is constructed intertextually between the *Landnámabók* redactions and the *landnám* sections of the *Íslendingasögur*, then we may view such a male bias as important for our understanding of medieval Icelandic literary constructions of maleness.[30] While the articulation of such a bias does not allow us to understand the qualitative constitution of Old Icelandic masculinity, it reinforces the importance of masculinity to the medieval Icelandic literary imaginary.

As can be seen, the works which treat masculinity in Old Norse literature – although each useful in its own right – are not capable of producing a coherent overview of men and masculinities in the sagas. In this study I hope to provide such an overview for the *Íslendingasögur*.

WHY STUDY MASCULINITY?

It may be claimed that the reason there are so few scholarly works on masculinity in Old Norse literature is simply because we do not need – or want – them. Indeed, it could be suggested that an impulse to study men or masculinities is not only needless – (are not almost all studies of saga literature, because of the 'overwhelmingly male-dominated world of the *Íslendingasögur*', in some ways studies of men?) – but also symptomatic of a petulant, reactionary response to studies that are broadly feminist in their approach.[31]

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[30] Robert John Roy Avis, 'The Social Mythology of Medieval Icelandic Literature' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2011), 15-51.
[31] Alison Finlay, 'Betrothal and Women's Autonomy in *Laxdœla saga* and the Poets' Sagas', *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997), 107-28 (109).

But such an attitude reifies woman as the sole object of feminist inquiry, consequently naturalizing the categories of men and masculinity. As Jane Flax notes:

> To the extent that feminist discourse defines its problematic as 'woman,' it, too, ironically privileges the man as unproblematic or exempted from determination by gender relations. From the perspective of social relations, men and women are both prisoners of gender, although in highly differentiated but interrelated ways. That men appear to be and (in many cases) are the wardens, or at least the trustees in a social whole, should not blind us to the extent to which, they, too, are governed by the rules of gender.[32]

By seeing women and femininities as in need of critical study – but not men and masculinities – femininities are seen as constructed and false, while men and masculinities are privileged as somehow real and authentic. Masculinities, of course, are as much a product of social construction as femininities.

As John Tosh notes for the historical record at large, 'it is as though masculinity is everywhere but nowhere.'[33] The same holds true for studies of saga literature.[34] Masculinity is everywhere because men are everywhere; it is concurrently nowhere because men and masculinities are not rigorously interrogated as categories, but rather taken as givens. This can be taken to be a function of masculinity's status as the 'unmarked category', where maleness can

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[32] Jane Flax, 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 12.4 (1987), 621-43 (629). This quotation is also cited – in abbreviated form – in Thelma Fenster, 'Preface: Why Men?', in Clare Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis and London, 1994), ix-xiii (ix).

[33] John Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop* 38 (1994), 179-202 (180).

[34] We can view introductory handbooks, companions, and encyclopediae as an index of this. For example, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (ed. Rory McTurk) contains Quinn's chapter on 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', but there is no corresponding chapter on 'Men'. Similarly, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf) contains an entry by Else Mundal on 'Women in Sagas' (723-5), and by Helen Damico on 'Women in Eddic Poetry' (721-3); there are no corresponding entries on men or masculinities.

pass as the universal human condition, while femaleness is to be seen as constructed and other.

This thesis seeks to take the same scrutiny that women and femininities have received in scholarly work on Old Norse literature and apply it to men and masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*. By doing so, I hope to reveal that men and masculinity cannot legitimately be treated as unproblematic, ahistorical, or natural categories, but rather – like femininity – must be seen as constructed, artificial, and mobile.

The study of masculinities, then, comes to be seen as a feminist enterprise in its own right.[35] By studying masculinities in the same way we do femininities we remove any claim that masculinity may seem to have to a natural authenticity, abstracted from the cultural discourse or the matrix of gender relations which constitute it. But moreover, viewing masculinities through the same critical optics we use to look at femininities allows us to examine the ways in which saga masculinities may be subverted and destabilized by the very texts which create them. As noted above, in the psychoanalytic account of the genesis of gendered identity, masculinity arises in relation to the feminine, but subjects are nevertheless unlikely to be wholly masculine or feminine. Instead, they usually possess a complex of gendered components. It is in this fact that the

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[35] At this point I would like to distance myself from – in fact completely reject – so-called 'masculinist' studies which, in complete opposition to the present study, 'draw on naturalizing discourses and stand in opposition, either implicitly or explicitly, to basic feminist principles' (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, 133). I would also like to reiterate that this thesis does not derive from some misguided notion that men are being treated unfairly by not being studied in the same way as women (this is the rather problematic logic behind masculinist studies). Rather, this study explicitly problematizes masculinity as a category.

seeds of subversion lie, and this thesis seeks to examine as fully as possible the fruits of its 'full subversive potential'.[36]

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

While the dominant methodological mode of this thesis is that of close literary analysis, my analyses will also draw on a range of other critical approaches from various disciplines including gender and feminist studies, queer studies, the psychology of emotions, sociology, and psychoanalysis. Although I perhaps aspire to a greater sense of coherence, my methodology has clear resonance with what Halberstam calls queer methodology:

> A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.[37]

Such a critically diverse – perhaps even critically promiscuous – approach will be shown to be well suited to the multifaceted topic of medieval gender. To rehearse each of these approaches and theories here is unnecessary: theories and frameworks will be introduced as necessary in the course of the thesis. However, it is worth once again emphasizing the main disciplinary nature of this project. As noted, the dominant methodological mode is that of close literary analysis. Every analysis made is either literary-critical itself, or will have bearing upon literary analysis, and any claims I make with regard to masculinities in the

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[36] Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity?', 179.
[37] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity,* 13

following pages should be understood as being about their construction, operation, and problematization within saga society, as represented in literary narrative. No claim is made for the extra-textual validity of my analyses.

THE REMIT OF THIS THESIS

This thesis does not attempt to investigate masculinities in all genres of Old Norse literature. Rather, it focuses solely on the *Íslendingasögur*.[38] These works are not only 'native, secular and naturalistic',[39] but as a genre produce – intertextually – a coherent picture of a realistic social world.[40] Their socially realist mode is particularly amenable to sustained readings of gender identity and construction. In this thesis I suggest a new way of conceptualizing masculinities in Old Norse literature, subsequently demonstrating its utility. I provide an overview of the interpersonal dynamics of masculinity, and also demonstrate the fragility of masculine identities, which are problematized through the inevitable intersection of the various identity categories which constitute a given subject. I also explore the ways in which medieval Icelandic literary texts use the body in order to stage a resistance to the socio-political category of masculinity. Finally, not only are masculinities shown to be self-problematizing, but also can be seen to be subverted by women and femininities.

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[38] There is of course debate over which texts should be counted among the *Íslendingasögur*. For the purposes of this thesis, the texts to be regarded as *Íslendingasögur* are those 40 listed by Vésteinn Ólason in 'Family Sagas', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2005), 101-18 (114-5). This list has been chosen for its inclusivity. Although not all texts will be able to be discussed in detail in this thesis, all 40 have been considered and have informed the arguments put forward here.

[39] Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford and Malden, MA, 2004), 23.

[40] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', 101.

A central aim of this thesis is to encourage the reader to see masculinities not as static and unitary, but instead as multiple and constructed. In doing so, it reveals men and masculinities in Old Norse literature as viable and worthwhile objects of study, which are in need of critical scrutiny.

OVERVIEW OF THIS THESIS

Following the present overview, this chapter then briefly discusses the inadequacies of one current, and popular, model used to conceptualize Old Norse masculinities, before suggesting a new model suitable for the study of the *Íslendingasögur* based on theories of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities.

In the second chapter, a broad range of masculine characters from across the *Íslendingasögur* is then analysed to give an overview of the operation of masculinity in the sagas, and to demonstrate the utility of the new analytic framework. In particular, attention is paid to the way in which masculinities influence, and are implicated in, the interactions between men. By focusing on the actions of male characters, this chapter touches upon, elucidates, and articulates many facets of saga society, and the representation of men within it, which are generally taken for granted and consequently not usually formulated in saga scholarship. I further suggest that masculinities in Old Norse literature can be viewed productively as the interaction of the hegemonic form of masculinity with a plethora of other identity categories through which social power is fractured and hierarchized. It will be concurrently demonstrated that it is often in interacting with other identity categories that masculinity becomes problematized.

In the third chapter I then move to argue that the male body is used to undermine the prevailing model of masculinity in saga literature. Through a study focusing on *Njáls saga* (a saga representative of its genre, with a superior range of characters and a thematic focus on issues of gender and sexuality), it is argued that the saga author deploys somatic indices such as facial reddening and tears at strategic moments to demonstrate a male character's embodied – although largely unconscious – resistance to the dictates of a culturally-endorsed, violent masculinity. These moments of somatic subversion are not unambiguous, however, and the usually clear, or even legalistic, prose gives way to functional polysemy, preventing the reader from knowing how they are to interpret such signs. Using the concepts of *écriture féminine* and emotion scripting as critical touchstones, it is suggested that such moments of ambiguity are purposeful – both thematically and narratorially.

While the second and third chapters both examine characters who tend to fail to live up to the masculine ideal, the fourth chapter examines the representation of a character that appears to embody masculinity to an exceptional degree.[41] Through a study focusing on the character of Grettir in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* it is seen how far masculinity problematizes a character's relation to self, family, society, and the very notion of masculinity itself. Masculinity is just as problematic when it is performed to an exceptional degree, it is argued, as it is when it fails.

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[41] I would like to briefly draw attention to the phrasing that I have used to describe Grettir's embodiment of masculinity, not least because I have been forced to use it twice within the same paragraph. I have used 'to an exceptional degree' to describe Grettir's performance of masculinity as the alternatives that I have considered are laden with unwanted associations. To say that Grettir embodies masculinity 'perfectly' or 'exceptionally well' would suggest approval. Likewise 'hyperbolic' or 'excessive' would function as undesired opprobrium. I hope that 'to an exceptional degree' suggests a more neutral evaluation of Grettir's relation to masculinity.

Finally, an epilogue briefly investigates the relation of femininities to masculinities in order to demonstrate the functions that non-male subjects can have in the problematization of masculinity. By ranging across a number of sagas, this section investigates how female characters in the *Íslendingasögur* are able to subvert and destabilize the category of masculinity itself.

MODELS OF MASCULINITY

As noted, little has been written that explicitly deals with masculinity in Old Norse literature. But in dealing with any question of Old Norse gender, I would be remiss not to discuss Carol Clover's work on the gender model of medieval Scandinavia. Indeed, while her work is not exclusively about masculinity, it nevertheless has bearing upon our understanding of masculinity in Old Norse literature.

In an article entitled 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', Clover, drawing on the work of Thomas Laqueur, suggests that 'a one-sex, one-gender model with a vengeance' was in operation in medieval Iceland.[42] In this framework, she proposes that rather than a model of 'masculine' and 'feminine', we should think in terms of *hvatr* and *blauðr* (literally, 'hard' and 'soft'), a system which 'works more as a gender continuum than a

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[42] Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations* 44 (1993), 1-28 (18).
The article was also published two other times: Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* 68.2 (1993), 363-87; and Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', in Nancy F. Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 61-85.
All quotations of this work appearing in this thesis are taken from the *Representations* version of the article.
Laqueur puts forward a theory of a 'one-sex, one-gender' model for medieval Europe in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

sexual binary.'[43] Indeed, rather than there being both masculine and feminine genders, Clover suggests that instead there was ultimately only one gender, and that 'it was something like masculine'.[44] Women, rather than being judged to a standard of femininity, were, like all subjects, judged according to whether or not they were *hvatr*. This leads to a situation in which,

> 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).[45]

It is in this formulation that Clover's theory has had its greatest influence.

But there are nevertheless problems with Clover's conceptualization. The theory upon which Clover bases her own – that produced by Thomas Laqueur – has, of course, been shown to be problematic. Joan Cadden, for example, has refuted Laqueur's claims, suggesting that his theory lacks nuance and oversimplifies the medieval actuality in which there is evidence both for and against a one-sex model.[46] Unlike Laqueur, Clover does not herself use medical or philosophical texts as evidence to support her self-stated assumption of the presence of a one-sex model in medieval Iceland, and her theory is thus to be viewed as entirely speculative.[47] Contrary to her model, saga literature also provides us with plentiful examples in which the two categories – man and

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[43] Clover, 'Regardless', 11.
[44] Clover, 'Regardless', 13.
[45] Clover, 'Regardless', 13.
[46] Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, 1995), 2. Cadden's critique of Laqueur is also discussed in: David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford, 2009), 14; and David Clark, 'Old English Literature and Same-Sex Desire: An Overview', *Literature Compass* 6.3 (2009), 573-94 (579).
[47] Clover, 'Regardless', 12.

woman – are distinguished from one another.[48] Such distinctions can be predicated upon biological markers that have been endowed with gendered meaning; in particular, beards are seen as an indicator of – and indeed prerequisite for – masculine identity.[49] Given the link between biological maleness and masculinity that can thus be elucidated, it can be safely assumed that even if a woman could adopt masculine behaviours – indeed, embody a

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[48] Þorgerðr in *Gísla saga*, 75, for example, suggests that she might not be able to give Gísli any more help beyond 'kvenvælar einar' (a woman's wiles alone), indicating that a difference is understood between the categories of man and woman. Similarly, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 27, the enemies of Þórarinn, a man who is taciturn and peaceful, say that he 'hefði eigi síðr kvenna skap en karla' (had no less the character of a woman than that of a man). Skarpheðinn, in *Njáls saga*, 144, also clearly separates the categories of men and women, claiming of himself and his brothers that '[e]kki hǫfu vér kvenna skap' (we do not have the character of women). Elsewhere in the corpus the distinction between what we would now distinguish as sex and gender is made even more clear. In *Laxdœla saga*, 96, Auðr is divorced by her husband Þórðr because – he claims – she has worn men's trousers. He accuses her of wearing breeches 'sem karlkonur' (like masculine women). Here, as the compound *karlkonur* indicates, Auðr clearly retains her female status, while being gendered masculine. In the same saga (*Laxdœla saga*, 162), Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir urges her sons to take vengeance for their brother Kjartan. In doing so, she speaks to them thus: 'er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu; ok víst ætla ek yðr til þess betr fellda, at þér værið dœtur fǫður yðvars ok værið giptar' (it is ill to have sluggish sons; and I'm certain it would have turned out better if you had been your father's daughters and had been married off). But the fact that they are sons – and are still recognized as such – suggests a recognition of biological difference between male and female persons.
Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's study, *Women in Old Norse Literature,* also problematizes Clover's framework. In it Jóhanna notes that 'there are plenty of female characters in the saga corpus as a whole who are depicted as powerful and who are often admired for it without subsequently being compared to a man' (7-8).

[49] In *Njáls saga*, 314, Flosi uses the fact that the aged Njáll is unable to grow a beard to question his sex, suggesting that 'margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona' (there are many, who see him, who cannot tell whether he is a man or a woman). The beard, here, can clearly be understood as a bodily signifier of cultural masculinity. In *Víga-Glúms saga*, 62, Bárðr questions the masculinity of Vigfúss Glúmsson by suggesting that 'finnsk nú þat á, at þú munt optar hafa staðit nær búrhillum ok ráðit um matargerð með móður þinni en gengit at hestavígum, ok er þann veg litt skegg þitt eigi síðr' (it's now easy to perceive that you must have more often stood by the pantry shelves and conferred about the cooking with your mother than gone to horse fights, and the colour of your beard points that way nonetheless). Likewise, in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 178, the young Þórðr is called 'meyjarkinninn' (maiden cheek) when he is overpowered by Ásbjörn, who accuses him of being ill-prepared to 'leik með rosknum mönnum' (play with full-grown men). The link between the possession of facial hair and the ability to inhabit a masculine subject position is clear. Indeed, as Oren Falk notes, 'for the Norse, the notional presence of facial hair unequivocally indexed manliness' – see 'Beardless Wonders: "Gaman vas Sǫxu" (The Sex was Great)', in Antonina Harbus and Russell Poole (eds.), *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank* (Toronto, 2005), 223-246 (235). Falk further suggests (242) that the link between beards and masculinity might problematize Clover's framework since it 'seems to hint at a conceptual system where gender is determined not only by manly behaviours but also by physical sex. It takes more than conduct as a *drengr*, "stalwart," to gain admission into the company of those who are *hvatr*, "butch."'

female masculinity – her lack of male sexual characteristics would ensure that she is not, *pace* Clover, able to be truly regarded as a man. The two categories remain separate and cannot be collapsed into homogeneity.

It must be noted, however, that it has been suggested that even if a one-sex model did not hold sway in medieval Iceland, this would not necessarily preclude the presence of a one-gender system: that is, that a two-sex system may have coexisted with a one-gender model.[50] Yet to suggest that the lack of a one-sex system would not impinge upon Clover's theoretical framework is to ignore the central position which the imagined presence of such a system occupies in Clover's argument. The presence of a one-sex system is fundamental to Clover's formulation; without such a system, her *hvatr-blauðr* model quickly reveals itself to be little more than masculinity/femininity in disguise. Similarly, a one gender model is a difficult conceptualization in itself. Clover articulates her vision of the sex-gender system of medieval Iceland thus:

> 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.[51]

If there is just one, approximately masculine, gender we might rightly query how such a gender came into existence and how it might function in practice. Indeed, if we accept that '[m]asculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a

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[50] For example, on the possibility of a one-gender model co-existing with a two-sex system, Carl Phelpstead argues that 'Clover relates this gender system to the one-sex system described by Laqueur, but the validity of her description of a one-gender system is not dependent on a one-sex model pertaining in medieval Iceland.' ('Size Matters', 435)

[51] Clover, 'Regardless', 13.

cultural opposition' and that '[m]asculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation', then Clover's suggestion that a single gender was in operation becomes problematic.[52] It is further suggested by Clover that the difficulty in elucidating the features of a Norse femininity that is distinguishable from effeminacy lends further weight to the argument for a one-gender system.[53] But this is perhaps to misunderstand the construction of femininity. As discussed earlier, femininity is something of an empty category, signifying nothing but its own lack. In this formulation, even if the feminine is simply seen as the 'not masculine' this still creates a binary – an opposition – resulting in a two-gender system. While Clover suggests that *hvatr-blauðr* is a continuum as opposed to a binary, this still means that a polar conception of gender is being used as an organizing principle. That *blauðr* is to be seen as little more than the antithesis of *hvatr* in fact aligns the relationship between *blauðr* and *hvatr* with that between femininity and masculinity, with *blauðr* being seen as nothing but the privation of *hvatr* qualities.

Furthermore, by describing the one gender that she identifies as being 'something like masculine', Clover appears to suggest that the category of masculinity is fixed and ahistoric. But, as Stephen Whitehead notes, there is a 'multiplicity of masculinities', dependent upon a number of intersecting factors for their production.[54] To speak, therefore, in terms that figure masculinity as static and fixed is to misrepresent and to oversimplify the historically contingent nature of gender.

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[52] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 2005), 44.
[53] Clover, 'Regardless', 12.
[54] Stephen Whitehead, 'Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited', *Gender, Work and Organization* 6.1 (1999), 58-62 (58).

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES

If we view Clover's model as inadequate for discussing representations of Old Norse masculinities, then it becomes clear that we must find an alternative model that can accommodate the diversity of gender representations evinced in medieval Icelandic literature, and that can also negotiate the hurdles at which the present theory stumbles.

At this point it is necessary to interject and state what this study will *not* attempt to do. It will not provide an *all-encompassing* alternative framework of gender relations of the kind that Clover produced (or indeed, that Laqueur formulated). Such grand, synthetic theorizing is destined to fail as it tries to impose unitary models onto gender – something which is *anything* but unitary. Such models, rather than enabling productive discussion of the representations of gender, instead inhibit these discussions by providing an artificial classification system in which to place any given gendered representation. While the appeal of the simplicity of such systems, which appear at first glance to 'solve' and to 'explain' gender relations, is obvious, simplicity alone is not a valid reason for their adoption. My intention, in effect, is to purposefully muddy the critical waters – as they must always be muddied when it comes to issues of historical, and indeed modern-day, gender – but nevertheless simultaneously suggest that there are alternative tools which may be used to conceptualize gender relations in Old Norse literature, and which can do so without being

reductive or attempting to produce a typology of different kinds of gendered identity.[55]

This conceptualization can, I believe, be best achieved through the critical framework of hegemonic masculinity. The notion of hegemonic masculinity entered critical discourse in the 1980s and was first delineated in Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee's ground-breaking article, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity'.[56] Connell, revisiting the concept a decade later, provides the following definition for hegemonic masculinity:

> At any given time one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.[57]

Hegemonic masculinity, then, can be considered the crystallization of the masculine ideal.

There are several central tenets which underpin the theory of hegemonic masculinity. One of the most important is that there are multiple masculinities. This resonates with our impressions of masculinity formed from reading saga literature. Perhaps the most vivid example of this is to be found in the characteristics of the two very different branches of Egill's family in *Egils saga* – as the saga tells us, it is a family 'sundrleitt mjǫk' (of two extremes).[58] Indeed, while the swarthy Egill is described as 'kappsamr mjǫk ok reiðinn' (very

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[55] See, for example, Jochens' *Old Norse Images of Women*, which classifies female characters into four types: 'Warrior Women', 'Prophetess/Sorceress', 'Avenger', and 'Whetter'.
[56] Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society* 14.5 (1985), 551-604.
[57] Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.
[58] *Egils saga*, 299.

impetuous and hot-tempered), his fair-complexioned son Þorsteinn is described as 'vitr maðr ok kyrrlátr, hógværr, stilltr manna bezt' (a wise man and peaceful, gentle, the most composed of men).[59] Despite their evident differences, the saga nevertheless recognizes them both as masculine, even if we might read Egill's masculinity as more dominant. Similarly, of course, we may look to the dual protagonists of *Njáls saga* – Gunnarr and Njáll – who likewise embody very different modalities of masculinity. Indeed, we may begin to wonder whether these contrasting pair bonds are not in themselves a literary response to the existence of multiple masculinities.

The multiplicity of masculinities leads to another tenet of the theory: that all masculinities that do not live up to the hegemonic ideal are subordinated to it, and therefore viewed as inferior. Consequently this does not, in significant contrast to what is implicit in Clover's framework, mean that those who do not fully exhibit the masculine ideal are not viewed as masculine. Rather, they are able to embody a masculinity that is subordinate to the idealized form, but is nevertheless regarded as masculine: deviation from the masculine ideal does not necessarily imply feminization.[60] For example, at the end of *Ljósvetninga saga*, Hárekr – in a friendly test of strength – tries to pull Skegg-Broddi's hands away from his head (a feat which the latter has just accomplished with ease), but he is unable to do so. Skegg-Broddi then speaks to Hárekr, telling him that '[e]igi þykki mér þú maðr sterkr, en drengr góðr ertu' (it does not seem to me that you are a

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[59] *Egils saga*, 99 and 274.

[60] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee illustrate this point thus: 'male homosexuals typically identify themselves as men (however problematic they may find the general social elaboration of masculinity)' ('Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 588).

strong man, but you are a good man).[61] Hárekr is clearly not effeminized for his lacklustre physical abilities.

The primacy of the hegemonic masculine ideal depends upon this subordination of other masculinities.[62] Furthermore, the exacting demands of the hegemonic form of masculinity mean that in reality few men, if any, live up to the ideal and can be seen to embody such a position.[63] Likewise, it is eminently possible that those who most visibly embody the hegemonic ideal are *not* the most powerful people or, similarly, that those who are most powerful are far from embodying hegemonic masculinity. Njáll for example, is eminently powerful, so much so that he is able to bring about a change in the legal foundation of the Icelandic commonwealth, despite his masculinity being consistently questioned.[64]

Implicit, of course, in a structure in which masculinities are multiple, and in which non-hegemonic masculinities are subordinated to hegemonic masculinity, is the hierarchization of different modalities of masculinity. One effect of this is that male characters in saga literature tend to seek to be in a superior position to other male characters, and consequently display a will to dominate. Unsurprisingly, men often react badly when they are forced to occupy a subordinate position. Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, for example, after setting up his own farm at Aðalból, settles the entire valley and gives land to other men, but he 'vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim'

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[61] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 106.
[62] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1.
[63] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 592; Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.
[64] *Njáls saga*.

(nevertheless wished to be their superior and took the *goðorð* over them).[65] Later in the saga, after his son Einarr has been slain by Hrafnkell, Þorbjǫrn confronts Hrafnkell to ask how he will make amends for the killing. But when Hrafnkell offers him compensation – to a degree that is unprecedented in its generosity – Þorbjǫrn refuses it and suggests that they instead appoint an arbitrator to judge between them. This, however, Hrafnkell will not agree to, and in his refusal indicates that it is his sense of social superiority which prevents such a settlement: '[þ]á þykkisk þú jafnmenntr mér, ok munum vit ekki at því sættask' (then you think yourself of equal rank to me, and because of this we two shall never come to an agreement).[66] Similarly, in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, Illugi convinces Þorsteinn to marry his daughter Helga to his own son Gunnlaugr, by threatening that any other course of action would suggest that Þorsteinn thinks himself of superior status – something that Illugi would not be able to tolerate: 'Þetta mun okkr verða at vinslitum, ef þú synjar okkr feðgum jafnræðis' (It will destroy our friendship, if you refuse this equal match to us two, father and son).[67] Some characters even seem to revel in the subordination of other men. In *Svarfdœla saga*, for example, the 'hálfberserkr' (half-*berserkr*) Moldi asks Herrøðr *jarl* for permission 'at ganga um hǫllina fyrir hvern mann ok spyrja, hvárt nǫkkurr þykkist mér jafnsnjallr' (to go around the hall in front of each man and ask whether anybody thinks himself equal in courage to me), and, moreover, suggests that it will be 'mikil gleði at skemmta sér með því' (great fun to entertain themselves in this way).[68] We could also read the saga cliché of leaving

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[65] *Hrafnkels saga*, 99.
[66] *Hrafnkels saga*, 106.
[67] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 67.
[68] *Svarfdæla saga*, 142 and 143-4.

Norway and travelling to Iceland to escape the yoke of tyrannical rule as a refusal to be subordinated by a man in a superior masculine position.

An inevitable facet of the hierarchization of masculinities is that certain men must fall at the very bottom of the masculine hierarchy. Today, homosexuality is the category which functions as 'the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity'.[69] This resonates with the state of affairs in medieval Icelandic texts, in which those who occupy the lowest rung in the masculine hierarchy are those who are thought to be *argr* / *ragr*. These words signify a complex in which the *argr* man is thought to be unmanly in a number of ways: as effeminate, as cowardly, and as having taken the passive role in homosexual anal sex. That there is correspondence between the operation of hegemonic masculinity today and in medieval Icelandic texts lends further weight to the use of theories of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities in discussing Old Norse masculinities.

Masculinities are not to be viewed as static roles, but rather are to be seen as being 'configurations of practice structured by gender relations', which are 'continually constructed within the history of an evolving social structure'.[70] Each manifestation of masculinity 'varies as it is constructed in different situations'.[71] This means that an individual's masculinity is always formed in relation to the hegemonic ideal, but also that an individual's relationship to the

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A similar scene is to be found in chapter 6 of *Víga-Glúms saga*, where the *berserkr* Bjǫrn asks, in turn, each of the men assembled at a feast whether they think themselves to be his equal.

[69] Connell, *Masculinities*, 79. This could be productively compared with Leo Bersani's 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* 43 (1987), 197-222, in which he suggests (at 222) that 'the rectum [as sexual organ] is the grave in which the masculine ideal [...] of proud subjectivity is buried'.

[70] Connell, *Masculinities*, 44; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 589.

[71] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 561.

hegemonic is situationally specific, as is the masculinity that is produced for each situation and for any given point in time. Furthermore – and of particular relevance to medieval studies – all masculinities, including the hegemonic form, are inherently historical, arising out of temporally and location specific conditions of gender relations.[72] This allows hegemonic masculinities, as a way of conceptualizing Old Norse gender relations, to meet Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler's demand that 'medieval masculinities […] be encountered in their mobile specificities'.[73]

We must also recognize the fact that masculinities, while often spoken of in abstraction, cannot be regarded as isolated from the myriad other factors which produce subject positions and subjectivity. Rather we must consider masculinities as being produced at the intersection of, for example, age, physical (dis)ability, and race *with* the current hegemonic model of masculinity.[74] Furthermore, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has suggested:

> If one position becomes privileged, it constitutes a nodal point. While in any particular historical moment class may be the primary modality through which one experiences gender and race, in other circumstances gender may be the privileged position through which one experiences sexuality, race, and class.[75]

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[72] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 593-4; Connell, *Masculinities*, 44.

[73] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, 'Becoming and Unbecoming', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (eds.), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York and London, 1997), vii-xx (xix).

[74] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3; Connell, *Masculinities*, 75-6; Connell, *Gender*, 40.
The term 'intersectionality' was coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139-67.

[75] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies', in Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis, 2009) 1-23 (10).

I suggest that, in the highly gendered society represented by medieval Icelandic texts, gender constitutes such a nodal point through which we are able to view and analyse character traits and behaviours in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Finally, it must be recognized that the hegemonic form of masculinity interacts with the *embodied* subject; the consequence of this for the experience of subjectivity – and thus the construction of individual masculinity – must not be understated. Indeed, Carrigan, Connell, and Lee suggest that '[m]asculinity invests the body', while Kathleen Slevin and Thomas Linneman rightly assert that 'it is important to register that notions of masculinity are embodied'.[76] Rather than seeing masculine subjects as being formed purely discursively – as a caricature of constructivism would have it – we must rather see masculinities as produced and reproduced at the level of the body, in interaction with the socio-cultural discourses of masculine ideals. Indeed, Foucault's formulation of the discursively formed subject has come under attack for having rendered the body invisible, and for ignoring the part it plays in social process.[77] The body is not to be viewed as a *tabula rasa* upon which dominant discourses are to be unproblematically inscribed. Indeed, to speak of the body in the singular is, simply put, a fallacy – there are a multiplicity of bodies (indeed, as many as there are subjects), and each body is unique and presents its own unique methods of

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[76] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 585; Kathleen F. Slevin and Thomas J. Linneman, 'Old Gay Men's Bodies and Masculinities', *Men and Masculinities* 12.4 (2010), 483-507 (483).

[77] For Foucault's formulation of the discursively formed body, see: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, 1991); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1990).
For a critique of the Foucauldian body's universalism see: Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1989), 55-66; and N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London, 1999), 192-7.

resistance to perfect cultural inscription.[78] Bodies are, considering their creation through discourse, but also their resistance to and subsequent modification thereof, 'both objects and agents of practice'.[79] In this sense, the formation of masculinity must *always* be seen as a 'body reflexive practice'.[80]

Hopefully, the merits of a hegemonic masculinity approach to the study of Old Icelandic literature, and perhaps medieval literature in general, will be self-evident: it allows for the presence of multiple masculinities; it demands the existence of an ideal of masculinity without resorting to a rigid role framework, and explicitly notes that most people – or in this case, characters – will not live up to such an ideal; it enables those who do not exhibit a hegemonic form of masculinity to still be viewed as masculine, which is a more accurate reflection of representations of gender in the sagas, and also of a reader's perceptions of the gender of characters; it allows the conceptualization of masculinities in flux; and finally, it does not see masculinity as an isolated category, but rather as produced at the intersection of a plethora of identity categories. Moreover, the theory of hegemonic masculinities is of particular use to literary studies as it melds the insights of psychoanalysis with larger structural accounts of the operation of gender.[81]

This is not to say that the theory of hegemonic masculinity has not itself received criticism. While most of these criticisms are readily rebutted, there is,

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[78] Connell, *Gender*, 47; Connell, *Masculinities*, 51 and 56; Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 203.
[79] Connell, *Masculinities*, 61.
[80] Connell, *Gender,* 47.
[81] Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, 139-40; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 593.

however, one critique which should be taken particularly seriously.[82] As John MacInnes incisively argues, 'significantly, he [Connell] nowhere attempts an empirical definition'.[83] Jeff Hearn likewise suggests that there are 'persistent question marks around what is actually to count as hegemonic masculinity.'[84] The theory of hegemonic masculinity, therefore, comes under attack for being imprecise and undefined. It must be noted that it is true that Connell, whether in her monographs or collaborative articles, never produces a description of the characteristics of the hegemonically masculine subject. Rather, hegemonic masculinity is only ever spoken of in abstract terms. However, if we take into account the historically contingent nature of the hegemonic, it is hard to imagine a way in which Connell, when providing a theory of the concept, could have possibly provided a solid definition of hegemonic masculinity's characteristics

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[82] Whitehead has suggested that it essentializes sex difference ('Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited'), but this view is perplexing, however, given the emphasis placed on the historical and situationally specific nature of masculinity by the theory's proponents. It is perhaps true that some scholarship published using hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework *has* essentialized sex difference (Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities*, 91), using the framework as a smokescreen in order to suggest the inevitability of the *status quo*, but this is a failing of the individual critics who misread the theory, intentionally or otherwise, rather than of the theory itself. Jeff Hearn, rather than truly producing a critique of hegemonic masculinities, suggests that instead of talking of hegemonic masculinities we should talk of the 'hegemony of men'. ('From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men', *Feminist Theory* 5.1 (2004), 49-72 (59)). This *does* essentialize sex difference, equating masculinity with men and the male body; Hearn's conception would rule out the possibility of masculine women, as theorized most famously by Halberstam (*Female Masculinity*). In perhaps the most nuanced re-evaluation of the concept of hegemonic masculinities to date, Demetrakis Z. Demetriou suggests that rather than a unitary hegemonic masculinity, we should, in dialogue with Gramsci's concept of the historic bloc and Bhaba's notion of hybridity, instead think in terms of a 'hegemonic masculine bloc' which is maintained through the hybridization of hegemonic masculinities with elements from the subordinate forms ('Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique', *Theory and Society* 30.3 (2001), 337-361). As Connell and James W. Messerschmidt argue, however, the theory that Demetriou produces, while partially convincing, is not ultimately a theory of hegemonic masculinities: in essence he mistakenly conflates hegemonic masculinity with the masculinities that are displayed by heterosexual men as a whole. Consequently, there is ultimately 'little reason to think that hybridization has become hegemonic' ('Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society* 19.6 (2005), 829-859 (836)). The theory then, abstracted from its misuse, and used with proper attention given to its historical contingency, remains sound.

[83] John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society* (Buckingham, 1998), 14.

[84] Hearn, 'From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men', 58.

without being essentialist or reductive. Indeed, Hearn even concedes that Connell's ostensible failure may be as a result of the fact that 'one of the subtleties of the hegemonic may be its very elusiveness and the difficulty of reducing it to a set of fixed positions and practices.'[85] But it is perhaps not so much its 'elusiveness' as its fundamental contingency that acts as a barrier to producing a definition of hegemonic masculinity. The construction of hegemonic masculinity is contingent upon the chronotope in which it operates. While this may act as a barrier for defining hegemonic masculinity in general terms or in real–life contexts, it does not prevent the literary or historical critic from producing a working model of a particular hegemonic masculinity for a particular literary chronotope. Given the coherence of the chronotope of the *Íslendingasögur*, these texts are particularly suited to this purpose. And indeed, such a task is essential for any analysis using hegemonic masculinities as a framework, and will hopefully guard against the uncritical and historically totalizing use of the term 'masculinity'.

PRODUCING A MODEL OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY FOR THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*

In his foundational work on sexual defamation, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen states that '[s]ociety was to a very great extent based on an aggressive masculine ethic'.[86] Readers of Old Norse literature will instantly recognize this as a valid assertion, and it is not too great a stretch of the imagination to see this notion of an 'aggressive masculine ethic' as a particular form of hegemonic masculinity. But to analyse gendered representations in terms of their adherence, or

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[85] Hearn, 'From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men', 59.
[86] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 21.

otherwise, to a model of hegemonic masculinity, we must first, considering the historically contingent nature of masculinities, produce a working model of hegemonic masculinity for Old Norse saga literature.

Regrettably, no Old Norse text spells out the terms of the model of masculinity in operation at the time in which the sagas were written or, indeed, set. And, of course, the term 'masculinity' is not a medieval one. The earliest attestation in English is from 1748, although an isolated attestation of *masculinité* is found in Old French from c. 1268, and witnesses to medieval Latin *masculinitas* are to be found in British sources from the thirteenth century.[87] But there exist no cognates for 'masculinity' in Old Norse. There are, however, multiple Old Norse words that seem to fulfil a similar semantic function to Modern English 'masculinity'. Of these, the most common are *drengskapr* and *karlmennska*; men who possess these qualities will often be called a *drengr* or a *góðr drengr*.[88] These terms may at first glance appear to be a good starting point for elucidating a model of Old Norse masculinity: if we look at each word – along with those similar in meaning – in their contexts within the *Íslendingasögur* then we might think that we could, in this way, recover the semantic range of the Old Norse concept of masculinity. But in practice such an exercise reveals little about the qualitative content of saga masculinity. When these terms are used they are clearly signifying a complex of attributes – in much the way the adjective 'manly' operates today – but the exact nature of the qualities which enable a character to be classified as possessing *drengskapr* or *karlmennska* is not elaborated upon. For example, in *Laxdœla saga* Gellir Þorkelsson is described as 'snimma

[87] OED Online, s.v. 'masculinity' (revised entry December 2000; accessed 10 August 2015).
[88] Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v. 'dreng-skapr' and 'karlmennska'. Also see those other terms which have *drengr* and *karl(maðr)* as their stem.

drengiligr maðr ok vinsæll' (from early on a manly man and popular), but we are not told what it is exactly that makes him *drengiligr*. [89] In *Flóamanna saga*, Hákon *jarl* commands Þorgils to go to the Hebrides to claim the tributes he is owed; Hákon appoints Þorgils as the leader of this expedition expressly so that he might prove his 'dáð ok karlmennsku' (deeds and manliness).[90] What exactly he must do to prove his manliness, however, is left unqualified. Examples like this abound: when words denoting manliness are used, they are not often qualified or elaborated upon. Rather, the terms function as by-words, the signification of which would have been understood by the audiences for which the sagas were written. But this does not mean that we are at a dead end in our search for a model of Old Norse masculinity.

Since, as Folke Ström asserts, 'injurious remarks, even when they are not taken literally, always tell us something about the existing set of social values', we may elucidate a model of hegemonic masculinity in the sagas by looking at the insults that are made in these texts.[91] *Níð* insults, which invoke the attributes of the *ergi*-complex, are useful for recovering a sense of medieval Icelandic masculinity since, to function, they clearly rely on a notion of what is appropriate conduct for a masculine subject. Meulengracht Sørensen has similarly suggested that insults functioned by signifying 'what a man *must not* be, since in that case he is no man.'[92] Insults, then, invoke and describe the complete polar opposite of manliness. In this sense we can see, from the many studies of Old Norse insults,

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[89] *Laxdœla saga*, 215.
[90] *Flóamanna saga*, 258.
[91] Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London, 1974), 15.
[92] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 24.

that a 'composite image of negative male behaviour has emerged'.[93] Just as with a negative photographic image, this image too may be developed into a positive by inverting it.[94] The inverse of an account of the typical features of Old Norse insults will provide us with a working model of hegemonic masculinity for the sagas.

While it is tempting to go back to first principles, and re-examine the corpus of Old Norse insults in order to produce a taxonomy of the different types of insult, such a task is rendered unnecessary by the vast array of scholarship on the topic.[95] Consequently, Clover's summary of the various ways in which Old Norse poetic insults function will be used in order to produce, through its inversion, a model of hegemonic masculinity. Her summary runs thus:

> 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 behaviour (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').[96]

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[93] Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 61.
[94] Larrington accomplishes a similar feat to uncover the desires of women in *Skírnismál*: 'By showing what women, be they giant or human, do not want, the curse allows us to construct an understanding of what *is* wanted – not simply the absence, but the converse of the elements of the curse' ('What Does Woman Want?', 11).
[95] There is a large body of scholarship on insults in Norse literature. See, for example: Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*; Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*; Thomas L. Markey, 'Nordic Níðvísur: An Instance of Ritual Inversion?', *Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (1972), 7-18; Alison Finlay, 'Níð, Adultery and Feud in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 23 (1991), 158-78; Alison Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *ýki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*', *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 21-44; and Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, 'On Níð against Bishops', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978/79), 149-53.
[96] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 8.

Inverting this to produce a working model of hegemonic masculinity, it can be inferred that to embody a hegemonic masculine position a person: must be of fine physical appearance; must act heroically (which includes the display of physical and martial prowess); must be bold, sincere, and responsible (actions must have good cause, the person must not be overly domesticated, and must not prefer sexual relations to physical labour); must act according to the dictates of honour at all times (must be both willing and able to exact due vengeance, and must act amicably with kinsmen); must adhere to alimentary taboos; and must not take part in 'irregular' sexual practices. (It is necessary to note that in terms of same-sex sexual activity it is the receptive role which is viewed as unmasculine – the penetrative partner attracted no opprobrium, and indeed, through the concept of 'phallic aggression' could rather be seen as highly masculine.)[97]

The problem with this model so far, however, is that it is entirely abstract. These may well be the qualities that comprised the hegemonic masculinity of medieval Icelandic saga texts, but in abstraction the model is useless. The utility of the model comes in its ability to interpret a range of masculinities from across the saga corpus, an ability which will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

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[97] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 27.

Chapter 2:
Saga Masculinities in Operation

In the previous chapter, I circumscribed the boundaries of a model of hegemonic masculinity for the *Íslendingasögur*. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the utility of this framework by looking at a range of masculinities from across the corpus. In doing so, I hope to produce an overview of some of the ways in which masculinity operates within the sagas and, simultaneously, of how masculinity interacts with other identity categories that may constitute a given subject. The first section of this chapter – 'Interactions Between Men' – will use the concept of homosociality to discuss attitudes to, and representations of, relationships between men. In the second section – 'Intersectional Masculinities' – the ways in which hegemonic masculinity interacts with, and is subverted by, a range of other identity categories (such as age, race, (dis)ability, and so on) will be interrogated. One danger of this chapter is that much of the material that I cover – and the conclusions that I draw – may be considered as pedestrian and tacit knowledge. But it is precisely this tacit information that requires interrogation and discussion. For as long as men and masculinities, as argued in the introduction, remain unexamined, they are given a privileged position and are able to masquerade as subjects somehow beyond and outside gender. But by examining masculinities in the same way we might look at femininities, we adopt a position from which many of the truisms about saga literature may be articulated. In order to discuss as fully as possible the operation of masculinity in its interpersonal (or rather, inter-character) modalities, I have chosen to place the focus in this section of the thesis heavily on the sagas themselves, and have

here used secondary criticism sparingly so as not to detract from the exploration of the construction and problematization of masculinities in the sagas, as articulated by the sagas. This chapter, then, will range widely across the *Íslendingasögur*. The coherence of the social world constructed by the sagas enables such an approach, particularly when considering such a fundamental ideological category as gender. While all of the *Íslendingasögur* have been surveyed to ensure that any claims I make about the operation of masculinity in the sagas are representative, to prevent this chapter from turning into a motif-index I will only discuss a limited number of examples of each type, but will indicate further examples in the footnotes as appropriate.

Homosociality and Medieval Literature: A (Slight) Digression

Before turning my focus towards the interactions between men, it is necessary to briefly discuss the notion of homosociality and its applicability to medieval literary studies, as I will be using it as a critical touchstone in what follows. The term 'homosociality' was initially used by sociologists and the term's use in sociology mainly stems from the work of Jean Lipman-Blumen, who discusses homosociality in her article 'Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles'.[1] For Lipman-Blumen, 'homosocial' is to be defined as 'the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex. It is distinguished from "homosexual" in that it does not involve necessarily [...] an explicitly erotic

[1] Jean Lipman-Blumen, 'Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles: An Explanation of the Sex Segregation of Social Institutions' *Signs* 1.3 (1976), 15-31.
For a discussion of the introduction of the term 'homosociality' and the corresponding concept into critical discourse, which has influenced my own discussion here, see Merl Storr, *Latex and Lingerie: Shopping for Pleasure at Ann Summers Parties* (Oxford and New York, 2003), 39-46.

sexual interaction between members of the same sex.'[2] While Lipman-Blumen's work has been well, if not uncritically, received within its own discipline, it is the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on homosociality which has been most influential in literary and cultural studies. In the opening to her seminal 1985 monograph, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick provides a definition of her conceptualization of male homosocial desire:

> 'Male homosocial desire': the phrase in the title of this study is intended to mark both discriminations and paradoxes. 'Homosocial desire,' to begin with is a kind of oxymoron. 'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously distinguished from 'homosexual'.[3]

Initially, then, Sedgwick's usage appears to be similar to that of Lipman-Blumen before her. But Sedgwick's use of the term is soon seen to be more nuanced than Lipman-Blumen's, not only, as Merl Storr notes, in its focus on the homosocial as a modality of a social power structure rather than a mere 'preference',[4] but also in its explicit conceptualization and identification of the role of homophobia in regulating – and keeping radically opposed – the homosocial and the homosexual. She justifies her decision in juxtaposing the terms 'homosocial' and 'desire' thus: 'To draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of "desire," of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility,

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[2] Lipman-Blumen, 'Toward a Homosocial Theory', 16.
[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), 1.
[4] Storr, *Latex and Lingerie*, 40-42.

for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.'[5] And this radical disruption, in today's society at least, is predicated upon homophobic discourses which figure homosexual relations between men as something altogether different from – and indeed, fundamentally opposed to – homosocial relations between men.

It is not difficult to see the relevance of such critical theorizations for the study of male-male relations in medieval – and particularly medieval Icelandic – literature. Male-male relations are of course ubiquitous within medieval literature; indeed, it could be suggested that it is impossible for them not to be given the focus of the majority of medieval texts on the lives of men, and the conflicts between them.[6] We need only think of Tacitus' *Germania* to appreciate the apparent importance of homosociality in the pan-Germanic context. For example, Tacitus tells us the following regarding the social expectation of male-male bonds:

> As for leaving a battle alive after your chief has fallen, *that* means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, to put down one's own acts of heroism to his credit – that is what they really mean by allegiance.[7]

And likewise he informs us that '[a] man is bound to take up the feuds as well as the friendships of father or kinsman'.[8] While there are of course many issues with the use of the *Germania* as a historical source,[9] and therefore in its use to enlighten readings of medieval Scandinavian literature, it is nevertheless the case that the view of male-male loyalty and responsibility as given by Tacitus is

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[5] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1-2.
[6] It would of course be unfair to pick out just the medieval for this critique. The Western canon is rightly subject to similar criticism.
[7] Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany: A Translation of the Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Harold Mattingly (Harmondsworth, 1948), 112. Clark also briefly discusses homosocial bonds in Tacitus in *Between Medieval Men*, 49.
[8] Tacitus, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany*, 112.
[9] Richard F. Thomas, 'The *Germania* as Literary Text', in A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2010), 59-72.

one that will be familiar to readers of medieval Icelandic literature. More specifically, Old Norse saga literature can be regarded as being structurally dependent upon male-male relations. The *Íslendingasögur* genre places great stress upon the importance of homosocial interpersonal relations, to the extent that they are usually regarded as considerably more important than heterosocial relations. While scholarship has frequently made vague references to the importance of homosocial bonds, a recent study by P. Mac Carron and R. Kenna, which produced a network analysis of the *Íslendingasögur,* demonstrated mathematically that the most influential and socialized characters in the genre are those that have a large number of links with other characters.[10] Moreover, it was also seen that it was important not just to have a large number of social links, but a large number of social links with other characters who likewise had a large number of such links. That is to say, that homosociality in medieval Icelandic saga literature was seen to be mutually reinforcing. As a specific example of this, we may think of the importance of male-male homosocial relations in the plot of *Bandamanna saga*, particularly in a legal context.[11] The converse is also true, and goes some way to explaining Grettir's inability to integrate successfully into society, as will be seen in chapter 4. It is not just the notion of homosociality itself which resonates with the gender order of medieval

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[10] P. Mac Carron and R. Kenna, 'Network Analysis of the Íslendinga sögur – the Sagas of Icelanders', *The European Physical Journal B* 86.10 (2013), 1-9.

[11] *Bandamanna saga*.
For a concise overview of the legal intricacies (and therefore the male-male relations) in this saga, see Hallvard Magerøy, 'Bandamanna saga', in Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 1993), 34-5.
Further examples of masculine status being reinforced through homosocial links with other men can be found throughout the corpus. See, for example: *Ófeigs þáttr* within *Ljósvetninga saga*, 121, where Ófeigr's reputation is said to have been improved by his dealings with Guðmundr *inn ríki*; or *Njáls saga*, 247-8, where Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and the sons of Njáll are said to add to each other's prestige though their association.

Icelandic saga literature, however. The homophobia which Sedgwick identifies as functioning to cause a symbolic rift between homosociality and homosexuality has its medieval Icelandic counterpart in the discourse of *níð*. *Níð*, much like modern homophobia, functions to abject from the normative masculine position that which is seen as unmanly. The concept of homosociality as described by Sedgwick, and discussed above, has in fact been used previously in the study of Old Norse literature. David Clark has shown the utility of a modified version of Sedgwick's model of homosocial desire in his analysis of the Helgi poems of the *Poetic Edda*, namely *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar,* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*.[12] While his conclusion that in these poems 'homosocial intimacy between warriors is predicated on the exclusion of same-sex eroticism seen most clearly in the exchange of sexual insults'[13] is clearly compelling, his critique of what he perceives to be Sedgwick's anachronism is perhaps somewhat overstated. His claim that Sedgwick's model 'needs some modification in order to avoid anachronism in its application to medieval texts' at first seems eminently sensible.[14] But the modification he primarily suggests is to '[replace] Sedgwick's emphasis (via Girard) on the triangulation of desire through a woman with a more nuanced approach to the erotics of interpersonal relations'.[15] And indeed, the model of triangular desire does not map simply onto either the Helgi poems, or many of the episodes I will

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[12] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 46-66.
As will be clear, I do not completely agree with all of Clark's conclusions, but his discussion of Sedgwick has nevertheless greatly influenced my own summary of Sedgwick and homosociality, and also my own thinking on the operation of homosocial desire in medieval Icelandic literature.
Sedgwick's framework has also been used by Carl Phelpstead in his article 'The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies* 75.1 (2003), 1-24.
[13] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 46.
[14] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 46.
[15] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 47.

discuss below. But Clark's suggestion that, as a result, '[Sedgwick's] model is thus not immediately applicable to medieval literature' is misleading in two ways.[16] Firstly, while triangular desire does not seem to play an overt role in the particular texts which Clark uses for his project of 'evaluating the usefulness' of Sedgwick's theories, it is disingenuous to suggest – or even imply – that the wider corpus of medieval literature does not provide examples of interpersonal relationships for which the triangular model of desire is a wholly appropriate analytical frame. For example, and as will be discussed below, Theodore M. Andersson notes the pervasive presence of the love triangle in the *skaldasögur*, while Jenny Jochens alludes to homosocial desire in her analysis of the erotics of these triangular relations.[17] In some cases then, it may be that little modification is necessary to Sedgwick's conceptualization. Secondly, in claiming that modification to her notion of male homosocial desire is necessary to make it applicable to medieval literature, Clark fails to grant enough credit to the historical flexibility which Sedgwick carefully builds into her theoretical model. Indeed, Sedgwick is quick to note in her introduction to *Between Men* that 'the structure of homosocial continuums is culturally contingent, not an innate feature of either "maleness" or "femaleness"'.[18] Sedgwick thus anticipates – and perhaps even demands – Clark's claim that her model must be adapted to a text's (or group of texts') specific chronotope. Nevertheless, the concepts of homosociality and male homosocial desire are clearly relevant to the study of

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[16] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 50.
[17] Theodore M. Andersson, 'Skalds in their Literary Context 3: The Love Triangle Theme', in Russell Poole (ed.), *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin and New York, 2001), 272-84; Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts', in Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (eds.), *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York and London, 1996), 369-400.
[18] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 5.

medieval Icelandic saga literature. It is these relations which will now be examined.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MEN IN THE SAGAS

HOMOSOCIALITY AS VALUED AND DESIRED

Homosocial bonds in the sagas are both valued and desired by men. In *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, Gunnar terminates his relationship with the female troll Fála; he does so, he tells her, because '[m]ál þyki mér að vitja manna minna' (it seems to me time to visit my men).[19] This not only suggests a desire for homosociality, but also that, in this saga, homosocial relationships are prioritized over heterosocial, sexual, relations. Such a desire for homosocial bonds is seen elsewhere in the corpus. Egill, in *Egils saga*, is said to have 'gerði sér títt við Arinbjǫrn ok var honum fylgjusamr' (courted Arinbjǫrn's friendship and was attached to him).[20] Later, in old age and having lost his sons, he laments the powerlessness that results from his lack of homosocial bonds, telling us that 'verðk varfleygr, / es vinir þverra' (I become faltering in flight / when friends wane).[21] Value being placed on homosocial bonds is common throughout the sagas, but the attitude towards such relationships is perhaps best summed up in Kári's proverbial utterance in *Njáls saga*: '[b]err er hverr at baki, nema sér bróður eigi' (the back of each man is bare, unless he has a brother).[22]

It is not just between men of roughly the same social rank that homosocial bonds are formed. Rulers – kings and earls – also form homosocial

[19] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 363.
[20] *Egils saga*, 105.
[21] *Egils saga*, 251.
[22] *Njáls saga*, 436; this proverb is echoed in *Grettis saga*, 260.

relationships with other men, and the bond is valued by both parties. In *Harðar saga,* Hörðr, having stayed with Haraldr *jarl* and his son Hróarr over the winter, wants to leave for Iceland when spring arrives. The *jarl* and his son are less enthusiastic about the prospect of Hörðr's departure, however, with the saga telling us that 'jarl ok Hróarr kveðst gjarna vilja, at hann færi eigi á burt, ok þótti þar eigi slíkr maðr komit hafa' (the *jarl* and Hróarr said that they desired that he would not leave, and thought that no man such as he was had ever been in that place).[23] They thus value their bond with him and desire to maintain their homosocial relationship expressly because of his pre-eminence. Similarly, in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, when parting from King Aðalráðr (Æthelred), Gunnlaugr is commanded to return to the king the following autumn because, the king tells him, 'ek vil eigi láta þik fyrir sakar íþróttar þinnar' (I do not wish to lose you on account of your accomplishments).[24] Unsurprisingly, the favour that rulers show to certain chosen followers inevitably stirs up feelings of jealousy amongst the less honoured retainers. In *Víglundar saga*, for example, the King appoints Þorgrímr to be his cupbearer, but others of the king's men are not pleased with this. Indeed, the saga suggests that '[þ]ótti hans mönnum mörgum þat við of, hversu konungr lagði mikit til Þorgríms í allri virðingu' (many of his men thought that it was excessive, how the king greatly advanced Þorgrímr by giving him every honour).[25] Similarly, in *Hallfreðar saga*, we are told that two of King Óláfr Tryggvason's followers 'ǫfunduðu Hallfreð, ok þótti þeim hann hafa ofmikinn gang af konungi' (envied Hallfreðr and they thought he received too

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[23] *Harðar saga*, 45.
[24] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 74.
For further examples see *Kjalnesinga saga*, 27, and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, 300.
[25] *Víglundar saga*, 69.

many advantages from the king).[26] A different perspective on this form of jealousy is given in *Laxdœla saga*, where, as Carolyne Larrington notes, the degradation of the homosocial relationship between Bolli and Kjartan 'begins with the loosening of homosocial ties between Kjartan and Bolli when the charismatic King Óláfr enters the scene'.[27] But it is not only retainers who can become jealous where homosocial bonds between rulers and their men are concerned. King Hákon in *Egils saga*, for example, becomes angry with Arinbjǫrn for pleading Egill's land-claim against the king, telling him that 'þú svá megir vera hér í landi, at þú metir eigi meira útlenda menn en mik eða mín orð' (you may only stay here in this country if you do not value foreigners more than myself or my words).[28] Here, Arinbjǫrn's continued homosocial relationship with the king is apparently dependent upon a demonstration that he values this particular homosocial relationship above all others. In this case, such a demonstration is not forthcoming.

While some retainers may be eager to leave a ruler's court despite the favour they are shown, others are eager to gain admittance to a retinue. In *Egils saga*, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, much to the distaste of his father, wishes to go to King Haraldr expressly because – he tells his father – 'ek ætla mik skulu af honum hljóta inn mesta frama' (I expect that I shall get the greatest advancement from him).[29] Bjǫrn, of *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, gives up raiding at the request of King Óláfr *helgi*; this decision seems to be motivated by that fact that he wants

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[26] *Hallfreðar saga*, 159.
[27] Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2015), 215.
[28] *Egils saga*, 215.
[29] *Egils saga*, 14.

'með honum at vera' (to be with him).[30] Even Grettir, who as we shall see in chapter 4 is typically staunchly anti-social, elects to sail to King Óláfr *helgi* in the hopes of gaining honour from him.[31]

But it is when their lords die that men most clearly demonstrate how important these homosocial bonds are to them. In *Hallfreðar saga*, when Hallfreðr was told of the fall of King Óláfr *helgi*, he 'varð svá við sem hann væri steini lostinn ok gekk þegar heim til búðar með miklum harmi ok lagðisk þegar niðr í rúm sitt' (became as though he had been struck by a stone, and immediately walked back home to his booth in great sorrow, and laid himself straight down on his bed).[32] The emotional response of taking to bed is a clear signifier of the grief that Hallfreðr feels at his loss. Even Hallfreðr's enemy Gríss confirms that Hallfreðr's emotional response is appropriate – and not a sign of unmanliness as his followers have branded it – telling them that 'er heit lánardrottins ást' (the love of a liege-lord is hot).[33] This emotional bond reaches its apex in the ideal of dying with one's lord, as exemplified by the ending of *Fóstbrœðra saga*.[34] Here, Þormóðr escapes entirely unscathed the battle of Stiklarstaðir, in which King Óláfr falls. Þormóðr is anything but pleased at this, however, suggesting that '[þ]at ætla ek nú, at eigi muna ek til þeirar gistingar sem konungr í kveld, en verra þykki mér nú at lifa en deyja' (now I expect that I will not be lodging in the same place as the king this evening, and so it now

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[30] *Bjarnar saga*, 133.
[31] *Grettis saga*, 125.
[32] *Hallfreðar saga*, 192.
[33] *Hallfreðar saga*, 192.
[34] For a discussion of this ideal in various medieval literatures including Old Norse, see: David Clark, 'Notes on the Medieval Ideal of Dying with One's Lord', *Notes and Queries* 58.4 (2011), 475-84.

seems to me worse to live than to die).[35] His wish is immediately granted when an arrow of unknown (but likely divine) origin flies toward him, striking him in the chest.

It is unsurprising that men value bonds with each other, especially when we consider the criteria that seem to be used to pick other men with whom to associate. In *Víglundar saga*, for example, we are told that '[k]onungr hafði marga hirð um sik ok valdi þar til ágæta menn, þá sem reyndir váru at harðfengi ok mörgum frægðarverkum' (the king [Haraldr *hárfagri*] had a large retinue about him and chose for it excellent men who were proven in valour and through many daring deeds).[36] And in *Egils saga* we learn that a large number of men live at Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr's farm, and that they are chosen by the father and son based on their similarity to themselves. Indeed, we are told that 'Kveld-Úlfr ok þeir feðgar vǫldu men mjǫk at afli til fylgðar við sik ok tǫmðu við skaplyndi sitt' (Kveld-Úlfr and his sons chose very strong men to become their followers and cultivated in them a temperament like their own).[37] Perhaps the most obvious reason that homosocial bonds are valued is that they mean that men are available to assist in lawsuits and physical altercations, and such a concern likely fuels the selection criteria for homosocial bonds evinced here in *Víglundar saga* and *Egils saga*. But examples of the power (or at least perceived power) that homosocial bonds provide can be found throughout the corpus. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Vermundr asks Hákon *jarl* to give him his *berserkir* because 'þá kom honum í hug, at honum myndi mikillar framkvæmðar afla á Íslandi, ef hann hefði slíka eptirgǫngumenn sem berserkirnir váru' (then it came into his mind that his

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[35] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 269.
[36] *Víglundar saga*, 63.
[37] *Egils saga*, 50.

status in Iceland would be greatly strengthened if he had such followers as the *berserkir*).[38] Although he is ultimately unable to control the *berserkir*, his desire to have them as his followers demonstrates the protection that homosocial bonds with strong men are thought to provide. In the Möðruvallabók version of *Bandamanna saga*, a legal case of Oddr's is thought likely to fail, not because he lacks a just claim, but because 'slíkir hǫfðingjar sem til móts eru' (such [great] chieftains are opposed to it).[39] Oddr is only able to overcome the chieftains that have assembled themselves against him when his father, Ófeigr, bribes and manipulates some of their number, breaking up their homosocial grouping.[40] In *Valla-Ljóts saga*, Ljótr is able to avoid outlawry for the killing of Halli because of the homosocial support upon which he is able to draw. Indeed, we are told that '[þ]á var leitat um sættir af vinum Ljóts; hann var fjǫlmennr ok hafði traust margra hǫfðingja. En svá lauk því máli með frændaafla Ljóts ok vinastyrk, at hundrað silfrs var goldit fyrir víg Halla' (a settlement was then sought by Ljótr's friends; he had many followers and the help of many chieftains. And the case ended thus through the power of Ljótr's kinsmen and the backing of his friends, that a hundred of silver was paid for the slaying of Halli).[41] In *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, Blund-Ketill's tenants, having ignored his advice on how to manage their farms, run out of hay. In order to help them, Ketill asks Hœnsa-Þórir to sell them some of his surplus. When he refuses to do so, however, Ketill appropriates the hay, and notes that his ability to do so is supported by the fact that he can 'njóta þess,

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[38] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 61.
[39] *Bandamanna saga*, 329.
[40] A similar case of chieftains ganging up against an individual man can be seen in *Ǫlkofra saga*. Here, Ǫlkofri's ability to overcome the homosocial band of powerful *goðar* that have set themselves up against him can be read as subversive, undermining the rule and power of chieftains.
[41] *Valla-Ljóts saga*, 246.

at vér erum fleiri' (take advantage of this, that we are many in number).[42] The implication, of course, is that a man with a greater number of supporters can overcome a man with fewer. And indeed, much of the rest of the saga takes an interest in watching both sides assembling supporters to back the inevitable legal case.[43] Such scenes are ubiquitous in the *Íslendingasögur*.[44]

There are, of course, also benefits associated with homosociality for both rulers and their retainers. For rulers, homosocial bonds with retainers can benefit them in many ways. This can be in the form of the deeds which retainers carry out for them (for example, when Hákon *jarl*, in *Flóamanna saga*, sends Þorgils to collect tributes from the Hebrides, as discussed in the previous chapter, or when Hallfreðr in *Hallfreðar saga* is sent by King Óláfr Tryggvason to blind Þorleifr *inn spaki*).[45] The value can be based on the encomiastic poems that a ruler's followers compose for him, such as the numerous *flokkar* and *drápur* produced by the skalds of the *skaldasögur*. Such poems serve to broadcast a ruler's power and status, and preserve his reputation for posterity. And indeed, if we accept John Lindow's suggestion that *dróttkvætt* constituted 'a kind of secret language in which the members of the *drótt* could maintain their collective traditions in a special way and also communicate in without being wholly understood by others, indeed to the exclusion of others', then we might see the

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[42] *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, 16.
[43] *Heiðarvíga saga* also revels in the amassing of homosocial support. See, in particular, chapters 16 and 17.
[44] See also, for example: *Víga-Glúms saga*, 82, where Þórarinn believes it will be difficult to pursue a suit against Glúmr for the killing of Þorvaldr because of the 'frændaafla Glúms' (strength of Glúmr's kinsmen); *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 37-8, where Geitir is overpowered simply because his opponent Brodd-Helgi has more men; *Þorskfirðinga saga*, 198, in which Þorgeirr thinks of Þórir as a difficult opponent because of 'fylgdar þeirar, er hann hefir' (the followers that he has); and *Finnboga saga*, 335-39, where Finnbogi is saved from Brandr and his men by the approach of his own.
[45] *Flóamanna saga*, 258, discussed in the previous chapter on page 33; *Hallfreðar saga* 163-4.

value in such verse-exchange for men in its creation of a homosocial group identity based on esoteric knowledge.[46] Or, of course, the value in homosociality for rulers can be simply based on the fact that plentiful homosocial bonds with retainers mean that a ruler will have enough men on his side in the case of a war or an attempted coup. Another reason for which rulers might value homosocial bonds with retainers derives from the invariably uneven share of power between the two parties in the relationship. For example, Búi in *Kjalnesinga saga* saves his head by showing deference to King Haraldr, who tells him that '[á] öngum manni níðumst ek, þeim er gengr á mitt vald […] en nú skaltu leysa höfuð þitt með einni sendiferð' (I don't behave dishonourably to any man who submits to my authority […] but now you must save your head with a certain errand).[47] Here, Haraldr seems to value the validation that other people may provide for his own sense of superiority.[48]

The value derived by retainers from their homosocial relationships with rulers can be material or social (or, as is often the case, can take both forms). Gunnlaugr, in *Gunnlaugs saga*, for example, is given an embroidered cloak of scarlet and fur by King Aðalráðr in return for a poem that he has composed in his honour. It is at this point that he is expressly admitted to the king's homosocial group as he is made one of his *hirðmenn*. In addition to the material gain this brings, it also raises his social status – we are told that he 'virðisk vel' (was well

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[46] John Lindow, 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies* 47.3 (1975), 311-27 (323).
[47] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 28.
[48] In *Egils saga*, 183-195, Egill is similarly able to save his head by composing the poem *Hǫfuðlausn,* and thereby demonstrating – or at least performing – deference to Eiríkr *blóðøx*.

esteemed).[49] Such gifts – whether in return for poems or deeds, or seemingly for very little at all – are extremely common.[50]

But even when no material benefit is forthcoming from a homosocial bond with a ruler, a retainer can still benefit from the relationship. Simply being associated with a ruler – a *de jure* authority – can improve a man's social standing. Eyvindr in *Hrafnkels saga*, for example, gains honour from his association with the Greek King in Constantinople.[51] In *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr and his brothers are 'vel virðir' (honoured highly) by King Hakón Aðalsteinsfóstri, and receive 'mikla frægð' (great fame) as a result of their journey.[52] Virtually all positive interactions with rulers result in an increase in social status.[53]

GIFT GIVING AND THE MAINTENANCE OF HOMOSOCIAL BONDS

Once homosocial bonds have been forged they are not, by any means, unbreakable; rather, connections must be actively maintained by those in the relationship. The most obvious method by which this is achieved is through gift-exchange. Gifts can form, maintain, and renew homosocial bonds between men; they can also serve to raise the social status of both the giver and the receiver. In

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[49] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 71.
[50] See, for three further examples out of a multitude: *Laxdœla saga*, 118, where Óláfr Tryggvason gives Kjartan the gift of his cloak; *Finnboga saga*, 287, where Hákon *jarl* gives Finnbogi a gold ring weighing a mark and a valuable cloak; and *Hallfreðar saga*, 155-6, where King Óláfr Tryggvason gives Hallfreðr an unsheathed sword, and slightly later in the saga (162) a scabbard to accompany it.
[51] *Hrafnkels saga*, 100.
[52] *Kormáks saga*, 266.
[53] See, for example: *Fljótsdæla saga*, 257, where Hákon *jarl* receives Þiðrandi warmly, and shows him greater honour than any of his own men; *Laxdœla saga*, 60, where King Haraldr and his mother Gunnhildr give Óláfr Hǫskuldsson more honour than any foreigner had ever previously received at their court; and *Njáls saga*, 197, where Kolskeggr Hámundarson receives 'virðingar miklar' (great honour) from King Sveinn *tjúguskegg* in Denmark.

Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls, for example, Barði has sheltered the brothers Gunnar and Helgi despite the anger that Hákon *jarl* has shown toward them. In order to assuage his wrath they give him gifts; we are told that '[þ]eir bjuggust þegar á fund jarls og völdu honum góðar gjafir og færðu jarli. Hann tók því öllu vel, gerði þá sína menn, og vóru þeir síðan með jarli, það sem eptir var vetrarins' (they immediately prepared to meet the *jarl* and chose good gifts for him and travelled to the *jarl*. He received them all warmly, made them his men, and they were then with the *jarl* for the rest of the winter).[54] Here, gifts are not only able to work against the *jarl's* anger towards the brothers, but also to commute these negative feelings into something altogether more positive. As a result of the gifts they are given access – through their position as followers – to the *jarl's* homosocial group. In *Svarfdæla saga*, following Þorsteinn's betrothal to Ingibjǫrg, the daughter of Herrøðr *jarl*, Þorsteinn gives his men gifts at their departure. Here, the saga suggests that 'varð hann af því vinsæll ok víðfrægr' (because of this he became popular and well-known), indicating the ability of gift-giving to increase both social status and reputation.[55] And in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, we are told of Eiðr and his foster-father Þórðr, who '[j]afnan fundust [...] ok gáfust gjöfum' (always visited one another, and gave each other gifts).[56] The saga is quick to tell us – in the very next sentence in fact – that 'skildi aldri þeira vináttu, meðan þeir lifðu' (their friendship was never broken throughout their lives).[57] The exchange of gifts, then, can contribute to the maintenance of homosocial bonds. That such gift exchange seems necessary is a result of the fact

[54] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 373.
[55] *Svarfdæla saga*, 149.
[56] *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 225.
[57] *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 225.

that – unlike the inevitable obligations of kinship – homosocial relations between non-kin are essentially voluntary and so the obligations they create must be actively renewed and reinforced.

The quality of the gift given can also function as an indication of the giver's estimation of the receiver's worth. In *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, for example, Blund-Ketill – in seeking to make a settlement for the hay he has taken from Þórir – makes a generous offer to Þorvaldr, who has now taken over Þórir's case. Indeed, he speaks to Þorvaldr thus: 'ger einn fyrir, svá mikit sem þér líkar, ok þó skal ek gefa þér gjafar ofan á, því betri ok meiri sem þú ert meira verðr en Þórir' (set an amount, as much as you like, and I will still give you gifts beyond that, that are greater and better as you are worth more than Þórir).[58] The worth of the gift is thus indexed to the worth of the man receiving it.

Not all gifts are welcomed, however.[59] Gifts often come with an obligation for reciprocity, and when one does not want to return the favour – whether that be in the form of another material gift, as a show of leniency, or as physical support – they can become troublesome. In *Króka-Refs saga*, Barði gives good gifts to King Haraldr *harðráði* in an effort to gain his support in overcoming Refr. The King immediately sees that an ulterior motive is behind Barði's generosity, saying '[m]ikit er um gjafir þessa manns við mik, eða hvat vildi hann af oss fyrir slíkt hafa?' (this man's gifts to me are great, but what does he want to have from us in return for such favours?).[60] Here, the king is rightly wary of the gift, and the implicit claim that it puts upon him. For some recipients this obligation is too

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[58] *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, 22.
[59] For a discussion of unwanted gifts see William Ian Miller's essay 'Requiting the Unwanted Gift', in his *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca and London, 1993), 15-52.
[60] *Króka-Refs saga*, 143.

great, and it is possible, of course, to refuse a gift. In *Gísla saga*, for example, Þorkell refuses a gift of fine furs from Vésteinn, the man who should – if all had gone to plan – have become his sworn-brother. Gísli reads this negatively, and we are told that '[n]ú ferr Gísli heim, ok þykkir honum um allt einn veg á horfask' (now Gísli goes home and he thinks that everything is pointing in one direction).[61] He is right to be worried of course. Þorkell's refusal of Vésteinn's gift signifies not only the absence of homosociality, but also outright hostility, and portends doom.

SOCIAL OBLIGATION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF HOMOSOCIAL BONDS

Gift exchange is not the only requirement for the maintenance of homosocial bonds with other men. Perhaps the main requirement is to simply lend support to other men, in the various guises that may take.

Rulers can expect a very particular kind of support from their men. Thus in *Gunnlaugs saga*, the expectations that King Aðalráðr has of his homosocial bond with Gunnlaugr enable him to tell Gunnlaugr that '[e]igi samir þér nú at fara frá mér, til slíks ófriðar sem nú horfir hér í Englandi, þar sem þú ert minn hirðmaðr' (it is not appropriate that you should now go away from me, when war is expected here in England, because you are my follower).[62] The offer of homosociality that he has tendered by making Gunnlaugr one of his *hirð* produces obligations that Gunnlaugr must meet. In *Hrafnkels saga*, Sámr is advised by Þorkell and Þorgeirr to 'vera blíðr ok góðr fjárins ok gagnsamr sínum mǫnnum, styrkðarmaðr hvers, sem hans þurfu við' (be friendly and generous

[61] *Gísla saga*, 42.
[62] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 83.

with money and helpful to his men, a supporter of each man who has need of it).[63] He is to do this specifically to create a sense of obligation among his followers; indeed, he is told that – assuming he treats his men as advised – 'eru þeir eigi menn, ef þeir fylgja þér eigi vel, hvers sem þú þarft við' (they are not men if they do not follow you well, whatever you require).[64] Real men, then, support the man they follow.

If rulers can expect the support of their men, then men can – and do – expect the support of their chieftains. In *Droplaugarsona saga*, Þorgrímr notes that Helgi Ásbjarnarson is failing to live up to his responsibilities to his followers. He tells him that '[a]llmjǫk dregr nú at því, at þú haldir enga þingmenn þína skammlaust fyrir Helga Droplaugarsyni, hvárki á þingum né mannfundum' (the time now swiftly draws near when you won't be able to protect any of your followers from Helgi Droplaugarson without disgrace, neither at assemblies nor meetings).[65] Similarly, Ásbjǫrn in *Fljótsdæla saga*, after being pierced through the chest by Gunnsteinn's spear, complains to Ketill that he is failing to live up to his homosocial responsibilities. Specifically, he tells him that '[n]ú ætlaða ek, at ek munda hafa heimsótt höfðingja, er þér eruð. En ek sé, at enginn er í þér dugr, at þér rekið aldrigi vórra harma, þó at oss sé skammir gjörvar' (now I had thought that I would have found you to be a chieftain. But I see that there is no bravery in you, as you never avenge our sorrows, even if we are disgraced).[66] Rulers, then,

[63] *Hrafnkels saga*, 123.
[64] *Hrafnkels saga*, 123.
[65] *Droplaugarsona saga*, 159.
[66] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 262.

must provide support and protection for those with whom they form homosocial relationships.[67]

MEN JUDGING MEN

Both the strong homosocial links between men and the obligations that men are thought to have to one another as a result, mean that masculinity can often be viewed as being achieved, defined, and monitored through the consensus of men. In practice, this can be observed in instances of men policing the behaviour of other men by questioning their adherence to the masculine ideal. One method of such policing is to claim that a man will become the object of scorn for all men. In *Kormáks saga*, for example, in challenging Þorvarðr to a second duel after he has failed to arrive for the first, Kormákr suggests that Þorvarðr will 'verði [...] hvers manns níðingr, ef hann kemr eigi' (become every man's *níðingr* if he does not turn up).[68] The threat is clearly that of negative public opinion. Similarly in *Vatnsdœla saga*, in discussing the upcoming duels between himself and Bergr, and Finnbogi and Þorsteinn, Jǫkull warns that 'ef nǫkkurir koma eigi, þá skal þeim reisa níð með þeim formála, at hann skal vera hvers manns níðingr ok vera

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[67] For further examples see: *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 343, in which Þorgrímr becomes extremely unpopular for abusing his *goðorð* and confiscating property from his farmers (and thus neglecting his homosocial responsibilities); *Fljótsdæla saga*, 290, in which Hallsteinn is – considering their long friendship – displeased that Bersi opposes rather supports him; and *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, 20, where Þorvaldr suggests that Þórir is getting little out of his friendship with Arngrímr, if Arngrímr does not prevent people from walking all over him.

[68] *Kormáks saga*, 280.
The word *níðingr* suggests one who embodies the complex of negative attributes – sexual, social, and personal – that *níð* insults suggest. I have chosen to leave it in the original as it encompasses ideas of both cowardice and sexual passivity. No Modern English term has quite the same semantic range. Perhaps 'queer' or 'fag' might have a similar effect, although both terms are too politicized and bound up with our own chronotope – as *níðingr* is for its own – to stand, unproblematically, as a substitute. Many translations that focus on the cowardly or contemptible nature of the *níðingr* fail to convey the suggestion, present in the original, of sexual subservience to other men.

hvergi í samlagi góðra manna' (if anyone does not turn up, then a scorn-pole will be raised against them with this formula, that he shall be a *níðingr* to every man, and will nowhere be in the fellowship of good men).[69] The threat that recurs here – to be thought 'hvers manns níðingr' – is common in such situations and emphasizes the communal judgment that accrues to the man who fails in his masculine duties.[70] This example from *Vatnsdœla saga* also neatly encapsulates the threat inherent in such a judgment: that one will be expelled from homosocial groupings, and the support that is associated with them. Such a threat is implicit in all suggestions that another's masculinity is lacking. In *Vápnfirðinga saga*, for example, Helgi Droplaugarson becomes angry with Þorkell for shying away from attacking Bjarni, and tells him '[e]igi þarftu mér orð optar at senda, er þú skræfisk nú, er ek em hér kominn til liðs við þik' (there's no point in sending word to me any more, when you act like a coward now, when I am here to assist you).[71] Here, the withdrawal of Helgi's homosocial support is seen as a direct result of Þorkell's perceived cowardice. Children, too, are seen to participate in such a discourse. In *Egils saga*, for example, the young Egill, having been overpowered by his opponent in a game, gets up and leaves. As he does so the other boys assembled for the games 'œpðu at honum' (jeered at him).[72] The boys' response to Egill's perceived masculine failure functions both to draw attention to his failing and to ostracize him from the homosocial group.

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[69] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 88-9.
[70] The phrase can also be used by women who whet men to take vengeance. See William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review* 1.2 (1983), 159-204 (186, n. 109). As Miller notes, even when the phrase itself is not used, the sense it carries is often implied nevertheless. It is interesting to note that women – in whetting men – rely on the ability to suggest that men will be judged by other men for their failures of masculinity.
[71] *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 58.
[72] *Egils saga*, 100.

The constant threat of being judged to have not lived up to the dictates of the masculine ideal means that men are vulnerable to being manipulated by those who would question their manliness. In *Kjalnesinga saga*, for example, Kolfiðr convinces Búi to leave his position of safety, and to come and face Kolfiðr and his men. To do so, he announces that '[e]f Búi má heyra mál mitt, þá gangi hann ór einstiginu, ef hann hefir heldr manns hug en berkykvendis' (if Búi can hear my words then let him come down from the narrow path if he has the courage of a man rather than that of a she-beast).[73] Kolfiðr's invocation of Búi's manhood successfully manipulates his opponent who leaps up and grabs his weapons. In a similar scene in *Víglundar saga*, Jökull manipulates Víglundr into fighting by suggesting that 'höfum vér þat fyrir satt, at þú sért eigi fullröskr karlmaðr, nema þú farir ofan af heyinu, ok berjumst svá til þrautar' (we know it for a fact, that you are not a fully-manly man unless you come down off the hay, and fight to the end).[74] The manipulation is successful, and Víglundr immediately begins to fight. But such manipulations are not restricted to violent altercations, and can be put to ends altogether less serious. In *Flóamanna saga*, for example, the slave Gíparr encourages Kolr to 'drekka karlmannliga' (drink like a man).[75] Although in this case the manipulation is unsuccessful (although it does provoke a violent response from Kolr, thereby proving his manliness), it does indicate that masculinity can be invoked as an attempt to guide men's behaviour in even the most banal of situations.

That women can adopt the role of *Hetzerin* or whetter is perhaps one of the best-known features of Old Norse literature, and Jenny Jochens has

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[73] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 24-5.
[74] *Víglundar saga*, 93.
[75] *Flóamanna saga*, 309.

convincingly suggested that '[f]or contemporary audiences she [the whetter] served as a convenient scapegoat for male misdeeds that threatened the existence of the present society'.[76] But it is not just women who can adopt such a role. Rather, saga men are able – like saga women – to manipulate a man's sense of masculinity to encourage him to take violent revenge. In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, for example, Þorsteinn incites his brother Kolr to vengeance, telling him that '[u]ndarligt þykki mér, bróðir, at þú mátt hlæja, slíkt orðtak sem Þórhaddr hefir mælt við þik, ok muntu aldri hefna vilja [...] mun ek hefna verða' (it seems extraordinary to me, brother, that you can laugh when Þórhaddr has spoken such words against you, and you never wish to take revenge […] I must take vengeance).[77] Here, Þorsteinn simultaneously polices the questionable masculinity of his brother and urges him to act in such a way as to bolster his masculine standing. In *Króka-Refs saga*, Þormóðr likewise urges Refr to violence, suggesting that 'mjök þykki mér þú sanna vándra manna orð, er þú lætr þá um kyrrt sitja. Nú bið ek þik, at þú látir þá kenna á sjálfum sér fyrir sín illyrði' (it very much seems to me that you affirm the words of bad men when you allow them to remain undisturbed. Now I implore you, that you make them blame themselves for their abusive words).[78] Such scenes are, again, ubiquitous.[79]

The slippage between the abstract notion of masculinity and the mutable complex of attributes that is associated with it allows saga characters to redefine the concept of manliness – to a certain extent – in order to suit their own needs when manipulating other men. In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar,* for example,

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[76] Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 211.
[77] *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, 315.
[78] *Króka-Refs saga*, 135.
[79] See also, for example: *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 46, in which Þórarinn urges Geitir to attack Helgi; and *Þorskfirðinga saga*, 218, in which Gunnarr urges Þórir to give support to his friend Ketilbjörn.

Þorsteinn entrusts his *goðorð* to Þórhaddr when he travels abroad. Upon his return he attempts to reclaim it from Þórhaddr, but Þórhaddr clearly wants to keep it for himself. Þorsteinn becomes violent in response, which leads Þórhaddr to attempt to rezone the boundaries of masculinity in order to cast Þorsteinn's agitation as unmanly. Indeed, Þórhaddr suggests that 'muntu ná goðorði þínu, þó at þú heitisk eigi til, ok eigi gerði faðir þinn svá, þá er hann missti Ljóts, sonar síns á alþingi. Þá mælti hann allt vægiliga, ok var þat þó mannraun, *en þetta engi*' (you will have your *goðorð* back, but you don't need to make threats, and your father didn't behave like this when he lost his son Ljótr at the *Alþing*. At that time he spoke with total forbearance, though that was a trial of manhood – *and this is not*).[80] This questioning of his opponent's gender performance is particularly impressive given that we would expect Þorsteinn's threat of violence to be regarded not only as appropriate, but also as appropriately masculine. That Þórhaddr is able to make such a claim against Þorsteinn perhaps indicates the precariousness of masculinity. But the concept of masculinity is not infinitely elastic, and the 'true' nature of masculinity is likely to reassert itself. At the court of Eiríkr *jarl* in *Gunnlaugs saga*, for example, one of the *jarl's* followers, Þórir, moves to respond violently to a poetic insult from Gunnlaugr. This would be the anticipated response and it would be unsurprising to have seen the follower branded as unmanly if he had not taken action to repay the insult. But the *jarl* – wanting to defuse the situation – attempts to rezone masculinity by suggesting that 'ekki skulu menn gefa at slíku gaum' (men should not pay any attention to

[80] *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, 305. The emphasis is, of course, my own.

such things).[81] The *jarl's* attempt to redefine the rules of masculinity at first appears successful. But just a few short lines later Gunnlaugr insults the *jarl* – by implying that his father died a coward's death and, by extension, that the *jarl* himself is unmanly – and the *jarl* turns 'rauðan sem blóð' (red as blood).[82] This somatic change indicates that Gunnlaugr's words have provoked an emotional response in the *jarl* and, sure enough, he orders his men to seize Gunnlaugr. The *jarl*, then – despite his suggestion that men should not respond to insults – is clearly provoked by an insult aimed at his own sense of masculinity.

SELF-POLICING MASCULINITIES

Men in the sagas are not only judged by one another, but can also be seen to have internalized the rules of idealized masculinity. Consequently men are careful to act in such a way as to avoid being thought unmanly by other men. In *Ǫlkofra saga,* for example, Broddi Bjarnarson tells Þorkell Geitisson that he will ride the route that his enemy, Guðmundr, knows he will take despite the clear risk of ambush. He refuses to alter his route, and instead says he will stick to the way that Guðmundr is aware of because – he claims – '[Guðmundr] mun virða mér til hugleysis ef ek fer eigi svá' ([Guðmundr] will hold me to be faint-hearted if I don't do so).[83] Egill of *Egils saga*, having arrived in York to discover that his enemy Eiríkr is in power, similarly refuses to attempt to escape undetected because 'þótti honum þat lítilmannligt, at vera tekinn í flótta þeim' (he thought it

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[81] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 69.
I here take Old Norse 'menn' to function in the same way in which 'men' does in Modern English. That is, although it could signify all persons – as a universal descriptor – I here read it, considering the context of the speech act, as referring to male persons.
[82] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 70.
[83] *Ǫlkofra saga*, 94.

unmanly to be captured in flight like that).[84] Examples of men acting in ways – often foolhardy – to avoid the judgement of other men can be found throughout the sagas. Men thus show clear concern over their ability to live up to the ideal of masculinity.[85] This is nowhere more poignant than in the case of Gunnarr Hámundarson of *Njáls saga*, who questions his own masculine identity by suggesting that '[h]vat ek veit […] hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en ǫðrum mǫnnum at vega men' (I would like to know […] whether I am the less manly than other men since it seems to me a greater deal than to other men to kill people.)[86] That Gunnarr, as a paragon of manliness, worries about his masculinity perhaps indicates something about the unachievable demands of gender ideals. Other characters would certainly have no cause to doubt Gunnarr's masculinity based on an apparent reluctance to kill. As William Ian Miller has noted, 'he has killed all whom the saga has shown to have given him cause within a short time of the cause having been given, and some who gave him no cause'.[87] His reluctance certainly does not affect his ability to kill. Rather, his reluctance must instead be seen as purely psychological – perhaps arising from a sense of guilt – and this rare glimpse into his inner life allows us to appreciate the burden of masculinity and the self-reflexive judgment which it produces.

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[84] *Egils saga*, 178.
[85] For further examples, see: *Hrafnkels saga*, 128, where Eyvindr does not run away from his pursuers because he is concerned that doing so would be thought ridiculous; *Reykdœla saga*, 223, in which Bjarni refuses his kinsman Glúmr's offer to stay with him because he thought it unmanly to run away from his own farm; *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 201-2, in which Þórðr ignores a prophetic vision because he does not want it to be said that he fears dreams; and *Njáls saga*, 434, in which Bjǫrn refuses to leave Kári's side because he is concerned that men would accuse him of cowardice.
[86] *Njáls saga*, 138-9.
[87] William Ian Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?: A Reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford, 2014), 122.

When men have demonstrably failed to live up to the ideals of masculinity they may avoid scenarios in which they might be reminded of their failure. In *Vatnsdœla saga*, for example, after the death of their father, the sons of Ingimundr 'váru heima um vetrinn ok sátu á inn óœðra bekk ok fóru til engra leika eða þings ok váru mjǫk ókátir' (were at home during the winter and they sat on the lower bench and did not go to any games or assemblies and were very miserable).[88] By avoiding games and assemblies, they avoid homosocial gatherings where they may expect their masculinities to be policed. But at the same time they are – by avoiding such gatherings – policing themselves. This is likewise reflected in the position that they take on the lower bench: by not taking the high seat they demonstrate recognition that they have not yet responded appropriately to the killing of their father and, as such, cannot rightly claim a dominant male position.

DOMINATING MEN

As noted in the previous chapter, men tend to demonstrate a will to dominate other men as a result of the inevitable hierarchization of masculinities. Such acts of domination increase a man's masculine status, while being dominated negatively impacts upon the subordinated man's position.[89] The method by which a man may dominate another varies but it invariably leads to an increase in status for the victor. Duelling is perhaps the most obvious example of this. In *Gísla saga*, for example, Gísli overcomes Hólmgǫngu-Skeggi in a duel, cutting off

[88] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 65.
[89] Tarrin Wills has linked this change in status with changes in testosterone after competitive encounters with other men. See Wills, 'Physiology', and Wills, 'Testosterone'.

his leg. Immediately afterwards, we are told that 'þykkir Gísli mikit hafa vaxit af þessum málum' (Gísli was thought to have grown greatly in fame from this affair).[90] In *Droplaugarsona saga* Grímr's status likewise increases after he defeats the viking Gauss; indeed, it is sugested that he 'fekk góðan orðstír af verki þessu' (received great renown from this deed).[91] But there are many other interactions in which a man's status may be affected. Winning legal disputes is one of these methods, as it functions as a public demonstration of the winner's socio-legal superiority. For example, in *Víga-Glúms saga*, we are told that after Glúmr prevailed over Þorkell in a legal case he 'tók nú virðing mikla í heraðinu' (now received much honour in the district).[92] Both violent altercation and the law into which such violent conflict is sublimated are thus means by which men are able to gain – and liable to lose – masculine status. Games between men can also function as a forum in which masculinities are compared and hierarchized, and in which men attempt to prove themselves. This is especially true for young men and adolescents, and will be discussed in more detail in the 'Youth' section of this chapter below.

When clashing with other men it appears to be preferable to come to blows with an opponent who is thought to be either of the same or of superior standing. Thus in *Egils saga* the *berserkr* Ljótr is pleased at the prospect of facing Egill in a duel, rather than Friðgeirr, because, he says, 'er þat miklu jafnligra en ek berjumk við Friðgeir [...] ek þykkjumk eigi at meiri maðr, þó at ek leggja hann at jǫrðu' (it will be a much more equal fight than against Friðgeirr [...] it does not seem to me that I should be thought a greater man even if I put him in the

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[90] *Gísla saga*, 11.
[91] *Droplaugarsona saga*, 179.
[92] *Víga-Glúms saga* 35.

ground).[93] Dominating a man thought to be manly thus increases one's own standing, but dominating less manly men has little impact on one's status. A similar desire to dominate socially and physically powerful men is shown in *Hrafnkels saga*, where Þorkell suggests that 'mér þœtti við þann bezt at eiga, er allir hrekjask fyrir áðr. Ok þœtti mér mikit vaxa mín virðing eða þess hǫfðingja, er á Hrafnkel gæti nǫkkura vík róit, en minnkask ekki' (it seems to me best to compete with one who has previously dominated all others. And it seems to me that my status will greatly improve rather than decrease, as would that of any chieftain who might in some way get the better of Hrafnkell).[94] A corollary of this desire to compete with only equal or superior men, and of the view that besting lesser men does not improve one's status, is that men who *do* dominate weaker men can be looked down upon. For example, in *Vatnsdœla saga* the narrator approves of Ingimundr Þorsteinsson as being 'óágjarn við sér minni menn' (not fierce towards his subordinates), while suggesting that Hrolleifr 'fór illa með afli sínu við sér minni menn' (*misused* his strength against his subordinates).[95] Þiðrandi in *Fljótsdæla saga* is likewise approved of and said to be popular 'því at hann var hægr við sína undirmenn' (because he was gentle towards his subordinates).[96] For powerful men then – at least those wishing to raise their own status – it is only worth engaging and competing with other powerful men; preying on weaker men may in fact be detrimental to a man's reputation.

That dominating other powerful men may bolster masculine standing leads to a situation in which the leading men in a district will frequently clash

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[93] *Egils saga*, 203.
[94] *Hrafnkels saga*, 114-5.
[95] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 19 and 50, emphasis mine.
[96] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 218-9.

and vie for dominance. Each prominent man desires to be at the apex of the masculine hierarchy. In *Finnboga saga*, for example, the sons of Ingimundr 'urðu mest til áleitni við Finnboga, því at þeir þoldu þat eigi, at Finnbogi var framar látinn eða formenntr þeim öllum öðrum, er þar váru vestr' (acted most aggressively toward Finnbogi because they could not bear it, that Finnbogi was held in higher esteem and was more highly skilled than all those others who were there in the west).[97] Similarly, Skeggi in *Þórðar saga hreðu* is displeased when Þórðr settles in his district and becomes popular because he 'þótti líkligt, at hann mundi vilja gerast höfðingi yfir Miðfirði [...] þoldi eigi, at aðrir væri látnir jafnfram honum' (thought it likely that he [Þórðr] would want to make himself chieftain over Miðfjörðr […] he could not bear it if other men were to be held in an equal position to himself).[98] Such an impulse to dominate can even get the better of otherwise peaceable men. Ljótr of *Valla-Ljóts saga* is one such man who, despite suggesting that he is reluctant to involve himself in violent acts, still notes that 'þó þykki mér illt at láta hlut minn fyrir nọkkurum manni' (it nevertheless seems ill to me to be bested by any man).[99] Tensions caused by the desire to be in the dominant position do not only arise between unrelated men, but can crop up among men of the same family tree, straining existing homosocial kinship bonds. Thus in *Ljósvetninga saga* we are told that '[f]átt var með þeim brœðrum, Einari ok Guðmundi, því at Guðmundr sat mjọk yfir metorðum manna norðr þar' (there was a coolness between the brothers, Einarr and Guðmundr, because Guðmundr bore down on all men there in the north).[100]

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[97] *Finnboga saga*, 299.
[98] *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 172.
[99] *Valla-Ljóts saga*, 254.
[100] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 16.

And even children are prone to such infighting. In *Víglundar saga*, for example, when King Haraldr *hárfagri* visits Eiríkr *jarl* in Rogaland, the *jarl* introduces his sons to the king, and Þorgrímr, the *jarl's* illegitimate son, pushes aside his two legitimate brothers, greets the king, and hugs him. This display of dominance is implicitly encouraged by the king, who reacts positively, sitting the boy beside himself, and later taking him into his care.[101]

The desire to dominate other men – and therefore the likelihood of men clashing with one another – seems to be heightened with geographical proximity. This means that men may choose to move in the hopes that they have a better chance of becoming dominant in a different district. Halli Sigurðarson of *Valla-Ljóts saga* is one such man. Discussing his maternal uncles, he gives his reason for wanting to move district thus: 'þeir frændr mínir, synir Ingjalds, eru yfirmenn mínir, ok eigi má ek hér mestr maðr vera várra frænda, meðan vér erum hér allir, en þar má ek mestr maðr heita' (my kinsmen, the sons of Ingjaldr, are my superiors, and so I may not here be the greatest man among our kinsmen while we are all here, but there I might be called the greatest man).[102] Alternatively, some men may choose to move out of an area to avoid clashing with others. Hávarðr, of *Hávarðar saga*, for example, tells his son that he no longer wants to live close to Þorbjǫrn Þjóðreksson because 'vit hǫfum engan afla at halda okkr til jafns við hann' (we do not have the strength to contend with him).[103] His desire to move is further motivated by the fact that their new farmstead will be 'nær frændum [...] ok vinum' (close to kinsmen and friends), fulfilling his need for

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[101] *Víglundar saga,* 68-9.
[102] *Valla-Ljóts saga*, 239.
[103] *Hávarðar saga*, 302.

homosocial support.[104] Other men are forced to move away in order to preserve the peace in a district. Thus, in *Finnboga saga*, Finnbogi is banished from Víðidalr to prevent further clashes with Jökull 'því at menn ætluðu, at þeirra vandræði mundu aldri fyrr losast en aðrir hvárir leitaði undan' (because people thought that their troubles would not be solved before one or other of the two went away).[105] All of these three cases of men moving away from their homes have different motivations, but each reveals the likelihood of prominent men to clash when they are physically near one another. The will to dominate seems stronger – or at least easier to act upon – when the object of one's potential domination is nearby.

HOMOSOCIALITY AS INHERENTLY UNSTABLE

That even men within the same family can squabble over positions of masculine supremacy perhaps indicates that homosocial bonds are an inherently unstable form of interpersonal relationship in the sagas. Being placed in a close relationship invites comparison of the two men in a homosocial bond and speculation – by both other characters and the men themselves – over who is the superior of the two. Thus, when infighting arises between the homosocial band of *goðar* that have set themselves up in opposition to Oddr in *Bandamanna saga*, it is questions of masculine supremacy that bubble to the surface. For example, before insulting his fellow confederate Styrmir Þorgeirsson, Egill Skúlason suggests that '[þ]ess betr er þú kallar mik verra mann, því at þat vitu menn, at þú hefir tekit mik til jafnaðarmanns þér' (it is better that you call me a worse man,

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[104] *Hávarðar saga*, 302.
[105] *Finnboga saga*, 323.

because men know it, that you have taken me to be your equal).[106] These words, spoken in anger, reveal Egill's anxiety over not being seen as superior; being seen as an equal is equated with personal failure. In old age, another Egill – Egill Skalla-Grímsson of *Egils saga* – desires to take two chests full of silver to the *Alþing* and shower their contents down upon the assembled crowd from the law-rock. Egill suggests that 'þykki mér undarligt, ef allir skipta vel sín í milli; ætla, ek at þar myndi vera þá hrundningar eða pústrar, eða bærisk at um síðir, at allr þingheimrinn berðisk' (it would be extraordinary to me, if they all share it fairly between themselves; I think there would then be pushing or punching, and it may turn out in the end that the entire assembly is laid low).[107] Egill's intention betrays a desire to expose the rotten core of the homosociality upon which the social system is predicated: that the *Alþing* – the height of homosociality in action – might be so easily derailed suggests the fragility of its foundations.

Examples of close emotional bonds between men turning sour occur throughout the sagas, and this theme is nowhere shown more strongly than in the case of foster-brothers. Perhaps the best-known example of foster-brotherhood becoming acrimonious occurs in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, in which we are introduced to the foster brothers Þormóðr Bersason and Þorgeirr Hávarsson. Immediately after they are introduced into the saga and have sworn to be as brothers, the saga narrative shows a concern for the discrepancies between the two protagonists, noting that 'Þormóðr var nǫkkuru ellri, en þó var Þorgeirr sterkari' (Þormóðr was a little older, but Þorgeirr was nevertheless the

[106] *Bandamanna saga*, 354.
[107] *Egils saga*, 297.

stronger).[108] From their very introduction, then, the saga displays an anxiety over which of the two foster-brothers is to be thought superior. This is a worry that haunts the pair. When, at the end of the third chapter, they are forced to bring their ship into an unnamed fjord and ask for hospitality at a small farm, they are immediately asked who leads their party by Sigrfljóð, the woman in charge. The narrative reveals the awkwardness of the inquiry with its statement – standing in place of an answer – that '[h]enni var sagt, at komnir váru Þorgeirr ok Þormóðr' (she was told that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr had arrived).[109] By sidestepping the question of which of the two foster-brothers is in charge, the narrative in fact draws attention to the expectation that there will be a single dominant man in the group. Slightly later, the foster-brothers and their men travel to Sviðinsstaðir to attack Ingólfr and his son Þorbrandr at the request of Sigrfljóð. When the father and son see that the men have arrived, they 'spyrja, hver þar sé flokks foringi' (ask who the leader might be).[110] The implication of the question – as above and as indicated by the use of the singular form of the noun *foringi* – is that Ingólfr and his son expect there to be *one* leader. Again, the foster-brothers' reply indicates the awkwardness that this inquiry creates; indeed, in response, rather than singling out one of the foster-brothers as leader, Þorgeirr instead tells the father and son that 'ef þér hafið heyrt getit Þorgeirs Hávarssonar eða Þormóðar Bersasonar, þá megu þér hér þá sjá' (if you have heard mention of Þorgeirr Hávarsson or Þormóðr Bersason, then you may see them here).[111] While the narrative itself seems to suggest that Þorgeirr is to be

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[108] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 125.
[109] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 135.
[110] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 137.
[111] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 137.

seen as the superior man – the narrative often uses locutions such as 'fǫrunauta Þorgeirs' (Þorgeirr's party) and 'Þorgeirr ok hans menn' (Þorgeirr and his men) rather than the equally intelligible 'fǫrunauta Þormóðar' or 'Þormóðr ok hans menn' – the foster-brothers, as evidenced by their replies to questions about leadership, seek to avoid such questions of dominance and subordination.[112] That is, until one day Þorgeirr asks the question that signals the inevitable end of their association: 'Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af ǫðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?' (What do you think, which of us two would surpass the other, if we two tried ourselves out against each other?).[113] With this question Þorgeirr makes explicit and unavoidable the problem that until this point has been merely implicit – that the two men are not of equal masculine status. Once this has happened, their association – as Þormóðr notes – must invariably come to an end.

There are many other examples of problematic foster-brother and sworn-brother relationships. In *Gísla saga*, for example, we see a sworn-brotherhood ceremony between Gísli, Þorkell, Vésteinn, and Þorgrímr, which fails because the obligation to men outside of one's kin group is viewed – by Þorgrímr at least – as too much of a burden to bear.[114] The rest of the saga from this point onwards can be seen as dealing with, as Carolyne Larrington notes, 'the repercussions from the abortive ceremony'.[115] In *Harðar saga* we see a different kind of problem

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[112] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 139.
Another example of a pair of men – this time biological brothers – attempting to avoid comparisons in terms of superior and inferior manhood can be found in *Fljótsdæla saga*. Here it is said that it is easy to recognize where the sons of Droplaug have been from their tracks since '[h]vórgi vildi ganga í spor öðrum, ok gengu þeir jafnfram' (neither wanted to follow in the other's footsteps, and so they walked side-by-side) (245).
[113] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 137.
[114] *Gísla saga*, 23.
[115] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 190.

arising from homosociality. Here, the foster-brothers Hörðr and Geirr do not fall out over questions of supremacy. Rather, it is the fact that Geirr repeatedly ignores Hörðr's intuitions – which are always proved to be correct – that leads to the downfall of the foster-brothers and the extra-legal community of outlaws that has assembled on the island of Hólmr.[116] To the reader, it is clear that Hörðr's perceptions are correct while Geirr is viewed as gullible and imperceptive.

Homosocial pair bonds may come under scrutiny and may be seen as suspect for an altogether different reason. Returning to the issue of the dissolution of the foster-brothers' association in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, it is instructive to note the reasons given for their separation. According to the saga prose it is as a result of Þorgeirr's fateful questioning of their relative positions in a masculine hierarchy. But, as Carolyne Larrington has astutely noted, the account given in Þormóðr's verse about this incident, contained in his memorial *drápa* for Þorgeirr, differs from the account given by the saga narrative.[117] Here, Þormóðr blames the fact that 'rógsmenn' (slanderers) have attempted to weaken their relationship.[118] If we take Þormóðr's claim seriously, then we may wonder to what slander might he be referring. The saga prose does not make this explicit, but we may safely hazard a guess that it would have been sexually defamatory in nature. Sexually defamatory verse, as discussed earlier in this thesis, is common in Old Norse literature, and in this particular context we may conjecture that the focus of this slander would have been the nature of the relationship between Þorgeirr and Þormóðr. In particular, it would likely have suggested an illicit

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[116] See, in particular, *Harðar saga* chapters 27 to 36.
[117] Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, 214.
[118] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 152.

sexual relationship between the two men.[119] Such slander would have been extremely problematic for the continued association between the two men, not simply for its implication of same-sex sexual contact, but specifically because it would have suggested that one of the two men had been sexually penetrated by the other. Bearing this in mind, we might read Þorgeirr's earlier question – 'Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af ǫðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?' (What do you think, which of us two would surpass the other, if we two tried ourselves out against each other?) – as not only containing a question of hierarchy in terms of physical strength, but also as simultaneously functioning as a question over their hypothetical roles if they were to engage in anal sex. (In fact, considering the link between sexual passivity and unmanliness in the Old Norse imaginary, we may even view the two implications as one and the same.) Considering that we read Þormóðr as the less hegemonically masculine and less dominant of the two men, we may well assume – likely along with the slanderers to whom Þormóðr refers – that it is Þormóðr who would take the passive position. It is unsurprising, then, that it is Þormóðr who ultimately calls an end to their association – it is to him that the opprobrium would accrue.

Characters frequently show an awareness of the likelihood of good homosocial relations breaking down into hostility, which is often expressed through prophesy. Thus in *Víga-Glúms saga* Oddbjǫrg suggests of Arngrímr and Steinólfr that 'eigi ætla ek lengi ástúðigt með þeim […] þat kann ek þér at segja, at þeir munu banaspjót eptir berask, ok mun hvat ǫðru verra af hljótask hér í heraði' (I do not think that the affection between them will last long [...] I can tell

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[119] See for example the slander produced about Þangbrandr and Þorvaldr in *Kristni saga*, 12-13.

you this, that they will be deadly enemies, and as a result everything will get worse here in the district).[120] Similarly, in *Laxdœla saga*, Gestr Oddleifsson prophesies the tragic breakdown of the association between Kjartan and Bolli, claiming that 'ekki kemr mér at óvǫrum, þótt Bolli standi yfir hǫfuðsvǫrðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok hǫfuðbana' (it won't come as a surprise to me if Bolli should stand over the dead body of Kjartan, and he will thereby cause his own demise).[121] The same Gestr, in *Gísla saga*, likewise predicts the dissolution of the homosocial group of Gísli, Þorkell, Þorgrímr, and Vésteinn.[122] Such prophecies invariably turn out to be correct, suggesting that the virtual certainty of eventual discord is a component of homosocial bonds.

TRIANGULARITY

The final component of homosociality in the sagas to be discussed here is the use of a third party to mediate the relationship between two men. As noted in the discussion of Sedgwick's model of homosociality above, this can take the form of triangulation through a woman, and there are certainly examples of this form of triangulation to be found in the saga corpus. It is a feature that is especially found in the *skaldasögur*. As Theodore M. Andersson has noted, '[t]he most salient feature of the core skald sagas is that they oppose two wooers in a contest over the same woman', thus forming a 'love triangle'.[123] Following the work of René Girard on triangularity in ostensibly opposite-sex orientated relationships, Jochens has postulated the applicability to the *skaldasögur* of the notion that the

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[120] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 41.
[121] *Laxdœla saga*, 92.
[122] *Gísli saga*, 21.
[123] Andersson, 'Skalds in their Literary Context', 273 and 284.

'rivalry between the two men and/or erotic attraction is more significant than the relationship between either one and the woman'.[124] Such a situation arises between the characters of Bjǫrn and Þórðr in *Bjarnar saga*. As Jochens notes, 'the men's rivalry was more intense than their love for Oddný',[125] and indeed, it eventually is physically reified in the form of a *níð-stöng*.[126] Oddný is used in this relationship as a way of negotiating the sexually-charged power relations between the two men. Long after Oddný and Þórðr are married, and even within their household, Bjǫrn continues to versify about the ostensible object of his desire. These poetic displays – arguably of the *mansǫngr* genre, whose existence is of course contested – would have functioned as powerful insults against Þórðr. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen notes, 'love-poetry was regarded as a gross outrage against the man – father, brother or husband – who was the woman's guardian'.[127] Indeed, while these verses were ostensibly aimed at the woman, their true target was undoubtedly the man who was responsible for her – in the case of Oddný this is of course Þórðr. Since *Grágás* would suggest that the composition of *mansöngr* was prohibited, and that the perpetrator could be prosecuted for full outlawry, for Bjǫrn to so flagrantly produce love verses for Oddný would be to imply that he does not fear revenge from Þórðr; that is, that

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[124] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 380.
René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1965).
[125] Jenny Jochens, 'Triangularity in the Pagan North: The Case of Björn Arngeirsson and Þórðr Kolbeinsson', in Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities in the Medieval West* (New York and London, 1999), 111-34 (127).
[126]*Bjarnar Saga,* 154-5.
Jochens ('Triangularity', 121) suggests that in this episode Bjǫrn deliberately depicts himself as the aggressor, both in the carving and the accompanying stanza.
[127] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 35.

he believes himself to be more powerful, physically and sexually, than him.[128] The verses aimed at Oddný even serve to figure Þórðr, as their true recipient, as *argr*. Indeed, as Meulengracht Sørensen notes, 'phallic aggression can […] be expressed in a heterosexual relation, where it is either directed personally against a woman or else – using her as a medium – against the man who is responsible for her and is her guardian.'[129] Oddný's role here, then, is to serve as a conduit through which the two men's power-plays may pass.

These power-plays are not just linguistic, but can also take physical form. For example, Þórðr strikes Oddný in front of Bjǫrn, displaying his power over her, and, by extension, over Bjǫrn. He also places Oddný upon his lap and is affectionate with her in an attempt to elicit a response from Bjǫrn.[130] Similarly, in *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr kisses Steingerðr to provoke Þorvaldr.[131] As Jochens notes, the placing of a woman on one's lap was a step in love-making, and was an act that could be seen from a distance.[132] Its provocative nature is therefore obvious. These women are used, in effect, as puppets; the attention shown to them is for the purpose of displaying the power and virility of the lover, and the relative powerlessness of the viewer. The woman is once again placed into the role of conduit of power, both social and sexual.

It is also possible to infer that some male characters are only interested in women while they are in a triangular relationship with another man, the woman

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[128] Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (trans. and eds.), *Grágás: The Laws of Early Iceland, II* (Winnipeg, 2000), 198.
[129] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 28.
[130] *Bjarnar Saga*, 142.
[131] *Kormáks Saga,* 291.
Other female characters physically manipulated in order to provoke other men include Kolfinna in *Hallfreðar saga* (145) and Yngvildr in *Svarfdæla saga* (170).
[132] Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality', 371-373.

thus serving as intermediary. Kormákr, for example, after being offered Steingerðr by Þorvaldr, declines, although he is more than ready to kiss Steingerðr when it is against her husband's wishes.[133] Women, then, can be seen to fulfil the role of transient love object, used by the male protagonists in order to play out their disagreements between one another. They can also, however, be used as a means of bringing men together into homosocial relationships rather than functioning as a conduit for animosity. Through the exchange of women in the institution of marriage, families are linked, instituting obligations that were not previously present. And when their usefulness in forming homosocial bonds comes to an end, women can be cast off entirely. Such is the case in *Heiðarvíga saga*, in which Barði announces his separation from Guðrún. He does not divorce Guðrún for any particular failing on her part, but rather because he views her father, Bjǫrn, as 'miklu meiri níðingr en duganda manni sami at eiga þik at mág' (much more of a *níðingr* than is appropriate for a brave men to have as a father-in-law).[134] Women's role in linking families together is also suggested by *Valla-Ljóts saga*, in which Halli notes that the reason he did not want to give his mother in marriage to Torfi is because it would 'svívirða svá ætt vára' (greatly dishonour our family).[135] Women, then, are often afforded a status that differs little from property, treated not so much as autonomous actors with agency, but rather simply as bridal bartering chips in a game played by men.

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[133] *Kormáks saga,* 291.
[134] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 311.
[135] *Valla-Ljóts saga*, 236.

Fosterage

Women of marriageable age are not the only third parties that can be used to institute and crystallize homosocial relationships between two men. Children – both male and female – can be exchanged between men in fosterage, thereby forging homosocial bonds, and creating obligations, between the father and foster-father. Thus, in *Reykdœla saga*, Hánefr offers to foster Vémundr's daughter, Þorkatla, because 'ætlaði hann sér þat mjǫk til traustst við aðra menn' (he thought he would get for himself a lot of support against other men).[136] Allowing Hánefr to foster Þorkatla, then, is clearly thought to create homosocial responsibilities on Vémundr's part, obliging him to provide support to his daughter's foster-father. A similar understanding of the implications of fosterage underlies the comment – after Þórðr has fostered Hǫskuldr's son, Óláfr, in *Laxdœla saga* – that when '[þ]etta spyrja þeir men, er mál áttu við Þórð godda, ok þótti nú fjárheimtan komin fastligar en áðr' (those men who had unsettled issues with Þórðr *goði* hear about this, they thought that pursuing suits would now be more difficult than before).[137] The implication, of course, is that – following this new fostering arrangement – they will also have to contend with Hǫskuldr. Fostering can also be used to show deference to another man, and thereby forge or strengthen a homosocial bond through subservience. This is articulated clearly in *Laxdœla saga*. Here, Óláfr, to work against his brother Þorleikr's animosity, offers to foster the latter's son. Indeed, Óláfr suggests to his brother that 'ef þú þykkisk af þessu vanhaldinn, þá vil ek þat vinna til heils hugar þíns, at fóstra son þinn, ok er sá kallaðr æ minni maðr, er ǫðrum fóstrar barn' (if you

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[136] *Reykdœla saga*, 160.
[137] *Laxdœla saga*, 38.

think yourself cheated in this, then I would like to ease your temper by fostering your son, since that one is always called the lesser man who fosters the child of the other).[138] By lowering his own status in relation to Þorleikr he mitigates his brother's anger for having – in Þorleikr's eyes – deprived him of part of his birthright by accepting gifts from their father on his deathbed.

Fostering, of course, also forges links between the child and its new foster-father. Eiðr, of *Þórðar saga hreðu*, is well aware of this and arranges fosterage for himself based on the benefits that he may glean from the relationship. As he suggests to his father, 'Þórðr er mikils háttar maðr, ok má af honum gott hljóta' (Þórðr is a very important man, and I can get excellent benefits from him).[139] Here, Eiðr himself nurtures the relationship for the social advancement that he thinks it will bring. If children are aware of the bond between child and foster-father that fostering creates, then so are the adults who undertake to foster them. This is nowhere more clearly shown than in *Njáls saga*, where Njáll fosters the young Hǫskuldr Þráinsson, after Njáll's son, Skarpheðinn, has killed Hǫskuldr's father.[140] By fostering Hǫskuldr, Njáll hopes to prevent any future impulse Hǫskuldr may experience to wreak revenge upon his father's slayers. His new – and conflicting – kin obligations work to preclude this possibility.

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[138] *Laxdœla saga*, 75.
A similar sentiment can be found in *Harðar saga*, 23.
[139] *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 175.
[140] *Njáls saga*, 236-7.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Homosociality in the sagas, from the above overview of the *Íslendingasögur,* can be seen to have both negative and positive aspects. As a mode of social organization, homosocial bonds between men are both valued and desired for the support they give to an individual in both protecting himself and his kin, and in carrying out his will against others. Maintained through the exchange of gifts (both material and metaphorical), women, and children, homosocial bonds give rise to mutual obligations and responsibilities between men. This network of men relying upon one another for support leads to the vigilant policing of men's masculinities: if a man is to rely on another man for social and physical support, then they must ensure that they are up to the task. Men's sexual activity, in particular, is carefully policed in an attempt to prevent those in homosocial relationships from attracting *níð*, which in itself is a function of the conceptual break between those in homosocial relationships and those in associations in which aberrant sexual activities may take place. The rules which men use to judge each other – constituting the bounds of a model of hegemonic masculinity for the sagas – are not only used to police the actions and appearance of other men, but are internalized by male characters. Consequently, men in the sagas apply the dictates of masculinity to themselves, leading to anxiety over their own gender performance. This policing of masculinities both relies on – and simultaneously produces – a hierarchy of masculinity, of which men strive to be at the apex. This can lead to violent clashes between men as they continually strive for supremacy. But perhaps the most important feature to note of homosociality in the sagas is its effective inevitability. In any situation in which men interact – and thus particularly in the male-dominated world of the

Íslendingasögur – men cannot fail but to find themselves in relations, of one kind or another, with other men. Homosociality, for better or worse, is implicated in all interactions between men in the sagas. This observation of the centrality of male homosociality to saga literature appears particularly significant when we consider the very real lack of female homosociality in the sagas.[141] Indeed, women are rarely – if ever – seen as interacting with one another (unless the topic of conversation is a male character). Men, as seen, use homosocial links to forge, consolidate, and maintain social power. But women – who are not shown to form the same kind of links with each other – are disenfranchised, being unable to gain the social power that can come so easily to men as a result of the male-male relationships in which they participate.

INTERSECTIONAL MASCULINITIES

While the previous section looked at the way in which masculinity operates interpersonally, giving an overview of interactions between different male characters in the sagas, this section will focus instead on the construction of individual characters' masculinities. As argued earlier in this thesis, masculinity is not to be seen as an abstract and singular quality of personal identity. Rather, gendered subjects are to be seen as being constituted at the intersection of a plethora of different identity categories. Thus, this section will examine the interaction of a selection of these identity categories with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, as outlined in the previous chapter, in order to shed light upon the construction and constitution of these multifaceted subjects. The sub-sections

[141] Natalie M. Van Deusen, 'Sworn Sisterhood? On the (Near-) Absence of Female Friendship from the *Íslendingasǫgur*', *Scandinavian Studies* 86.1 (2014), 52-71.

devoted to these identity categories will not of course be comprehensive – there are as many masculinities as there are men in the sagas (and indeed more if we take into account masculine women) – but will rather simply sketch out some of the ways in which such identity categories can affect masculine identity.

YOUTH

If, as suggested earlier, masculinity is tied – to some extent – to a concept of biological maleness evinced in part through secondary sexual characteristics (for example, beard growth), how then are we to view the relation of young male characters to masculinity?

There are clear indications in the *Íslendingasögur* that young males are not expected to have the qualities generally associated with men. Thus, in *Fljótsdæla saga*, a farmhand is not afraid of being confronted, along with Þorgrímr, by the brothers Helgi and Grímr because, he suggests, 'þeir ungir báðir, ok munu þeir ekki geta at gjört við okkr, ef vit veitumst duganda' (they are both young and they will not be able to do anything against us two, if we support one another like brave men).[142] While the farmhand's confidence here is misguided it nevertheless suggests a belief that young males will be unable to contend with mature men, and thus suggests that youth is seen as an impediment to the performance of masculinity. A similar attitude can be found in *Hrafnkels saga*, where Eyvindr's young attendant flees to Sámr when Eyvindr's party is attacked by Hrafnkell and his men. We are told that he does this expressly because he

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[142] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 246.

'þóttisk ekki krǫptugr til orrustu' (thought himself not strong enough to fight).[143] Here, youth functions as a reason for the young male's inability to successfully participate in battle, and also as an excuse for his failure to even attempt to do so. Such an attitude is not simply common opinion, but is further entrenched in socio-legal structures. For example, when Ingólfr dies in *Vatnsdœla saga*, his sons are unable to take over his *goðorð* 'fœrir sakar aldrs' (because of their age).[144] Youth similarly seems to be an impediment to men who would wish to assert their masculinity by going on viking raids. Indeed, *Floámanna saga* suggests that 'þat váru lög í þann tíma, at eigi skyldi yngri maðr vera í herförum en tuttugu vetra' (it was the law at the time that a man under twenty years old could not be in a raiding party).[145] That young males are seen as either unmanly or less manly than mature men is also suggested by insults found in the sagas. Hence, in *Bjarnar saga*, Bjǫrn frequently calls Þórðr 'lítill sveinn' (little boy) – and variations thereof – thereby subordinating and marginalizing his opponent.[146] A similar logic, of young men being unable to properly embody masculinity, lies behind the slur 'meyjarkinninn' (maiden cheek) that is used against the young Þórðr in *Þórðar saga hreðu* when he seems to be unable to compete with other men in local games.[147] The suggestion behind the insult, of course, is that since he does not display the secondary sexual characteristic of facial hair, he will be unable to properly perform masculinity. That he is unable to win in the contest with Ásbjörn is thus seen as a logical effect of his lack of the bodily signifiers of masculinity. Such an attitude to young males – that they are not to be thought of

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[143] *Hrafnkels saga*, 129.
[144] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 109.
[145] *Floámanna saga*, 234.
[146] *Bjarnar saga*, 201. See also 142, 143, and 144.
[147] *Þórðar saga hreðu*, 178. Also discussed in the previous chapter on page 18, n. 49.

as manly – is perhaps not surprising if we think of their bodies as preventing them from embodying hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, as suggested in the previous chapter, to be thought manly in the sagas one must be able to display physical and martial prowess, and be willing and able to exact due vengeance. Considering our expectations of the young male body as considerably weaker, smaller, and perhaps less-coordinated than that of the adult male, it is unsurprising that young males are not thought of as masculine. While few men may be able to fully embody the ideals of this model of hegemonic masculinity, for the young male their bodily characteristics are more likely to preclude the possibility altogether rather than just render it improbable.

Some young males are, however, thought of as manly despite their youth. For example, in *Fóstbrœðra saga,* after the young Þorgeirr has slain Jǫðurr for the killing of his father, we are told that everyone thought it remarkable 'at einn ungr maðr skyldi orðit hafa at bana svá harðfengum heraðshǫfðingja ok svá miklum kappa sem Jǫðurr var' (that one young man alone should have caused the death of so hardy a chieftain and so great a champion as Jǫðurr was).[148] Similarly, in *Vápnfirðinga saga*, we are told that Brodd-Helgi – after he has killed the outlaw Svartr – '[v]arð […] víðfrægr ok lofaðr mjǫk af alþýðu fyrir þetta þrekvirki, er hann hafði unnit, jafnungr sem hann var enn at aldri' (became widely-known and much praised among all people for this daring deed that he had accomplished, young as he still was in years).[149] But that such men are viewed as exceptional – despite the seeming ubiquity of such men – suggests that manliness in a young

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[148] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 133.
[149] *Vápnfirðinga saga*, 26.

male is *ab*normal, and certainly worthy of comment. It thus reinforces the idea that young males are not men. At least not yet.

Considering the apparent function with which secondary sexual characteristics are endowed in signifying a male character's successful embodiment of masculine gender, we might reasonably assume that simply growing up – and allowing puberty to take its course – will be enough, generally, to achieve manhood. And despite Carolyne Larrington's suggestion that '[t]he sagas of Icelanders do not tend to observe that a boy has become a man', there are nevertheless numerous clear examples of the sagas displaying an awareness of young male characters developing physically and reaching maturity.[150] Thus, in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, it is said that Þorgeirr 'var bráðgǫrr maðr' (was a man who developed early).[151] The idea that he 'developed' into a man suggests the movement from boy to man was seen as a progression in terms of masculine status. A similar implication lies behind the suggestion – in *Fljótsdæla saga* – that Helgi Droplaugarson, at the age of twelve, was 'svó vel þroskaðr, at margir vóru þeir fulltíða at aldri, at bæði hafði Helgi við þeim afl ok þroska' (so well grown-up that Helgi had the same strength and growth as many who had come of full age).[152] Suggesting that his strength and growth are exceptional for someone not *yet* fully grown articulates an understanding that these qualities are expected to accompany physical maturation. The idea of physical maturation giving access to pursuits thought appropriate to men is demonstrated in *Víglundar saga* where we are told that Þorgrímr went raiding when he was 'fulltíða at aldri' (fully

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[150] Carolyne Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature', in Shannon Lewis-Simpson (ed.), *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), 145-60 (146).
[151] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 123.
[152] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 243.

mature in years).[153] Here, as with *Flóamanna saga* above, a certain level of masculine status must be reached before the young man is able to go on viking raids. In *Vatnsdœla saga*, too, we can detect an understanding that manhood for young men can be reached through ageing and thus – we may assume – puberty. Here we are told that the people of the Vatnsdalr district were keen on the idea that Þorkell 'þroski yrði hans í þeiri sveit' (would grow into his manhood in the district) for the protection he would afford them.[154]

But if ageing and physical maturity are prerequisites for a masculine identity, they do not – on their own at least – guarantee it. Rather, young males must frequently prove their masculine identity for it to be recognized as such. Methods of proving and testing masculinity vary widely.

One forum at which masculine identity may be proven is the local *knattleikr* games held between men of a district. The sagas are clear that such games are occasions held – and, indeed, appreciated – for the testing of masculine prowess. Indeed they are, as Larrington has noted, 'a socially-sanctioned forum for controlled aggression and social interaction'.[155] Thus in *Svarfdæla saga* it is suggested that Þorsteinn *svǫrfuðr* and his friends introduced games into Svarfaðardalr because they 'vildu reyna knáleik sinn' (wanted to test their prowess).[156] Similarly, in *Gísla saga* we read of the game held between Gísli and Þorsteinn, and Bǫrkr and Þorkell, where 'kom þar fjǫlði manna at sjá leikinn,

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[153] *Víglundar saga*, 71.
[154] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 119.
There are many more examples of the physical development of young men being commented upon in the sagas. In *Egils saga* it is suggested that when Kveld-Úlfr had reached old age, 'synir hans váru rosknir' (his sons were fully-grown) (6). In *Grettis saga* we are told that the strained relations between Grettir's father Ásmundr and his own father were bad until he 'var roskinn at aldri' (had grown to maturity) (34). And in *Laxdœla saga* we are told that when Hǫskuldr was elderly, his sons were 'þroskaðir' (grown up) (49).
[155] Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 149.
[156] *Svarfdæla saga*, 152.

því at mǫrgum var mikil forvitni á at sjá leikinn ok vita, hverr sterkastr væri eða leikmaðr beztr' (a great crowd of people came there to see the game because many were curious to watch the contest and find out who was the strongest and the best player).[157] While men of all ages participated in ball games, they appear to be particularly popular with young men looking to use them as a means of proving themselves. For example, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, games are held by Kolli as a means of entertaining the Norwegian skipper Örn, and we are told that 'er þat spurðu ungir menn um sveitina, þá drifu þeir til, ok urðu þar leikar fjölmennir' (when the young men of the district heard about this, then they rushed there, and there were crowds of people there at the games).[158] Indeed, it is these games which Þorgerðr urges her *kolbítr* son Kolfiðr to attend in order to prove himself socially instead of just lounging aimlessly by the fire.[159] It is clear from her words that she expects that the games will provide a forum in which her son might prove his manliness; she speaks to him thus:

> þeir sitja tveir menn í Kollafirði ok keppast um Ólofu ina vænu, ok mörg karlmannlig brögð eru frá þeim sögð. Nú ganga þangat allir ungir menn til leika, en þú ert sú vanmenna, at þú liggr í eldgrófum til hrellingar þinni móður[.][160]
>
> two men sit in Kollafjörðr and contend with one another over Ólof the fair, and many manly deeds are told concerning them. Now all young men are going to that place to the games, but you are that worthless that you lie by the fire-pit, an affliction to your mother.

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[157] *Gísla saga*, 57.
[158] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 16.
[159] The common saga topos of the *kolbítr* – the idle male who is both unpromising and antagonistic in youth, but who grows up to be a pre-eminent and manly man – clearly draws on the idea that masculinity is a state that must be won through action. Indeed, the *kolbítr* must undertake appropriately manly tasks in order to be accepted as a man. For examples of characters in the sagas which draw on this topos, see: Þorsteinn Þorgnýsson in *Svarfdæla saga*; Grímr Eyjúlfsson in *Þorskfirðinga saga*; Refr Steinsson in *Króka-Refs saga*; and Gunnar Þorbjarnarson in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*.
[160] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 17.

Her urging is successful and Kolfiðr quickly departs to prove his manliness. Egill, of *Egils saga*, is also drawn to the games as a young man. Indeed, the saga suggests that 'þann vetr, er honum var inn tólfti, var hann mjǫk at leikum' (in that year, when he was twelve, he took part in a lot of games).[161] We can infer that it is the opportunity to prove his masculinity that is attractive to the young Egill.

Games, however, are not the only means by which a young male can prove his masculinity. In one case, in fact, a young male must prove his masculinity *before* he is even allowed to enter into the games. In *Flóamanna saga,* the five-year-old Þorgils is prevented from taking part in a game with other boys because he has not – in their eyes – yet proven himself. Indeed, we read that '[s]veinar sögðust hafa sammælzt á, at sá einn skyldi at leiknum vera, er nökkuru kvikindi hefði at bana orðit. Réðst Þorgils þá frá leiknum, ok þótti þó illa, er hann var fráskila gerr' (the boys said they had agreed together that only a person who had caused the death of some living creature could be in the game. Then Þorgils left the games, but nevertheless thought it ill that he had been rejected).[162] Here, the young Þorgils is ejected from a homosocial grouping because he has not yet carried out a rite of passage to prove his worth. That the particular rite prescribed is that of killing an animal is surely significant: in order to kill an animal, a young male must display certain qualities associated with men in the sagas, such as physical strength, bravery, and the ability to dominate others, not to mention a taste for, or at least inclination toward, violence. Immediately after Þorgils' exclusion from the games, we read that '[u]m kveldit fara menn heim'

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[161] *Egils saga*, 101.
[162] *Flóamanna saga*, 250.

(the men went home in the evening), which further serves to underline the fact that Þorgils has been excluded from such a homosocial grouping.[163] Following his exclusion, Þorgils kills the horse Illingr, expressly because he does not want to be left out of the games again. In the very next chapter following that in which Þorgils carries out this violent rite of passage – at the age of five – we are given a portrait of him as a man:

> Svá er sagt, at Þorgils var fríðr maðr sýnum ok drengiligr í viðbragði ok skýrligr, hár á vöxt ok réttvaxinn, ramr at afli, harðgerr ok skjótráðr, gegn ok öruggr, örðigr ok manna bezt vígr ok inn hraustasti í öllum mannraunum, þegar honum dróst aldr sem frá mun verða sagt[.][164]
>
> So it is said, that Þorgils was a handsome man to behold, and manly in appearance, and intelligent, tall and upright of growth, physically strong, hardy and quick to make decisions, honest and dependable, stalwart and the best of men in battle and the most valiant in all trials of manhood, once he grew up, as will be told.

Having proven his masculinity through violent action, Þorgils can be viewed by the saga as a man. In fact, the transformation from young boy to masculine man following this rite of passage is so swift as to be almost comical. Similarly, in *Víga-Glúms saga*, the young Eyjólfr proves his masculinity by killing a young bear and returning with its snout. As a result of this action – by which he is said to have shown his 'vaskleik' (courage) – he subsequently gains the admiration of those men who had previously thought little of him.[165]

Such acts of violence – which come in various guises – are common rites of passage marking the transition into manhood for a young male. For example, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, Búi forces Jökull to wrestle with him to prove that he his

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[163] *Flóamanna saga*, 250.
[164] *Flóamanna saga*, 251.
[165] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 10.

indeed his son, as he expects his son to be strong like himself.[166] A show of strength is thus required for him to be recognized as part of his father's kin group. In *Víga-Glúms saga*, Vigfúss does not show Glúmr any honour, and does not seat him near to himself, until Glúmr has proven himself by forcefully ejecting the *berserkr* Bjǫrn from Vigfúss's hall.[167] In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, after Þorgeirr has killed Jǫðurr, his mother Þórelfr comments upon his actions approvingly: '[ó]bernsligt bragð var þat, ok njóttu heill handa, sonr minn' (that was no childish exploit, and bless your hands, my son).[168] Following his violent act of vengeance, Þorgeirr's mother no longer views her child as a youth, but instead – by implication – regards him as having achieved manhood. *Vatnsdœla saga* provides us with yet a further example of a male youth undertaking violent action in order to prove his masculinity. Here Þorsteinn kills Jǫkull Ingimundarson explicitly because 'vildi hann nú leggja sik í nǫkkura mannhættu' (he now wanted to place himself at some mortal peril).[169] As Þorsteinn is preparing to attack Jǫkull, we are given a further glimpse of his motivations:

> Honum kom nú ok í hug eggjan feðr síns, at þrótt ok djarfleik myndi til þurfa at vinna slíkt afrek eða ǫnnur, en frami ok fagrligir penningar myndi í móti koma, ok hann myndi þá þykkja betr gengit hafa en sitja við eldstó móður sinnar. Þá kom honum ok í hug, at faðir hans segði hann eigi betra til vápns en dóttur eða aðra konu ok meiri sœmð væri frændum, at skarð væri í ætt þeira en þar sem hann var. Slíkt hvatti Þorstein fram [...].[170]

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[166] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 42-3.
[167] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 19.
Mary Danielli has suggested that defeating *berserkir* is to be viewed as a rite of passage in Old Norse texts. See: Mary Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature', *Folklore* 56 (1945), 229–45; Danielli's article is cited by Larrington in 'Awkward Adolescents', 145-6.
[168] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 132.
[169] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 6.
[170] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 8.

> His father's incitement now came into his mind, that strength and courage would be needed to perform such a deed or others, but fame and fine coins would come in return, and he would be thought to have done better than to sit by his mother's hearth. Then it also came into his mind that his father had said he was no better at taking up a weapon than a daughter or other woman, and that there was more honour to his kinsmen in having a breach in their family line than there was in having him. Such thoughts drove Þorsteinn on.

We can clearly see that Þorsteinn is driven by a desire to be seen as manly. Moreover, this is a masculinity which apparently needs to be achieved through the rejection of femininity and the maternal, as represented by the 'mother's hearth' and the subject position of the daughter. That, in this scene in *Vatnsdœla saga* at least, masculinity must be achieved through a repression of the feminine is in keeping with psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of masculine identity.

Participating in viking raids can also function as a rite of passage which raises a young male's social status. In *Harðar saga* we learn that the sworn brothers Hörðr, Hróarr, Geirr, and Helgi go raiding abroad, and that as a result of this '[v]arð þeim bæði gott til fjár ok frægðar' (they became both very wealthy and famous).[171] Of Ǫgmundr in *Kormáks saga* we read that '[þ]egar er hann hafði aldr ok þroska, lagðisk hann í víking á sumrum [...] hann aflaði sér góðs orðs ok mikils fjár' (when he was of age and fully-grown, he set out raiding in the summers [...] he won for himself a good reputation and great wealth).[172] We are similarly told that Þorsteinn in *Vatnsdœla saga*, 'var í hernaði á sumrum ok aflaði fjár ok virðingar' (went raiding in the summers and won wealth and honour).[173]

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[171] *Harðar saga*, 45.
[172] *Kormáks saga*, 204.
[173] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 17.

Eyjólfr, too, in *Víga-Glúms saga* is said to be thought 'inn mesti garpr ok framgǫngumaðr' (the greatest champion and a valiant man), having been on several viking raids.[174] A suggestion can also be found, however, that viking raids are only appropriate for young males while proving their masculinity, and not for more mature men. Thus, when Leifr of *Flóamanna saga* wants to take up raiding again after already amply proving himself, we are told that 'Ingólfr latti þess ok sagði þeim vera mál at setjast um kyrrt at búm sínum' (Ingólfr dissuaded him from this and said it was time that they settled down on their farms).[175] Such an attitude adds weight to the idea that viking raids can function as a transitional stage into manhood for a young male.

But going on viking raids is not the only reason that a young male might venture abroad. Nor is it the only method for a young male to prove his masculinity while away from Iceland.

The very act of going abroad, in itself, can be seen as a rite of passage enabling access to a masculine status. Indeed, by going abroad the young male shows independence, bravery, and strength of character. It may also be argued that he removes himself from the main body of society, and thereby places himself into what we might now recognize as a Foucauldian heterotopia, where the required transition into a man may take place.[176] In particular, lands beyond Iceland may function as 'crisis heterotopias' – spaces to which the subject in flux may retreat, or be forced to travel, while their identity is in transition.[177] Such would be the case, for example, for the England of *Gunnlaugs saga* in which

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[174] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 11.
[175] *Flóamanna saga*, 236.
[176] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 22-7.
[177] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, 24.

Gunnlaugr kills the *berserkr* Þórormr, an action from which he earns great fame.[178] Lands beyond Iceland are also seen as heterotopic elsewhere in *Gunnlaugs saga*. During the negotiation for the betrothal of Gunnlaugr to Helga *in fagra*, Helga's father Þorsteinn states that 'Gunnlaugr skal fara útan ok skapa sik eptir góðra manna siðum; en ek skal lauss allra mála, ef hann kemr eigi svá út, eða mér virðisk eigi skapferði hans' (Gunnlaugr must go abroad and model himself on the conduct of good men; but I shall be free of all obligations, if he doesn't return or if his character is not to my liking).[179] The clear implication is that Þorsteinn expects Gunnlaugr's journey abroad to provide time and space in which he might mature into a settled man. That countries beyond Iceland can function as crisis heterotopias is reinforced by the behaviour of Egill in *Egils saga*. Egill frequently gets into clashes over his status and rights when abroad, but the saga suggests that '[e]kki var Egill íhlutunarsamr um mál manna ok ótilleitinn við flesta menn, þá er hann var hér á landi' (Egill did not meddle in the affairs of men and was not aggressive to most men when he was here in Iceland).[180] We can infer that having proven his masculinity abroad, there is no need for him to do so once he has returned home. Going abroad can also be seen as significant for a young male as it provides him with an opportunity to do something not seen as an option for women. Thus, in *Laxdœla saga*, Þorleikr wishes to go abroad because – he tells his mother and step-father – 'leiðisk mér at sitja heima sem konum' (I am tired of sitting at home like women).[181] By journeying abroad, he proves his masculinity through a rejection of the feminine.

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[178] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 73.
[179] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 68.
[180] *Egils saga*, 211.
This suggestion is reaffirmed on page 257 of the saga.
[181] *Laxdœla saga*, 204.

Indeed, a further scene in the same saga also clearly indicates that travelling abroad is not an option open to women. When Kjartan decides that he wants to journey abroad, Guðrún is displeased and suggests that she wants to travel with him – a suggestion that is likely tantamount to a proposal of marriage.[182] But Kjartan does not even entertain the prospect, suggesting to Guðrún that '[þ]at má eigi vera' (that cannot be) and instead asking her to wait for him to return.[183] Kjartan's words make it clear that the idea of a woman going abroad is unthinkable. And indeed, in *Kormáks saga*, Steingerðr's foray abroad appears so improbable that it is close to burlesque.[184]

Travelling abroad also provides young males with the opportunity to come into contact with men of high social standing and those who hold *de jure* positions of authority, such as kings and earls. Glúmr of *Víga-Glúms saga*, for example, travels abroad at the age of fifteen in the hope that he might get status from his noble relatives.[185] In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, King Óláfr suggests that if Þorgeirr leaves his court he will receive less good fortune in Iceland than he receives from the king.[186] The implication, of course, is that Þorgeirr receives social advancement from his interaction with the ruler. Of Oddr in *Bandamanna saga*, it is said that 'hann optast á hendi tignum mǫnnum ok vel virðr útan lands' (he usually stayed with noble men and was highly esteemed abroad).[187] Similarly, of Þorsteinn Þorfinnsson in *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, we are told that he left Iceland for a period of five years, and that while he was away '[k]om hann sér vel

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[182] Finlay, 'Betrothal and Women's Autonomy', 123.
[183] *Laxdœla saga*, 115.
[184] *Kormáks saga*, 293-98.
[185] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 16.
[186] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 193.
[187] *Bandamanna saga*, 297.

við hǫfðingja ok þótti inn rǫskvasti maðr' (he came into the favour of eminent men, and he was thought the boldest of men).[188] That travelling away from Iceland and entering into homosocial relationships with powerful men abroad is something of a rite of passage for young men is clearly suggested by Hákon *jarl* in *Finnboga saga*. Here, the *jarl* expresses his anxiety that Finnbogi plans to leave his court: 'nú muntu vilja fara til Íslands; ferr yðr svá flestum, þegar þér komizt í gildi við höfðingja eða í kærleika, þá vili þér þegar á brott' (now you will want to go to Iceland; it goes for you like the rest – once you achieve the esteem or friendship of a ruler, you wish to leave straight away).[189] Although in this case Finnbogi is not in the rush to depart that the *jarl* fears, the *jarl*'s words nevertheless suggest that friendship with powerful men is thought of – by Icelanders at least – in terms of the potential it provides for social advancement at home. Relationships with rulers can be profitably exploited in order to improve masculine status.

The relationship a young male character has with his father is also important for the development of a masculine identity. Relationships between fathers and sons in the sagas are frequently troubled, however. Thus Oddr in *Bandamanna saga*, who receives little affection from his father, wants to leave home because his father gives him 'enga sœmð' (no honour).[190] His father also refuses to give him financial or material support for his intended journey. In *Gunnlaugs saga* Gunnlaugr's father Illugi withholds – for a time at least – the material support that the young Gunnlaugr requires to venture abroad.[191] In

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[188] *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 16.
[189] *Finnboga saga*, 286.
[190] *Bandamanna saga*, 295.
[191] *Gunnlaugs saga,* 59.

Svarfdæla saga, the young Þorsteinn Þorgnýsson is treated coldly by his father, to the extent that 'eigi vildi Þorgnýr láta hann sinn son kalla' (Þorgnýr did not wish that he [Þorsteinn] be called his son).[192] Ásmundr in *Grettis saga* similarly shows little affection to the young Grettir, and withholds material support from him.[193] These images of unsupportive – and, indeed, downright antagonistic – fathers indicate how a father should *not* act towards his young sons. Rather, a good father, we may infer, provides both emotional and material support. Indeed, as suggested by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, '[p]aternal generosity is often an essential component in sons' successful careers, and it is reasonable to assume that the young man appreciated the benefits they received from material support'.[194] Examples of such fathers can certainly be found in the sagas. Thus, in *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, when Þorsteinn *fagri* asks his father, Þorfinnr, to help him with the costs of going abroad, Þorfinnr agrees and gives him whatever he asks for.[195] This support enables him to travel abroad for a few summers, thereby raising his status. While abroad we are told that 'lagði hann nǫkkut eptir af fjárhlut þeim, er hann þóttisk þurfa ok faðir hans' (he set aside any of those valuables which he thought he and his father needed).[196] Theirs, then, is a model father-son relationship, in which the father provides the necessary support to enable the son's advancement and the son repays his father's support with subsequent reciprocal support of his own. Finnbogi of *Finnboga saga* is another example of a

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[192] *Svarfdæla saga*, 129.
[193] *Grettis saga*, 36-42.
The effect of Ásmundr's parenting style upon Grettir is explored in detail in chapter 4.
[194] Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, 'The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons', in Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (ed.), *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays* (New York and London, 1996), 173–96 (185).
[195] *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 7.
[196] *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, 7.

supportive father. After being banished from Víðidalr and being advised to go abroad, he refuses because, he suggests, 'man ek fylgja sonum mínum, menna þá ok hreysta eptir megni' (I shall guide my sons, make men of them, and make them strong).[197] Finnbogi's words reinforce the idea that men must actively be 'made' and that simply ageing is not enough to achieve manhood. They also suggest the important function that fathers play in turning their sons into socialized men.

Youth and the Crisis of Masculinity[198]

Writing on *Gísla saga*, David Clark has convincingly argued that heroic attitudes are something that came to be associated with the (mythological) past – they are viewed as the values of a past age.[199] Similarly, writing on *Grettis saga*, Carolyne Larrington has suggested that the reason that Grettir clashes with his father Ásmundr is simply that he is 'a man born too late, who cannot adapt to the demands of the eleventh-century farming family into which his formerly viking lineage has evolved'.[200] His model of masculinity, she suggests, is one that is no longer tenable. Both of these readings are in accordance with Theodore M. Andersson's influential claim that, in the family sagas, a warrior ideal has been

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[197] *Finnboga saga*, 323.
[198] I use the concept of a 'crisis of masculinity' advisedly. Indeed, as Tosh has suggested, 'if we speak of "crisis", we imply stability the rest of the time' ('What Should Historians do With Masculinity?', 193; see also, Connell, *Masculinities*, 84). Such stability is clearly not possible for a concept as contingent and mutable as masculinity, and so should not be used as a critical term. Here, rather than a critical assessment of a gendered reality, I instead refer to an apparent recognition of a crisis in masculinity within the sagas, and by saga characters.
[199] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 102.
[200] Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 154.

replaced by a social ideal that stresses moderation and social accommodation; sagas as a whole, he suggests, take a dim view of excessive heroism.[201]

Here, however, we may draw a distinction between the attitudes evinced by sagas as a whole and the attitudes shown by individual saga characters. And indeed, it is this wedge between saga authors and saga characters that enables the former to produce a critique of the views and actions of the latter. While excessive masculinity may be regarded as problematic by saga authors, individual saga characters often take a very different attitude to masculine identities of the past. Rather than seeing such masculinities as problematic, they instead lament their passing. In particular, fathers frequently complain that their sons do not display masculine qualities that are regarded as having been commonplace in the past. Thus in *Vatnsdœla saga* Ketill tries to encourage his son Þorsteinn to take manly action by suggesting that he is considerably less manly than the young men of his own day. He speaks to him thus:

> Ǫnnur gerisk nú atferð ungra manna en þá er ek var ungr, þá girntusk menn á nǫkkur framaverk, annattveggja at ráðask í hernað eða afla fjár ok sóma með einhverjum atferðum, þeim er nǫkkur mannhætta var í, en nú vilja ungir menn gerask heimaelskir ok sitja við bakelda ok kýla vǫmb sína á miði ok mungáti, ok þverr því karlmennska ok harðfengi[.][202]
>
> The behaviour of young men is now different from when I was young; then men yearned for exploits, either by going harrying or by winning wealth and honour with some actions – those in which there was some peril, but now young men want to be stay-at-homes and sit by the evening-fire and fill their bellies with mead and ale, and thus wane manliness and courage.

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[201] Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', *Speculum* 45.4 (1970), 575-93.
[202] *Vatnsdœla saga*, 4-5.

Here, Ketill clearly articulates an anxiety over contemporary masculinity that can be detected in a number of sagas. In *Fljótsdæla saga*, when Sveinungr tells his young son to go and herd their flock, the boy suggests that he would first like to fetch his gloves and hood. This prompts Sveinungr to claim that '[þ]á er vér vórum ungir, þurftum vér hvórki hött né vöttu' (when we were young we needed neither hoods nor gloves).[203] By making reference to his own youth, he implicitly suggests that today's youth are to be found lacking. In *Grettis saga* the wife of Þorfinnr Kársson tells Grettir that '[v]íst ertu fára manna líki, þeirra sem nú eru til' (certainly you are unlike other men, of those now living).[204] This is a sentiment echoed by Þórarinn *inn spaki*, who suggests that '[s]att er þat, at mikit afbragð er Grettir annarra manna, þeira er nú er kostr á váru landi' (it is true that Grettir greatly surpasses other men, of those from which to choose who are *now* living in our country).[205] The implication, of course, is that manly men like Grettir were more common in days gone by. In *Laxdœla saga* Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir utilizes the discourse of masculinity in crisis to whet her sons into avenging their brother. While outside the farm Tunga she tells them that 'hér býr Bolli, bróðurbani yðvarr, ok furðu ólíkir urðu þér yðrum frændum gǫfgum, er þér vilið eigi hefna þvílíks bróður, sem Kjartan var, ok eigi myndi svá gera Egill, móðurfaðir yðvarr' (here lives Bolli, your brother's slayer, and you have come to be entirely different from your noble ancestors, when you won't avenge such a brother as Kjartan was, and never would your grandfather Egill have acted thus).[206] The implication – again – is that men of the past were more manly, and

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[203] *Fljótsdæla saga*, 274.
[204] *Grettis saga*, 71.
[205] *Grettis saga*, 104.
[206] *Laxdœla saga*, 162.

appropriately so, than those of today. Þorsteinn in *Hallfreðar saga* also uses this discourse in order to dissuade his son Ingólfr from paying illicit visits to Valgerðr Óttarsdóttir, telling him that '[a]nnan hátt hafi þér en vér hǫfðum á unga aldri, gerið yðr at ginnungum, er hǫfðingja efni eruð' (you have different ways than we did in youth; you make yourselves into fools, when you are the stuff of which chieftains are made).[207] This lacklustre masculinity – which is certainly seen as a negative attribute – is viewed as a problem endemic among young men. It is further viewed as inferior in relation to the masculinity of the young men of past generations; the particular generation being cited as a paragon of masculinity is that to which the man complaining of the current state of young men himself belongs. In this regard, the attitudes of older generations to younger males – the former viewing the latter as acting in ways that would have been unacceptable when they were young – has clear resonance with the ways in which some members of older generations view young people today.

Youth, then, is seen as a hindrance to masculine status and can act as a barrier that stops young male characters from being thought of as manly. In order to achieve a masculine status, a young man must do more than just grow older (although this in itself is usually a pre-requisite for manliness). Rather, the young male must prove himself through daring deeds, violent acts, journeys abroad, or by associating with men of power and status. In order to assist a son on his journey to becoming a man, a good father will provide the socio-economic support he needs in order to prove himself; many male characters do not receive

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[207] *Hallfreðar saga*, 143.

this support, however, and must devise their own route to masculinity. When young males do achieve manliness, they may nevertheless be thought of as not manly enough and certainly not as manly as their ancestors were, although readings of saga narrative sometimes suggest that harking back to old heroic models is in fact *un*desirable and likely to produce men for whom 'the time is out of joint'.

This discussion of the intersection of youth and masculinity has also demonstrated a particular advantage of the framework of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities over Clover's one-sex, one-gender model. While Clover's theory leaves no room for the conceptualization of immature males, a model based on hegemonic and subordinate masculinities can, as demonstrated, theorize and discuss masculine subjects whose pre-adult bodies – for the moment at least – are unable to adequately perform the idealized form of masculinity.

OLD AGE

In the previous section, it was suggested that being too young prohibited a male character from being seen as manly. Being too old can have a similar effect on masculine identity.[208] With reference to modern Western gender relations,

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[208] Little has been written specifically on old age in the sagas. Ármann Jakobsson has identified in the *Íslendingasögur* the literary topos of men who become troublesome in old age, and who continue to be antagonistic after death – see Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104.3 (2005), 297-325. Gillian R. Overing has questioned at what age a person is to be thought of as old in Old Norse texts ('A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29.2 (1999), 211-225 (211)). In order to avoid the problem of who is to be seen as old, I here discuss characters who are identified as old within their respective narratives. It should be noted, however, that Overing's suggestion that '[i]n medieval Iceland, decrepitude is as great or a greater signifier of age than lifespan' (212) is certainly

Kathleen F. Slevin and Thomas J. Linneman have suggested that '[t]he hegemonic form of masculinity is youthful *and* heterosexual'.[209] Leaving aside the question of sexual desire for the moment – and of course recognizing that we must be wary of transferring the norms of one model of hegemonic masculinity to another – a case can certainly be made for (sexually and socially mature) youth being a component of ideal saga masculinity. Indeed, many (although not all) of the tenets of the hegemonic masculinity for saga literature outlined in chapter 1 – being of fine physical appearance, the ability to show martial prowess, being able to exact due vengeance, and being able to take the penetrative role in sexual relations – are fulfilled more easily by a youthful, or at least not overly aged, body.

There are many examples in the sagas of male characters being unable to fully adhere to the directives of the masculine ideal as a result of their advancing years. Bersi in *Kormáks saga* is one such character who complains of the ravages of age. After he has been slighted – his lands have been used by Váli for grazing without his permission – Bersi speaks the following verse to his foster-son Halldórr, lamenting that he believes himself – at this point – to be unable to take vengeance:

> Liggjum báðir
> í bekk saman,
> Halldórr ok ek,
> hvergi fœrir;
> veldr œska þér,
> en elli mér,

tenable. For example, Hávarðr of *Hávarðar saga* seems to perform old age intermittently depending upon how his legal cases progress. See in particular *Hávarðar saga,* chapter 13. Many other old men seem to 'perform' old age, particularly in the case of the dramatic emotional response of taking to bed in grief.

[209] Slevin and Linneman, 'Old Gay Men's Bodies', 486.

> þess batnar þér,
> en þeygi mér.[210]
>
> We both lie
> together on the bench,
> Halldórr and I,
> utterly incapable;
> youth is the cause for you,
> and old age for me;
> it gets better for you,
> and yet not for me.

Age, then, is here figured as an inescapable impediment to masculinity. It is age which has robbed him of the ability – or given the later events of this chapter, in this case the perceived ability – to act in a way which is compatible with the demands of masculinity. It is interesting to note – and this point is more coherently suggested in *Laxdœla saga* – that Halldórr's youth is likewise seen as an affliction. His youth, like Bersi's age, is an impediment to fully and unproblematically embodying hegemonic masculinity. The fact that Halldórr's situation is said to be improving, however, reinforces the notion that there is a window of age – of youthful adulthood – during which masculinity may be inhabited most unproblematically.

Njáll, of *Njáls saga*, given the opportunity to leave the house in which his sons are to be burned alive, states that '[e]igi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skǫmm' (I will not go out, because I am an old man, and little able to avenge my sons, and I will not live in shame).[211] Njáll explicitly blames his inability to avenge his sons on his old age, suggesting that to be unable to take due vengeance is indeed viewed as

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[210] *Kormáks saga*, 261.
Bersi also speaks this verse – in a slightly different form and in a more plausible context (Halldórr is still an infant) – in chapter 28 of *Laxdœla saga* (76).
[211] *Njáls saga*, 330.

unmanly. In this case he would rather die than live with the shame of being unable to live up to the ideals of masculinity. It is not, however, quite as simple as this. As Ursula Dronke notes:

> Njáll provokes the burning, forces his sons – against their better tactical judgement – to go into the house to be burnt like foxes in a hole, and dies himself with them, because he is too old to avenge them[.][212]

Njáll, then, not only allows himself to be annihilated once he is unable to conform to the masculine vengeance imperative but, interestingly, he continues to exert his paternal influence over his sons despite his impugned masculinity. Despite the fact that his sons – in their youth – are probably far more able to meet the more physical demands of hegemonic masculinity, the power he wields as their father overrides this. Masculinity, then, cannot be simply equated with power, and in this case, the most powerful person in the relation is not the most obvious bearer of hegemonic masculinity.

Perhaps the most striking image of ageing masculinity in the sagas comes in the form of Egill Skalla-Grímsson of *Egils saga*. In chapter 85 of *Egils saga* we learn that Egill has become old and infirm, with both his sight and hearing starting to fail. One day when walking outside his home he falls and is mocked by some women for his infirmity. Grímr notes that '[m]iðr hæddu konur at okkr, þá er vit várum yngri' (women mocked us less when we two were younger).[213] Here, as above, old age is accompanied by a loss of physical prowess that negatively affects Egill's ability to claim a position of hegemonic masculinity. But this representation of geriatric masculinity goes further in its depiction of the

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[212] Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga* (London, 1981), 14.
[213] *Egils saga,* 294.

ageing body's inability to live up to the ideal. After Grímr has noted that they used to be regarded as more manly than at present, and thus received more respect, Egill speaks the following verse:

> Vals hefk vǫfur helsis;
> váfallr em ek skalla;
> blautr erum bergis fótar
> borr, en hlust es þorrin.[214]

Many conservative – if inaccurate – translations produce an interpretation which merely seems to reinforce the loss of mobility that the saga prose details. However, if we are less prudish in our translation then we are led to a rather different interpretation. Carl Phelpstead has succinctly summarized the issues of translation posed by the phrase 'bergis fótar borr':

> 'Bergis fótar borr' [...] might be translated literally as 'borer/drill of the hill of the leg/foot.' The 'hill of the leg' may then be interpreted to mean 'head,' in which case its borer or drill is the tongue and Egill is confessing an inability to compose verse as fluently as in the past. Alternatively a more obscene meaning of 'hill of the leg' entails that its borer or drill is Egill's penis. Given the skaldic love of double entendre it is likely that both meanings are intended.[215]

This double meaning seems to me likely, and would lead to a translation of the verse along the lines of the following:

> I have a shaking horse of the collar;
> I am inclined to fall onto my bald head;
> my borer of the hill of the leg is soft,
> and my hearing is diminished.[216]

Carol Clover produces a similar interpretation of the stanza to Phelpstead. Clover suggests that we can say that this poem 'stems from a point very far down the

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[214] *Egils saga,* 294.
[215] Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 425.
For a similar argument, see: Kari Ellen Gade, 'Penile Puns: Personal Names and Phallic Symbols in Skaldic Poetry', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 6 (1989), 57-67 (60).
[216] Translation from Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 425.

gender scale', while Phelpstead, drawing on Clover, notes that it is indicative that 'in old age he is no longer the vigorous man he once was, and instead belongs with the *blauðr* women, in whose company he indeed spends a great deal of his time in the last part of the saga'.[217] While it is true that Egill is not able to occupy a position of idealized masculinity, what Clover's and Phelpstead's readings overlook is that although he is no longer able to exhibit hegemonic masculinity, he is nevertheless invested in masculinity and his own masculine identity. Just because Egill has started, in his old age, to spend more time in the company of women does not, as Clover would have it, mean that he is one. Indeed, both this stanza and the poem *Sonatorrek* both function as laments for Egill's waning masculinity, indicating that his masculinity is something that is important to him and with which he identifies. It is no longer his ability to sexually penetrate that is important – that he is impotent does not disbar him from seeing himself as male. It is his *interest* in masculinity that is important: he is still a man and the diminishment of his masculinity renders this fact painfully obvious. Ultimately, to suggest, as Clover does, that Egill has in some 'deep cultural sense' become a woman is a reductive and unhelpful misreading of the text.[218] Indeed, it is true he is less masculine – if figured in terms of his distance from the ideal of hegemonic masculinity – but as his verse shows, he is troubled by this fact and the inability of *his* masculinity to match the exalted form. Indeed, much as *Sonatorrek* can be seen as a kind of 'talking cure', so too this verse illustrates Egill's consideration of the fact that his body now acts as an obstacle to his attaining the status of hegemonic masculinity, rather than the means by which it may be attained. His

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[217] Clover, 'Regardless', 16; Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 427.
[218] Clover, 'Regardless', 17.

masculinity is no longer embodied unproblematically. Rather than now being seen as feminine or female, he should instead be seen as inhabiting a position that is more obviously subordinated – certainly to the masculine ideal, and perhaps even to some women. This does not however mean he is less masculine than them: indeed, as Carrigan, Connell, and Lee note, gender is just one element in a dynamics of power, and other considerations, such as age or class, may put a person in a superior social position, regardless of gender.[219]

Egill's continued interest in masculinity is shown through another episode in his old age. As discussed earlier in this chapter, we learn that Egill harbours the desire to attend the *Alþing* and cause chaos by throwing his stores of treasure from the law-rock, and then watching while the civilized façade of the assembled *goðar* falls as they scramble and fight for material gain. While commonly seen as a function of his Óðinic character, it can also be read as an attempt to (re)assert his masculinity. As David Clark notes, physical wealth can be a signifier of masculinity in that it must be won and protected by masculine endeavour.[220] Egill's desire, then, can be seen as a wish to display his wealth of masculinity and also to subordinate the masculinity of others who will scramble for a mere fraction of what Egill has. It is perhaps possible to see this as a case of Egill compensating for the loss of masculinity in one area by making up for it in another.

A discussion of old age masculinities in the sagas would be incomplete without reference to *Hrafnkels saga*.[221] Here, a servant woman of Hrafnkell's

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[219] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 590.
[220] Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 51.
[221] This is not to say that this discussion is complete – old age masculinities can be found throughout the sagas. The representations, with regard to masculinity, usually fall into two types.

urges him to action using the proverbial phrase 'svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk' (everyone becomes less manly as he gets older).[222] Of this, Clover suggests that '[w]hat the proverb "Svá eldisk [sic] 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'.[223] The proverb clearly implies a loss of masculinity with age. But it does not, as Clover suggests, support a one-sex system. Rather, the proverb accurately records the biological truth that '[i]n a number of respects male and female bodies also become more similar in old age'.[224] For example, ageing causes decreased testosterone levels in males, bringing a man's hormonal balance more into line with that of a woman.[225] In this regard all men do become associated with *ergi*-complex in old age because their ageing bodies no longer allow them to embody the idealized form of masculinity.

RACE

The idea of race – particularly in medieval contexts – is contentious. But, as Richard Cole has argued, (proto)racial thinking is clearly in evidence in Old Norse texts, with groups of people being delineated on the basis of perceived differences in bodily and cultural characteristics.[226] Cole further provides an

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In the first it is suggested that a character is unable to carry out some task – avenging sons, controlling his estate, taking part in games, going abroad, and so on – explicitly because of his old age. In the second, a character is said to be able to do these things *in spite of* his old age, implying that old age would usually be thought to inhibit masculine activity.

[222] *Hrafnkels saga*, 126.

[223] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', 17.

[224] Connell, *Gender*, 29.

[225] Wills, 'Physiology', 290.

[226] Richard Cole, 'Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the *Blámaðr*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* [forthcoming]. See also: Richard Cole, '*Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt:* Proto-Racial Thinking and its Application to Jews in Old Norse Literature', in Cordelia Heß and Jonathan Adams (eds.), *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region* (Berlin, 2015), 239-68; and Jenny Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity

excellent discussion of Old Norse terms which carry racial significance.[227] Here, however, I am not concerned with the terms used to describe racial alterity, but rather with the interaction of racial thinking with concepts of masculinity.

Discussing racial attitudes in Old Norse literature, both Cole and Jenny Jochens have noted that people with dark complexions are viewed negatively, being thought of as inferior to those with light complexions.[228] Similarly, writing on contemporary Western society, Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon have suggested that '[w]ithin the literature on men and masculinities black masculinity is usually defined as a "subordinate masculinity"'.[229] They have also suggested that today 'cultural stereotypes of black masculinity often exhibit a fixation with the black male body'.[230] The representation of the Old Norse figure of the *blámaðr* ('black man') is in accordance with all of these assertions: this racialized character type is viewed negatively, is subordinated to non-black masculinities, and is discussed in very physical terms.[231] The figure of the *blámaðr*, then, will form the basis of this discussion of the interaction of race and masculinity in saga literature.

In *Kjalnesinga saga* Búi is forced to wrestle with a *blámaðr* by King Haraldr *hárfagri*. He is warned in advance by Rauðr that the king will likely make him do this. Rauðr speaks to him thus:

> nú mun hann etja á þik því trölli, er ek veit mest í Nóregi, en þat er blámaðr, sá er mörgum manni hefir at

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Among Medieval Norwegians and Icelanders', in *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience / Sagaene og Noreg*: *10. Internasjonale Sagakonferens* (Trondheim, 1997), 313-22.

[227] Cole, 'Racial Thinking'.

[228] Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in Joyce E. Salisbury (ed.), *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1991), 3-29 (19).

[229] Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, 150.

[230] Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, 150.

[231] For a discussion of the *blámaðr*, see Cole, 'Racial Thinking'.

> bana orðit. Nú vil ek gefa þér fangastakk, þann er þú skalt þá hafa; væntir ek þá, at þú munir eigi allmjök kenna, hvar sem hann leggr at þér krummur sínar; því at hann brýtr bein í flestum, ef hann deyðir eigi.[232]
>
> now he will set against you the greatest troll, the one I know the most in Norway, and it is a *blámaðr*, one that has caused the deaths of many men. Now I will give you a wrestling jerkin which you shall wear; I expect then, that you will not feel too much where he lays his paws on you; this is because he normally breaks the bones, if he doesn't kill.[233]

Before Búi even comes face to face with the man, then, the *blámaðr* has already been described as a non-human being – a troll – with *krummur* (claws, paws) rather than hands. He is represented as more animal than human, and is further characterized in terms of the bestial threat he provides to men as a result of his extreme physical strength. The *blámaðr* is also clearly being kept by the king: if a man of such prowess, who was not black, were in the king's retinue he would without doubt be thought a champion rather than a troll. When the king announces that Búi is to wrestle the *blámaðr,* he says to him that 'verðum vér at sjá nökkut af þínu afli, ok skaltu fást við blámann várn' (we must see something of your strength, and you must wrestle against our *blámaðr*).[234] The king's words indicate not only the extreme strength that is attributed to the *blámaðr*, but also that the king – in calling him *blámann várn* – regards the man as property that is owned, rather than a person with agency. When the wrestling takes place we read that '[k]onungr lét þá leiða fram blámanninn, ok heldu á honum fjórir menn; hann grenjaði fast ok lét tröllsliga' (the king then had the *blámaðr* brought out,

[232] *Kjalnesinga saga*, 35.

[233] I have kept *blámaðr* in the original as I do not want to conflate this racialized idea with contemporary black male identity by translating *blámaðr* as 'black man'.

[234] *Kjalnesinga saga,* 35.

and four men were restraining him; he howled loudly and behaved trollishly.)[235] Again, the man's extreme strength is emphasized as is his non-human nature. Búi reinforces this bestial characterization when he first sees the man, saying '[e]kki sýnist mér þat maðr; trölli sýnist mér þat líkara' (that doesn't appear to be a man to me; to me it looks more like a troll).[236] The spectators of the wrestling match also participate in such a discourse; we are told that 'gekk Búi fram á völlinn, ok er fólkit sá hann, þá mæltu margir, at þat væri illa, er trölli skyldi etja upp á jafndrengiligan' (Búi went out onto the field, and when the people saw him, many said that it would be ill if a troll should be set against such a gallant man).[237] The *blámaðr*, then, is continually abjected from the human, and is set up against a normative – that is, white – masculinity. His wrestling abilities and physical prowess would be glorified and celebrated if he were not black. But his blackness bars him from being viewed as an exceptional man, and rather ensures that his is regarded as a subordinate – and perhaps even sub-human – masculinity. Moreover, the *blámaðr* is not given name or agency, and is introduced into the narrative simply so that he may be killed, thereby enabling Búi to prove to the king that he is a '[m]ikill maðr' (great man).[238]

Such a clearly racist view of *blámenn* is not, unfortunately, an isolated occurrence.[239] In *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* Hákon *jarl* Sigurðarson makes Gunnar agree to a wrestling match. He acquiesces on the condition that it is to be

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[235] *Kjalnesinga saga,* 36.
[236] *Kjalnesinga saga,* 36.
[237] *Kjalnesinga saga,* 36.
[238] *Kjalnesinga saga,* 37.
[239] Following Cole, I use the word 'racist' advisedly. Writing on depictions of Jews in *Teiknibók,* he suggests: 'I do not mean to put the Middle Ages on trial by using the word 'racist'; rather, I intend only to highlight the fact that the artist in question apparently rehearses the notion that Jews look a certain way, and he clearly does not intend his depictions as compliments' ('*Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt*', 252). Much the same can be said about representations of *blámenn*.

against a 'mennskr maðr' (human man).[240] We are then told that '[v]ar nú fram leiddr blámaðr einn. Sá hafði mörgum góðum dreng að bana orðið' (now a *blámaðr* was brought out. That one had caused the deaths of many good men).[241] Upon seeing the man, Gunnar complains that he did not agree to wrestle with a 'tröll' (troll).[242] Again, the *blámaðr* is extremely strong – stronger than Gunnar by far – but is nevertheless beaten, causing the *jarl* disgrace because 'hann missti blámann sinn' (he lost his *blámaðr*).[243] Again then, the *blámaðr* is dehumanized, denied agency and individualized identity.[244] His masculinity – in some ways hyperbolic considering his strength – is nevertheless subordinated in relation to the 'good men' (and almost certainly white men) whom he has been forced to kill for the *jarl*'s amusement. His race clearly acts as barrier to a dominant masculine position (and indeed, narrative representation beyond the basest caricature).

Although only one racial group has been briefly discussed here – and many more could have been discussed (for example, the *Skrælingar* of *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*) – it is clear from this analysis of the representation of the *blámaðr* that race impacts on the construction of masculinity. Indeed, having black skin means that a character is cast in a certain way, preventing them from embodying dominant forms of masculinity. Moreover, characteristics that would otherwise be seen as exceedingly masculine are – when coupled with racial otherness – transmuted into something that is considered monstrous and bestial.

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[240] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 366.
[241] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 366.
[242] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 367.
[243] *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 368.
[244] See also *Finnboga saga*, 283, for a further wrestling match between saga hero and enslaved *blámaðr.*

IMPAIRMENT / DISABILITY

Today, the category of masculinity certainly interacts with that of disability in the intersectional construction of the subject, with disabled men being marginalized from the category of masculinity since their bodies necessitate gender performances that are 'at odds with the expectations of dominant culture'.[245] But we cannot, of course, assume that the same is automatically true for characters in saga texts. Indeed, we must be aware of uncritically using the term 'disabled': we can distinguish between '"impairment" – that is, a set of physiological circumstances – and "disability", which only applies once an impairment is perceived or experienced as a hindrance'.[246] This is a distinction that will be kept in mind in the following discussion.

Men in the sagas often become impaired following some kind of physical altercation. An impairment, in this circumstance, can function as a sign that its bearer has failed to beat his opponent in physical combat. In *Víga-Glúms saga*, for example, we are told that the *berserkr* Ásgautr, after his foot has been sliced off in a duel with Eyjólfr, 'leysti sik af hólmi ok lifði við ørkuml' (bought himself off the island and lived on with his lasting disfigurement).[247] Characters can also receive lifelong nicknames based on their newly acquired impairments, thus becoming a constant reminder that they have been subordinated by another

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[245] Thomas J. Gershick and Adam S. Miller, 'Coming to Terms: Masculinity and Physical Disability', in Donald F. Sabo and David Frederick Gordon (eds.), *Men's Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995), 183-204 (183).
[246] Richard Godden and Jonathan Hsy, 'Analytical Survey: Encountering Disability in the Middle Ages', *New Medieval Literatures* 15 (2013), 319-339 (316).
See Christina Lee, 'Disability', in Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling, *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies* (Hoboken, 2012), 23-38 (especially 29-32), for a cogent discussion of the critical terms and theories used in discussing disability/impairment in medieval texts. As Lee suggests, '[t]he question is not whether there was impairment […] but whether impairment was at all disabling for the afflicted' (29).
[247] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 13.

man. For example, in *Bárðar saga* we read that Þorkell's leg is broken in a wrestling match with his brother, is bound, and heals well. But despite this healing we are nevertheless told that '[h]ann var síðan kallaðr Þorkell bundinfóti' (he was thereafter called Þorkell bound-foot).[248] His impairment moves from the physical to the linguistic, his name signifying that he is weaker than his brother. Similarly, in *Eyrbyggja saga* we learn that Þorólfr receives the nickname 'bægifótr' (lame-foot) after sustaining an injury to his leg that causes him to limp for the remainder of his life.[249]

Such impediments can have clear detrimental effects on a character's masculine standing, and can thus legitimately be considered disabilities. Bersi in *Kormáks saga* is one such character whose disability impacts negatively upon his masculine status. After receiving a wound to the buttocks he is divorced by Steingerðr, who declares that he should henceforth be known as 'Raza-Bersi' (Arse-Bersi).[250] By naming him in this way, she highlights that it is his disability which is the reason for the dissolution of their marriage, but also that the wound – despite healing quickly enough to allow Bersi to duel in the next chapter – produces a diminishment of status that will be permanent. Bersi's maiming, although not defined exactly as such in the text, can clearly be seen as a *klámhögg* (shame-blow). The recipient of a *klámhögg*, according to Meulengracht Sørensen, receives a blow which is 'a symbolic action with a sexual component, corresponding to that of *níð*'; as the result of such a blow, he suggests, 'the mutilated man was deprived of his manhood'.[251] To put it more bluntly, the blow

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[248] *Bárðar saga,* 118.
[249] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 14.
[250] *Kormáks saga*, 254.
[251] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 68.

to the buttocks that Bersi receives functions metonymically to evoke anal penetration. But the deprivation of his manhood is not purely symbolic. Bersi's injury is an enduring, physical reification of his unmanliness, and marks him as forever unable to claim the hegemonic position. It is obviously telling that '[v]ið þessa atburði lagði Steingerðr leiðendi á við Bersa ok vill skilja við hann' (because of these events Steingerðr took a dislike to Bersi and wished to separate from him), and, further, that she 'eigi vilja eiga Bersa ørkumlaðan' (did not wish to be married to a maimed Bersi).[252] She clearly sees the physical disability as a permanent impediment to his ability to inhabit a dominant masculine position. Her brother Þorkell's support of her decision to divorce Bersi illustrates that her motivations are to be regarded as socially intelligible and valid.

Such a wound does not necessarily deprive a character of the audience's respect, however. Bjǫrn in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, at the hands of Þórðr, receives a similar blow to that which Bersi receives. In this case it is our sympathy, rather than our disdain, which this attracts, being a function of the saga's general bias in favour of Bjǫrn. This is reinforced by the fact that earlier in the same battle, after Bjǫrn has been maimed by Kálfr, he continues to fight his numerous attackers valiantly, despite only having a pair of shears and being unable to stand. While his masculinity *is* clearly impugned by his injuries, he still nevertheless adopts other masculine characteristics: he acts boldly, heroically, and honourably. Interestingly, while Bjǫrn is clearly unable to inhabit a position of hegemonic masculinity at this point, his inability to do so in fact casts his other

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[252] *Kormáks saga*, 254.

masculine qualities into sharper relief. He may be physically incapacitated, but his subsequent actions show his continued concern with masculine behaviour and values.

In the opening to *Grettis saga*, Ǫnundr Ófeigsson loses the lower part of one of his legs in a battle, and from then on uses a wooden prosthesis to enable him to walk. He is thenceforth known as Ǫnundr *tréfótr* (tree-foot).[253] Ǫnundr is worried about the impact that this injury will have on his masculine standing, and expresses his anxiety in verse:

> Glatt esat mér, síz mœttum,
> mart hremmir til snimma,
> oss stóð geigr af gýgi
> galdrs, eldþrimu, skjaldar;
> hykk, at þegnum þykki,
> þat 's mest, koma flestum,
> oss til ynðis missu
> einhlítt, til mín lítit.[254]
>
> I have not been glad, since
> swords clashed in battle;
> much to bear so soon,
> the axe cursed me with a blow.
> I think that many men will think
> me to be of little importance;
> that is the reason
> for my lost happiness.

Despite Þrándr's subsequent suggestion that Ǫnundr will nevertheless be considered 'rǫskvan mann' (a vigorous man), Ǫnundr continues to suggest that 'kvánfǫngin horft hafa vænna, þau er slœgr sé til' (the better marriage-matches were now lost to him, those which are desirable).[255] Like Bersi in *Kormáks saga*,

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[253] *Grettis saga*, 6.
[254] *Grettis saga*, 9.
[255] *Grettis saga*, 9-10.

then, Ǫnundr's disability impacts upon his masculine status – and, indeed, his state of mind – as it threatens his marriage prospects.

In *Njáls saga*, the son of Hǫskuldr Njálsson, Ámundi, is born blind and is known as Ámundi *inn blindi* (the blind). Immediately after he has been introduced the saga is quick to tell us – seemingly as if it is felt necessary to quickly stress Ámundi's masculine credentials – that he was 'þó mikill vexti ok ǫflugr' (nevertheless very big and powerful).[256] His blindness can however be seen as negatively impacting upon his masculinity as it prevents him from taking revenge for his father. Just before he miraculously gains the ability to see – for just long enough to carry out vengeance – he suggests that 'ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvárt fyrir fǫður minn fébœtr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!' (if I were sound in both eyes, I should either have compensation for my father or blood revenge, and so let God settle it between us).[257] The implication, of course, is that his blindness prevents him from taking part in the masculine system of revenge. Ultimately – until he is miraculously healed – his impairment prevents him from acting in the manner expected of a man.

Physical impairments, then, are frequently viewed as disabling in the sagas inasmuch as they prevent characters from acting in the ways important to, and expected of, a man in saga literature. They can prevent a male character from possibly embodying the culturally exalted form of masculinity by acting as irremovable barriers to ideal masculine performance. A body that is viewed as

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[256] *Njáls saga*, 248.
[257] *Njáls saga*, 273.

less than perfect renders a subject's masculinity inevitably – and usually permanently – subordinate.

SEXUALITY

By using the term 'sexuality', I do not here mean to suggest that my intention is to discuss sexual identities. To speak of either homosexuality or heterosexuality in medieval contexts is of course fraught with difficulty.[258] The purpose of this section, then, is not to follow the work of scholars such as John Boswell in an attempt to uncover and reclaim sexual identities of the past, but rather to theorize sexual *desire* in a way that is historically sensitive to contemporary notions of what it meant to display normative and deviant modes of sexuality.[259] In this context, then, I use 'sexuality' to refer to the issues attendant to sexual desire and sexual acts.

As Guy Hocquenghem has argued, same-sex sexual desire is not to be seen as the product of bodies which are physically different, but it is nevertheless a

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[258] Foucault famously raised the important question of to what extent there existed a homosexual identity at any point prior to the nineteenth century in Volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality*. This does not prevent the discussion of same-sex desire, however. Providing a more nuanced view than the caricature of constructivism which is often taken to be his position, he notes in the introduction to Volume 2 that: 'the term [homosexuality] did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century, a fact that should neither be underestimated nor overinterpreted. It does point to something other than a simple recasting of vocabulary, but obviously it does not mark the sudden emergence of that to which "sexuality" refers.' (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1992), 3.) This is a point noted by David Clark in his *Between Medieval Men,* 10. Just as it is problematic to talk of homosexuality in medieval texts, it is equally problematic to discuss heterosexuality as an identity category. See James A. Schultz, 'Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15.1 (2006), 14-29.

[259] For the most influential formulation of Boswell's ideas, see: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth* Century (Chicago and London, 1980). For a more moderate, revised, version of his thinking, see: John Boswell, 'Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories', in Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (eds.), *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (London, 1991), 17-36.

bodily fact: the embodied subject cannot ignore such a desire.[260] We must, however, be careful not to ascribe recognition of this desire – and subsequent construction of a sexual identity – too readily to historical and fictional characters. While Carrigan, Connell, and Lee suggest that 'mainstream masculinity is heterosexual masculinity' (or perhaps, in terms more suited to medieval studies, 'sexually-normative masculinity'), it is essential that when looking at textual occurrences which could be seen to be the result of same-sex desire, we do not automatically assume that they would therefore be regarded as deviant.[261]

As has been noted, there is of course ample evidence that the receptive partner in same-sex anal sex was stigmatized, but also that the penetrative partner received no gendered opprobrium as his role as penetrator was seen as unquestionably masculine.[262] Penetrating another (whether male or female) served only to reinforce masculine identity, while the figure of the penetrated partner becomes the cultural repository for all that is abjected from the dominant model of masculinity. Unlike today, where both partners in homosexual sexual acts, whether anal or otherwise, may be culturally vilified for their apparently deviant actions, in medieval Icelandic texts this only applied to

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[260] Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Danielle Dangoor (London, 1978), *passim*.

[261] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 584.

[262] *Bjarnar saga* may at first seem to provide evidence to the contrary. In chapter 17, a carving depicting two men engaged in anal sex, one standing behind the other, is found by Þórðr's harbour. It is suggested that 'mæltu menn, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð' (people said that the part of neither was good, of those who stood there, and still it was worse for that one who stood in front) (*Bjarnar saga*, 155). This could be read as suggesting that some gendered opprobrium does in fact accrue to the penetrative partner for his participation in anal sex with another man. However, I am inclined to agree with Meulengracht Sørensen who suggests that the penetrative partner in this encounter is thought to occupy an unfavourable position not because it is unmanly, but because it is thought to be 'uncivilised, savage' to treat another man in this way (*The Unmanly Man*, 57).

the receptive partner. But what of the effect on a character's perceived masculinity when anal sex has not taken place, but other sexual activity may have? Today, this would probably make little difference and those involved may still be stigmatized, but this does not necessarily appear to be the case in Old Norse literature.

In *Kormáks saga*, we find the following verse, spoken after Kormákr realizes his cloak pin has been stolen in jest:

> Drengr ungr stal mik dálki,
> þás drakk á mey rakka;
> vit skulum dalkinn deila
> sem drengir tveir ungir;
> vel hefr Vigr of skepta,
> verðk í grjót at skjóta,
> víst's at ek mannsins missta,
> mosinn vas upp at losna.[263]
>
> A young man stole a cloak-pin from me
> as I drank to an upstanding [lit. erect] maiden;
> we two should share the pin
> like two young lads;
> my well-shafted spear is raised,
> I have to shoot it at stones,
> it is certain that I missed the man,
> the moss was loosened up.

While the verse can, of course, be taken at face value, and be seen as simply recounting the events that have just taken place, another interpretation is possible given the prevalence of phallic puns in skaldic verse.[264] If we take Kormákr's suggestion that 'vel hefr Vigr of skepta' ([his] well-shafted spear is raised) to be a reference to his erect penis, then we can subsequently interpret

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[263] *Kormáks saga*, 295.
The analysis of *Kormáks saga* here draws on – and is inspired by – David Ashurst's paper ('Verse as Sex Act: Chiefly in *Kormáks* saga) presented at the 2010 Viking Society Student Conference held at University College London.
[264] Puns for phallic symbols and sexual acts abound in skaldic verse. See, for example: Gade, 'Penile Puns'.

his disappointment at having 'í grjót at skjóta' (to shoot it at stones) as frustration at his having to masturbate, and subsequently ejaculate, over the moss on the ground, rather than partaking in sexual conduct with the thief. The nature of the conduct which Kormákr desired with him is also punningly suggested: his request – 'vit skulum dalkinn deila / sem drengir tveir ungir' (we two should share the pin like two young lads) – can, taking the *dalkr* as a phallic symbol, be construed as a desire for mutual masturbation. Kormákr's same-sex desire at this moment is reinforced by the fact that he notes that he was aiming for the man – 'ek mannsins missta' (I missed the man) – suggesting, in this reading at least, that he had hoped to achieve orgasm with the man rather than on his own.

This – admittedly conjectural – reading of a verse from *Kormáks saga* may seem overly fanciful, but it is possible to locate a further example of a skaldic stanza that may be read as referencing such sexual acts and which thus adds credence to my interpretation. In *Bjarnar saga*, Bjǫrn Arngeirsson, upon hearing of the marriage of Oddný *eykyndill* to Þórðr Kolbeinsson, produces the following verse:

> Hristi handar fasta
> hefr drengr gamans fengit;
> hrynja hart á dýnu
> hlǫð Eykindils vǫðva,
> meðan vel stinna vinnum,
> veldr nǫkkvat því, klǫkkva,
> skíð verðk skriðar beiða
> skorðu, ǫr á borði.[265]

The first *helmingr* is clearly obscene and can be rendered thus:

> The man has got pleasure from

[265] *Bjarnar saga*, 123.

> the Hrist of the hand-fire;
> the muscle-mounds
> of Eykyndill crash hard onto the bed.

Kari Ellen Gade has suggested that the second *helmingr* can likewise be read as having an erotic interpretation, taking the oar as phallic pun.[266] She translates the second *helmingr* thus:

> […] while I make the stiff oar grow soft on the railing –
> something causes that -; I desire the gliding forwards of
> the stick of the prop.[267]

Gade suggests that 'skíð skorðu' is a double entendre, meaning both 'stick of the prop' (i.e. 'ship') and 'stick of the woman' (i.e. 'penis'). The latter reading is plausible since, as Gade notes, *skorða* can function as a woman *heiti*.[268] If we follow this reading, and take the stiff oar to be a phallic pun, then the (erotic) implication of the verse is that Bjǫrn masturbates while desiring sexual intercourse with Oddný: by masturbating, and subsequently reaching climax, he causes his erect penis to become flaccid. Such an implication is bolstered by the – almost coy and euphemistic – suggestion that 'veldr nǫkkvat því' (something causes that). But Gade's translation is not wholly accurate, and she has failed to render the first person plural indicative form of the verb *vinna* – *vinnum* – as such in her English translation. If we translate the *helmingr* with this is mind, then we may render it as follows:

> while *we* work to make the stiff oar
> soften on the gunwale
> – something causes that –
> I desire the gliding forwards of the stick of the prop.

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[266] Gade, 'Penile Puns', 61-2.
[267] Gade, 'Penile Puns', 61.
[268] Gade, 'Penile Puns', 62.

The difference is small, but highly significant. Rather than one person – the poet – working on his own to 'soften the stiff oar', now multiple people take part in this task. If we continue to read the situation as erotically charged and the oar as a phallic pun – and indeed, we have no reason to stop doing so – then the situation being described is no longer a man masturbating on his own, but rather the stanza seems to describe an instance of communal masturbation.[269]

If we accept these readings then what is of particular interest here is not necessarily the presence of same-sex sexual activity but rather that neither Kormákr nor Bjǫrn seems to have any qualms about making allusion to it. Both verses are spoken openly and without shame, and, unlike verses involving an accusation or implication of same-sex anal sex, there are no negative repercussions from these strophes, nor are the events and desires implied by them mentioned again in the remainder of their respective sagas. Indeed, the lack of concern for the desires alluded to means that the reader must question whether they were seen as deviant in the slightest. In fact, looking at the model of hegemonic masculinity produced earlier in this thesis, it appears that sexual activity between men – assuming no-one took the receptive role in same-sex anal sex – would quite possibly not have been seen as odd or something of which to be ashamed. The allusions of the two men discussed here support such a view, as does the fact that their masculinities are not subsequently impugned in any way

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[269] It should, of course, be noted that the first person plural is often used in skaldic verse to refer solely to the individual poet speaking a given stanza. However, this does not prevent us from sometimes reading the first person plural as also referring to multiple persons. That it could, in this instance, be understood as either 'I' or 'we' is in fact in keeping with the punning nature of the stanza. Moreover, given the context of this verse, spoken as Bjǫrn's ship lies off Hamarseyrr, it makes sense to render *vinnum* as 'we work', which – in the literal, non-punning translation – would refer to Bjǫrn and those others with whom he rows. There is no reason to subsequently stop understanding *vinnum* as a literal first person plural when we consider the alternative, erotic meaning of the stanza.

as a result of their verses. Alternatively, if we take the view that both of these stanzas are considerably older than the prose that surrounds them, then we may wonder whether a more reticent (and Christian) saga author either did not understand the double meanings or hoped that at least his audience would not understand them (especially if he did not draw attention to them). In the case of *Bjarnar saga*, at least, this latter possibility seems likely since immediately after Bjǫrn has spoken his verse we are told that 'Bjǫrn var enn með ina sǫmu virðing ok fyrr með jarlinum' (Bjǫrn was still given the same honour as before by the *jarl*).[270] We may read such a comment as revealing a certain textual anxiety about the verse, but also as attempting to skip over it while drawing as little attention to its sexual content as possible.

While it may seem counterintuitive to modern sensibilities trained to think in terms of identity categories – heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and so on – to separate out the different possible sexual acts that can take place between men, this is exactly what we must do, since it is what the evidence of the texts clearly suggests. While anal sex is stigmatized, other sexual activity does not appear to be. Although a man who has been penetrated may be seen as *argr*, one who is involved in mutual masturbation is not. Indeed, as Karras notes, although '[sexual] acts may be the same [...] each society will determine what the meaning of those acts is and whether they create identities'.[271] If we accept the above interpretations then no particular meaning seems to accrue to non-penetrative same-sex sexual acts in Old Norse literature, and nor is a corresponding identity formed as a result. Such a hypothesis clearly resonates

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[270] *Bjarnar saga*, 124.

[271] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York and Oxford, 2005), 7.

with, for example, Alan Bray's suggestion that same-sex relations were often overlooked in Renaissance England since they were never recognized as 'homosexual' – no identity category was associated with them, and they were therefore invisible.[272] It appears legitimate to view non-penetrative same-sex sexual activity in medieval Icelandic texts in a similar way.

It comes as no surprise that a man's masculinity in the sagas is impacted upon by the kind of sexual activity in which he partakes. But what is worthy of note are the differences from the ways in which issues of sexuality affect masculine identity today. Although to be *argr* is to be the antithesis of masculine identity – much like an effeminate gay identity may be considered today – same-sex sexual activity in itself might not necessarily impact upon masculine standing.

RELIGION

The coming of Christianity to Iceland is of course central to saga literature. Not only did it provide the tools with which saga literature could be recorded or composed, but the period in which the *Íslendingasögur* are set means that sagas closely anticipate, straddle, or closely follow the seemingly peaceful conversion of Iceland in the year 999/1000. But conversion and Christianization are, of course, two very different things.[273] While the former refers to the official switch from Norse paganism to Christianity, the latter refers to the much slower, more

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[272] Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York, 1995).
Bray's work is discussed by Allen J. Frantzen in *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago, 1998), 15.
[273] Duke [Grønlie], Siân Elizabeth, 'Recreating History: Literary Descriptions of Iceland's Conversion to Christianity, 1100-1300' (DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2000), 9.

complicated process of the changing and modulation of belief systems. The two very different belief systems in question came, of course, with very different models of acceptable masculinity. While the sagas are often silent on the effects that these religious changes had on individual characters' perceptions of their manliness, there is clear evidence to suggest that Christianity impacted upon the masculine ideal. Indeed, Vésteinn Ólason has astutely noted that:

> In some respects, the ideology of the Viking Age worked well as an exemplary paradigm of manly conduct. The sagas, on the other hand, were composed long after the Viking Age by Christian authors. Two different cultural worlds played over the minds of Icelanders after Iceland was Christianized. Saga writers were Christians, and an awareness of the special nature of Icelandic society must always have existed among those who had heard reports of, or even come into contact with, monarchical rule overseas. Yet old ideas about the ties of family, the importance of honor, and the obligations of revenge continued to bind their society together.[274]

That these two very different models of masculinity were in operation alongside one another during the period in which the sagas were set, mean that the sagas – unsurprisingly – do not paint a clear or perfectly coherent picture of how masculinities are inflected by religious belief. Indeed, the sagas give examples of instances where masculinity is seen to be weakened by the incoming religion, but also provide examples of a muscular Christianity, which bolsters a man's masculine standing. Examples of both of these interactions will now be discussed.

Christianity, in some sagas, is seen to enhance a man's physical prowess, allowing him to physically subdue his heathen enemies. Thus, in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, we are told that 'Almáttigr er sá, sem svá snart hjarta ok óhrætt gaf í brjóst

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[274] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', 111.

Þorgeiri; ok eigi var hans hugprýði af mǫnnum gǫr né honum í brjóst borin, heldr af inum hæsta hǫfuðsmið' (the Almighty is that one, who so touched the heart and placed fearlessness into the breast of Þorgeirr; and his courage was not of man's making nor was it innately in his breast, rather it came from the highest creator).[275] His extreme masculinity is thus seen as having divine origin. In *Hallfreðar saga*, Hallfreðr defeats Ǫnundr in a fight by invoking Christ: 'Dugi þú mér, Hvíta-Kristr, ef þú ert svá máttugr sem Óláfr konungr segir; lát eigi þenna mann stíga yfir mik' (Help me, White Christ, if you are as mighty as King Óláfr says; do not allow this man to overcome me).[276] After saying this, he is immediately bolstered with enough strength to overcome his enemy. Men of the cloth can also exhibit a form of muscular Christianity. In *Njáls saga*, Þangbrandr is able to beat and kill the outspoken heathen Þorkell in a duel, despite the fact that he 'bar [...] róðukross fyrir skjǫldinn' (carried a crucifix instead of a shield).[277] A few pages later the same Þangbrandr demonstrates the superiority of Christianity over Norse paganism by defeating a *berserkr* (a figure embodying a hypermasculine threat).[278] In chapter 103, we are introduced to the *berserkr* Ótryggr, who is apparently afraid of neither weapons nor fire, and of whom the assembled heathens are afraid. In order to convince them to convert, Þangbrandr suggests that they pit their faiths against one another in a test to see which can overcome the *berserkr*. They build three fires: one is to be blessed by Þangbrandr, one by the heathens, and one is to remain unblessed. When the *berserkr* arrives, he walks through the heathens' fire with ease but is afraid to

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[275] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 208.
[276] *Hallfreðar saga*, 170.
[277] *Njáls saga*, 258.
[278] Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', 521.
Berserkir are further discussed in chapter 4 – see page 250, n. 137.

pass through Þangbrandr's fire. As if this were not enough to assert the dominance of Þangbrandr's form of muscular Christianity, he then strikes the *berserkr* with a cross, causing him to drop his sword in what is, according to the saga, a miracle. (Perhaps we might read the dropping of the sword as a rather unsubtle metaphor for the *berserkr*'s unmanning at the hands of a dominantly masculine Christianity.) The supremacy of religious masculinity over the hyperbolic masculinity of the heathen *berserkr* is reinforced yet further with a transparent metaphor for phallic aggression: Þangbrandr kills his opponent by driving a sword into his chest.[279] *Bárðar saga*, too, provides us with an example of a clergyman physically defeating a heathen enemy. Here, the priest Jósteinn is able to overcome the heathen Rauðgrani (Óðinn in disguise) by hitting him in the head with his crucifix.[280]

But while in some instances Christianity may bolster masculine status, in others it detracts from it. Thus Guðlaugr Snorrason, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, is mocked by his brothers for having a peaceful and mild religious temperament.[281] And in *Njáls saga* Steinunn Refsdóttir mocks Þangbrandr, whose ship has been wrecked, since, she claims, it demonstrates the strength of Þórr over a cowardly and impotent Christ.[282] In both of these cases Christianity is figured as physical weakness in relation to the strength of Norse paganism. But that Christianity may be seen as weakening masculinity is perhaps most clearly shown in *Flóamanna saga*. Here, Þorgils is subject to a miracle when he is able to breastfeed his son himself after the child's mother has been killed. We read that

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[279] *Njáls saga*, 268.
For a similar scene of a priest overcoming *berserkir*, see *Vatnsdœla saga*, 124-5.
[280] *Bárðar saga*, 163.
[281] *Heiðarvíga saga*, 246.
[282] *Njáls saga*, 265.

he cuts his nipples, and then '[f]ór fyrst út blóð, síðan blanda, ok lét eigi fyrr af en ór fór mjólk, ok þar fæddist sveinninn upp við þat' (first blood came out, then a mixed fluid, but he did not stop until milk came out, and he reared the boy with it).[283] But this 'striking image of gender reversal' is, as Siân Grønlie suggests, problematic for a man, and for a man in saga narrative in particular.[284] As Grønlie notes, this is clearly demonstrated by the longer version of *Flóamanna saga* where this scene 'is preceded by the anxious comment that Þorgils *minntist þá drengliga á karlmennsku* "bravely called to mind his manhood"'.[285] That this miracle causes his masculine status to be thrown into doubt is shown clearly when later, at the dwelling of Eiríkr *rauði*, Eiríkr's servant states that he cannot tell whether Þorgils is a man or a woman.[286] The saga's anxiety over the breastfeeding scene is further illustrated by the reaction of Þorgils' son who, when he is given female breast milk, suggests that 'mjólk föður síns ekki svá lita' (his father's milk looked different).[287] This assertion can be read as an attempt by the saga narrative – much like the anxious stressing of his manhood above – to clearly distance Þorgils from femininity and femaleness. He may have the miraculous ability to breastfeed, but we are encouraged to see this as separate from women's breastfeeding. This scene – and such anxiety – demonstrates that the saga author clearly anticipated that this religious miracle would be troublesome for the perception of Þorgils as a man.[288]

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[283] *Flóamanna saga*, 289.
[284] Siân Grønlie, 'Saint's Life and Saga Narrative', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 36 (2012), 5-26 (21).
[285] Grønlie, 'Saint's Life', 22; *Flóamanna saga*, 288.
[286] *Flóamanna saga*, 305; Grønlie, 'Saint's Life', 22.
[287] *Flóamanna saga*, 299.
[288] That the milk of his father is said to be different to that of women adds further weight to the idea that a 'one-sex' model of sexual difference is not appropriate to saga literature: in a one-sex

Religion, then, as an identity category, does not impact on masculinity in a singular or uniform way. While in some cases it may bolster or reinforce a character's masculinity, allowing him to triumph over heathen enemies, in others it throws his manliness into question.

INTERSECTIONAL MASCULINITIES: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Masculinity cannot be viewed in abstraction from the various other categories that have bearing upon a character's identity; rather, subjects must be seen as being constituted at the intersection of a range of identity categories including – but of course not limited to – age, race, physical (dis)ability, sexuality, and religion. In analysing such intersectionally constituted subjects, it becomes apparent that masculinities are in fact problematized and undermined as a direct result of the intersection of identity traits.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has provided an overview of interactions between men and investigated the formation of individual masculine identities. In doing so, it has illustrated some of the methods by which masculinity, individual masculine identities, and male-male relations are constructed and maintained. It has further provided evidence for the thesis that masculinity in the sagas is a fragile thing, which is constantly open – and subject – to subversion. Indeed, since all subjects are formed at the intersection of various identity categories – and, as has been seen, the interaction of identity categories undermines masculine

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system we would expect the milk produced by men and women to be the same, but the saga makes it clear that this is not the case.

status – it follows that virtually all masculine subjects will occupy a precarious position with regard to gender. Masculinity may well be seen as an ideal in saga literature, but it is clearly one that is not easily achieved or sustained.

Chapter 3:
Somatic Subversion: Masculinity and the Emotional Body in *Njála*

Njáls saga is commonly held to be the greatest of the *Íslendingasögur*, and is also the longest of all the works classified into this grouping. If we are to take the number of extant medieval manuscripts as an index then it was certainly the most popular in its own day.[1] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that of all the *Íslendingasögur*, it is *Njáls saga* which has attracted the most interest from scholars focusing on issues of gender and sexuality. But the fact that it has been the focus of the most approaches of this kind cannot simply be ascribed to the general popularity or quality of this saga; rather, *Njála* must be regarded as particularly amenable to readings of this nature.

Gendered Approaches to *Njála*

In her 1980 Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture, Ursula Dronke convincingly argued that *Njáls saga* is structured by an author, and that this author had consistently and purposefully focused on sexual themes in the writing of their saga.[2] Indeed, in arguing for the role of the author in the shaping of *Njála*, Dronke suggested that certain references 'seem so insistent that one thinks they must represent a mode of thought and construction consciously chosen by the author of *Njáls Saga*. One such sequence is the continuum of reference to sexual matters: experiences, emotions and attitudes.'[3] Not only is it a major theme, but also is, as

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[1] Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 3-4.
[2] Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes*.
[3] Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes*, 5.

Vésteinn Ólason notes, 'here more openly dealt with than in most or all sagas'.[4] Three years prior to Dronke's lecture, Helga Kress had argued that *Njáls saga* was a misogynistic work,[5] although by the time a revised Norwegian version of her article had been published she had adjusted her position somewhat. Rather than being solely oppressive to women, Kress now saw the saga as demonstrating that expectations of normative gender performance were oppressive to all characters, reading the saga 'som en historie som *rolletvang*' (as a story about role coercion).[6] Moreover Helga Kress, like Dronke, also saw themes of gender and sexuality as central to the construction of the saga narrative: 'Motsetningen *mannlig-kvinnelig* er […] grunnleggende for den sagaen […] er det den som driver fram selve handlingen' (The dichotomy *male-female* is […] fundamental to the saga […] it is that which drives forward the action).[7] The stability of the poles of this *motsetning* has been questioned, however. Heather O'Donoghue, for example, has argued that 'the depiction of the women in *Njáls saga* challenges our preconceived notions of gender distinction'.[8] Likewise, Carolyn Anderson – adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach – has argued that 'gender is blurred' in the saga because characters' gender identities are 'always in process'.[9] This, she argues, is 'a consequence of the unfinished nature

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[4] Vésteinn Ólason, '*Njáls saga*', in Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 1993), 432-4 (433).

[5] Helga Kress, '"Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap": Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í *Njálu*', in Einar G. Petúrsson and Jónas Kristjásnsson (eds.), *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20 júli 1977*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík, 1977), I. 293-313.

[6] Helga Kress, 'Manndom og Misogyni: Noen Refleksjoner omkring Kvinnesynet i *Njåls saga*', *Gardar* 10 (1979), 35-51 (50).

[7] Kress, 'Manndom og Misogyni', 35.

[8] Heather O'Donoghue, 'Women in *Njáls saga*', in John Hines and Desmond Slay (eds.), *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga* (London, 1992), 83-92 (83).

[9] Carolyn Anderson, 'No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in *Njáls saga*', *Philological Quarterly* 81.4 (2002), 421-440 (435).

of the entry into the Symbolic by both men and women'.[10] Whether one takes O'Donoghue's or Anderson's critical approach to the text, the conclusion to be drawn here is the same: characters (unsurprisingly) do not perfectly embody prevailing gender norms. This should not, however, be taken as an indication that these norms of gender do not themselves exist, but simply that they become problematic when characters are forced to attempt performances thereof.

In his 1943 monograph on *Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson suggests that 'Njálssaga er karlmanna rit' (*Njáls saga* is a story for men). He qualifies this by adding that '[e]kki svo að skilja, að höfundur hugsi sér engar konur meðal áheyrenda, fjarri því. En hún er skrifuð með sjónarmiði karla, í henni birtist skilningsleysi karls á konu – og líka skilningur' (this is not to suggest that the author did not expect to have women among his audience, but he wrote from a man's point of view, with a man's understanding – and lack of understanding – of women).[11] Einar thus clearly views the saga as having a special relationship with maleness. I am wary of wholly subscribing to Einar's view as it fails to give due credit to the central functions of female characters in the narrative,[12] and likewise does not recognize the instability or provisionality of gender performances (as noted by O'Donoghue and Anderson). However, it is in the Norwegian translation of Einar's suggestion that an alternative view is introduced with which my view is – unsurprisingly – in accordance. Here, Einar's

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[10] Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', 422.
[11] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð: Bók um Mikið Listaverk* (Reykjavík, 1943), 86. The English translation here is by Paul Schach, as given in *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1971), 108.
Kress has similarly argued that *Njáls saga* presents a picture of a society that is 'patriarkat' (patriarchal) ('Manndom og Misogyni', 35).
[12] See for example, Robert Cook (ed. and trans.), *Njal's Saga* (London, 2001), xxi, where he argues that '[i]t would be naïve to call *Njál's saga* a man's saga.' Although Cook does not explicitly state that he is responding to Einar's assertion it seems likely that this is the case. Cook here bases his argument on the prominent position of female characters in the saga.

original Icelandic is rendered 'Njåls saga er et maskulint verk', which is best translated as '*Njáls saga* is a masculine work.'[13] This version encapsulates not only Einar's argument about the gendered standpoint from which the work is written, but also – perhaps unintentionally – signals the importance of notions of masculinity to understanding this text. It is not just a Norwegian (mis?)translation of an Icelandic original, itself published more than seven decades ago, that signals the importance of masculinity in *Njála*, however. In addition to Helga Kress' suggestion that the so-called '*rolletvang*' evident in the saga is oppressive to men as well as women,[14] Judith Jesch has drawn attention to the recurrent emphasis on '*goðir menn*' (good men) in the saga, suggesting that it is important to interrogate what it means to be a 'good man' in this text.[15] Helga Kress has also drawn attention to the masculine bias in the saga, noting that '[a]v verkets ca. 650 personer er 550 menn, 100 kvinner' (of the work's 650 characters, 550 are men, 100 women), leading her to conclude that '[i] forfatterens verdensbilde eksisterer det altså 1 kvinne mot 5 og en halv mann' (therefore, in the author's worldview there exists 1 woman for every 5 and a half men).[16] Several commentators have also noticed the anomalous position that the character of Njáll himself occupies in the saga: as a character whose masculinity is repeatedly called into question, Njáll's central role in the saga indicates that

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[13] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njåls saga: Kunstverket*, trans. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Bergen and Oslo, 1959), 75. The translation into English is my own.

[14] Perhaps the clearest articulation of this is found on page 50 of her 'Manndom og Misogyni', where she argues that 'Njåla problematiserer mannsrollen samtidig som den heroiserer den' (Njála problematizes the man's role at the same time as it heroizes it).

[15] Judith Jesch, '"Good Men" and Peace in *Njáls saga*', in John Hines and Desmond Slay (eds.), *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga* (London, 1992), 64-81.
Dronke also briefly alludes to the importance of masculinity in the saga (*The Role of Sexual Themes*, *passim.*, but see especially page 30, where the reference is most explicit).

[16] Kress, 'Manndom og Misogyni', 46.
However, Miller is certainly correct in arguing that 'mere numbers underestimate the importance of women to the action' (*Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 8).

the attitudes of the saga toward issues of gender, and more specifically masculinity, are far from what we would typically expect.[17] This is not to say that he does not adopt a patriarchal – and dominant – position in the saga (he does),[18] but simply that his gender performance is somewhat ambiguous. The question has also been raised as to whether the saga leaves open the possibility that the character of Njáll experiences same-sex desire, and similarly, whether there is a relationship between Njáll and Gunnarr which goes beyond the bounds of friendship, into the realm of the romantic, the sexual, or perhaps both.[19] To a contemporary reader such a possibility – if taken seriously – would raise further questions about Njáll's (and indeed, Gunnarr's) masculinity. And of course, if even Gunnarr's masculinity can be questioned, then all claims to masculinity in

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[17] For example: Dronke has noted that 'at the centre of the saga is the effeminate Njáll himself' (*The Role of Sexual Themes*, 11); Jane Lee Rulfs has noted that he is not the 'normal saga hero' ('Narrative Techniques in *Njáls saga*' (PhD thesis, Rice University, Texas, 1974), 27); Kress argues that Njáll 'er på en måte hverken mann eller kvinne' (is in a way neither man nor woman) ('Manndom og Misogyni', 50); for Cook, 'Njal is not the hero one expects from a work called "saga"' (*Njal's Saga*, xiv), and he further suggests that '[t]he presence of Njal at the centre of the saga is a sign that the emphasis is not on overt displays of masculine prowess' (*Njal's Saga*, xv); Miller suggests that Njáll is presented as 'a liminal and ambiguous sort' (*Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 62); and, likewise, Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that, contrary to our expectations of saga narrative, 'Njáll er ekki vígamaður, sést aldrei með vopn í hendi, nema þá svo sem fyrir siðasakir og þá með taparöxi litla' (*Á Njálsbúð*, 132) (Njáll is no warrior. He is never seen with a weapon in his hands except, so to speak, for the sake of convention, and even then he only carries a very small ax' (translation Schach, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, 159).

[18] See, for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 132-3, and Kress, 'Manndom og Misogyni', 36.

[19] Discussing the relationship between Njáll and Gunnarr, Ármann Jakobsson has not only noted that 'a close friendship between two men might have lead [sic] to rumours of an illicit homoerotic relationship' ('Masculinity and Politics', 205), but has also suggested that '[f]or years, ordinary readers of *Njáls saga* have wondered whether a homoerotic interpretation of the friendship is possible' ('Masculinity and Politics', 206). See also Eli Petzold's interview with Dr. Óttar Guðmundsson ('Iceland's First Gay Lovers?', *www.grapevine.is* (August 2012; last accessed 1 March 2014)). Here, Óttar – a clinical psychologist who takes the sagas as his object of study, and saga characters as his patients – claims that there is sufficient evidence in *Njáls saga* for Njáll and Gunnarr to be considered to be in a secret, sexual relationship. Such a reading of course requires the reader to rely strongly on their personal response to the text as such detail is not supplied by the narrative itself. It is suggested in the same article that *Njáls saga* was the favourite book of members of the Icelandic gay community in the 1940s and 1950s because Gunnarr and Njáll were thought to be gay and in a relationship with one another.

We may wonder whether the cause for such conjecture over the nature of the relationship between Njáll and Gunnar stems from the fact that we are hard pressed to find a *reason* – whether political, familial, or otherwise – for their close association.

the saga must be considered precarious.[20] Masculinity then – both its construction and subversion – must be regarded as an important topic of study for this saga.

The most sustained treatment of masculinity in the saga to date comes in the form of Ármann Jakobsson's 2007 article, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*'. Here Ármann, like a number of other commentators (discussed above) suggests that '*Njáls saga* is […] strikingly critical of the hegemonic ideas of its time and [...] in its treatments of gender roles and of the relationship between gender, power and love, it maintains a critical and perhaps ironical stance.'[21] Seeing masculinity as an important case of a hegemonic ideal to which the saga responds, he argues that '[m]asculinity seems to have been imagined as something of a burden in tenth-century Iceland.'[22] Indeed, Ármann convincingly demonstrates that *Njáls saga* problematizes dominant paradigms of masculinity, noting that the text systematically subverts the legitimacy – or at least the virtue – of masculinity's dominance.[23]

Also viewing *Njála* as a saga that is uniquely concerned with the nature of masculinity, I will likewise approach the text from the critical vantage point of masculinity studies. My focus, however, will be somewhat different.

The Study of Emotions in Both Life and Literature

This chapter will respond to the recent critical focus on affect and will interrogate the relation of the expression of emotion to dominant paradigms of

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[20] It must be remembered that Gunnarr himself questions his own masculinity, as discussed on page 62 of this thesis.
[21] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', 194.
[22] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', 191.
[23] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', *passim*.

masculinity. But before extending the reading of masculinities in *Njála* through an interrogation of emotion scenes – that is to say, scenes in which characters in the saga display physical signs that would suggest underlying, causative emotion – it will be necessary to briefly discuss the concept of emotion itself.

There is a rapidly growing body of literature concerned with the construction and expression of emotion, in several fields of inquiry. Psychologists have been largely concerned with the genesis of emotion, and have fallen into two broad camps: those who believe in universal 'basic emotions' that are experienced in the same way by people in different times and places,[24] and 'social constructionists' who believe that the quality and expression of emotions is culturally determined.[25] On which side of the debate one falls clearly has great implications for our ability to be able to comprehend – and view as culturally intelligible – the emotional expressions of past cultures.

Some philosophers have attempted to distinguish between the concepts of affect and emotion. The concept of affect originates in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. In part three of his *Ethics*, Spinoza defines affect as 'affectations of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished,

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[24] See, for example, Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, 'Constants Across Cultures in the Face and Emotion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17.2 (1971), 124-9, who suggest universal correspondence between particular patterns of movement in facial muscles and discrete emotions, but cf. Andrew Ortony and Terence J. Turner ('What's Basic About Basic Emotions?', *Psychological Review* 97.3 (1990), 315-31) who argue (at 315) that 'there is no coherent nontrivial notion of basic emotions as the elementary psychological primitives in terms of which other emotions can be explained.'

[25] For useful summaries, see Carolyne Larrington, 'The Psychology of Emotion and the Study of the Medieval Period', *Early Medieval Europe* 10.2 (2001), 251-6, and William Ian Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1992), 89-110. The latter appears in a slightly different format as chapter 3 – 'Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic' – of Miller's *Humiliation* (see pages 93-130).

aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affectations'.[26] This concept has been refined and extended by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (and their translator into English, Brian Massumi).[27] In Massumi's gloss, affect 'is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act.'[28] In this conceptualization, then, affect is bodily, whereas emotion is of the mind. While such a distinction is theoretically interesting, such a philosophical – and indeed, unobservable – distinction between the two becomes difficult to maintain when taking textual sources, especially saga literature, as our object of study. For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, the distinction will not be observed (except in the construction 'affective responses' as these, regardless of their mental or bodily genesis, are unquestionably somatic in presentation), and where 'affect' is used, it should be seen as interchangeable with emotion.

Many readings of emotion have been produced by scholars working from within the discipline of history, and more specifically within the rapidly expanding field of the history of emotions. While it may be expected that the history of emotions would provide useful frameworks for the study of saga emotion, this is only true if one chooses to use the sagas as historical sources. Indeed, if we take Peter Stearns' claim that '[c]harting the changes in emotion […] is the core of the history of emotions' as representative of the aims of the field in general, we can see that the sagas (and indeed, Old Norse literature more

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[26] Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin M. Curley (London, 1996), 70.
[27] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and notes Brian Massumi (London, 2014).
[28] Brian Massumi, 'Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements', in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, xv-xviii (xv).

broadly) may prove an attractive and viable prospect for the historian of emotions, but this is a position from which – for the purposes of this chapter – I intend distance myself at the outset.[29] Indeed, rather than trying to discover the qualitative core of the emotions to be discussed – trying, for example, to find out what anger or shame was like *for medieval Icelanders*, or how the quality of a given emotion changed over time – I am instead interested in their literary representation and narrative function.[30] This is not to say that methodologies from the history of emotions do not prove useful to scholars of Old Norse literature. In particular, Barbara Rosenwein's concept of 'emotional communities' (which are to be defined as 'groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions')[31] has clear relevance for the study of Old Norse literature, and indeed has recently begun to be used in such textual studies.[32] As is to be expected, the recent focus on the study of emotions in general has subsequently

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[29] Peter N. Stearns, 'History of Emotions: Issues of Change and Impact', in Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (eds.) *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd edn. (New York, 2008), 17-31 (17).

[30] This is not of course to disparage, or to downplay, the history of emotions, but simply to suggest this chapter will take a different critical approach, which is more focused on literary effects than historical fact. For an excellent example of what can be achieved by approaching medieval texts from a perspective more closely aligned to the history of emotions, see Carolyne Larrington, 'Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?', *Scandinavian Studies* 87.1 (2015), 74-94. Here Larrington investigates the changes made in transforming the scenes of emotion in the French of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal* into the Old Norse of *Parcevals saga*. In doing so, Larrington is able to investigate the language-specific emotional system of Old Norse.

[31] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 2006), 2. Also see Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying About Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107 (2002), 821-45.

[32] See, for example, Erin Goeres, 'How to do Things with Tears: The Funeral of Magnús inn góði', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 37 (2013), 5-26, and Kristen Mills, 'Grief, Gender, and Genre: Male Weeping in Snorri's Account of Baldr's Death, Kings' Sagas and *Gesta Danorum*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113.4 (2014), 472-96.

led to a surge in studies that focus on the concept of emotion in Old Norse literature.[33]

GENDER, EMOTION, AND RESISTANCE

One facet of the genesis and expression of emotion which I have thus far neglected to mention is its relation to dominant social ideologies. Several commentators have convincingly claimed that emotion is only possible when something occurs which has bearing upon, or affects, a subject's relation to a social or personal ideal in which they have some investment. For example, William Ian Miller suggests that '[e]motions are intimately connected to our beliefs and to the normative world of which we are a part', while Ed Tan notes that the presence of emotion 'underlines the things that matter to the individual in a given situation and how they matter'.[34] Similarly, Rosenwein has argued that 'we may say that if emotions are assessments based on experience and goals, the norms of the individual's social context provide the framework in which such

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[33] Carol Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', in Sarah Anderson with Karen Swenson (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays*, (New York, 2002), 15-53; Jacques Le Goff, 'Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga*', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1992), 161-5; Erin Goeres, 'How to do Things with Tears'; Thomas D. Hill, 'Guðlaugr Snorrason: The Red Faced Saint and the Refusal of Violence', *Scandinavian Studies* 67.2 (1995), 145-152; Thomas D. Hill, 'The Red Faced Saint, Again', *Scandinavian Studies* 67.4 (1995), 544-7; Thomas D. Hill, '*Guðrúnarkvíða in fyrsta*: Guðrún's Healing Tears', in Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (eds.), *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays in Old Norse Heroic Legend* (New York and London, 2013), 107-16; Larrington, 'The Psychology of Emotion and the Study of the Medieval Period'; Larrington, 'Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?'; John Lindow, 'The Tears of the Gods: A Note on the Death of Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101 (2002), 155-69; Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas'; Miller, 'Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic'; Mills, 'Grief Gender, and Genre'; Daniel Sävborg, 'Elegy in Eddic Poetry: Its Origin and Context', in Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (eds.), *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays in Old Norse Heroic Legend* (New York and London, 2013), 81-106; William Sayers, 'The Honor of Guðlaugr Snorrason and Einarr Þambarskelfir: A Reply', *Scandinavian Studies* 67.4 (1995), 536-544; Kirsten Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', *Scripta Islandica* 51 (2000), 93-117.

[34] Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis, 2005), ix-x; Miller, 'Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic', 115; Ed S.-H. Tan, 'Film-Induced Affect as a Witness Emotion', *Poetics* 23.1-2 (1995), 7-32 (8).

evaluations take place and derive their meaning.'[35] As discussed in the introduction, and demonstrated in chapter 2, the society as depicted in the sagas of Icelanders is aggressively patriarchal, with masculinity intersectionally inflecting all claims to subjectivity. In particular, it was seen that subjects are formed in relation to the model of hegemonic masculinity that operates within the *Íslendingasögur* genre. Understanding emotion scenes in the sagas then requires not only that we are aware of the medieval Icelandic gender order as it is presented in the saga corpus,[36] but also that we bring it to bear on our readings of the expression of emotion. Indeed, we must constantly seek to understand the interaction between hegemonic masculinity (or rather, the specific model thereof elucidated in the introduction to this thesis) and embodied subjects that brings about the emotion scenes depicted. This is especially pertinent for the study of emotion scenes in *Njála,* a saga which, as was seen above, is particularly interested in the construction and function of masculinities.

Emotions – particularly those which can be characterized as being 'negative affects' – may furthermore be seen as a method by which resistance to the dictates of hegemonic forces may be enacted, or at least recognized. Indeed, as was discussed in the introduction, the purely discursive model of subject formation is open to critique as it neglects ideas of embodiment.[37] While in

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[35] Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 15.
[36] We must likewise be particularly careful not to 'read backwards' and anachronistically impose modern conceptions of the gendered association of a particular emotion onto saga texts. As Leslie R. Brody and Judith A. Hall have noted, gender differences in the expression of emotion are contextual, not universal ('Gender and Emotion in Context', in Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd edn. (New York, 2008), 395-408). In particular see page 405: 'gender differences in any particular modality of emotional expression are culturally and situationally specific.'
[37] See chapter 1, 28-9.

chapter 2, this idea was used as a framework to discuss the operation of masculinity within, and its interaction with, the various identity categories through which social power is fractured and hierarchized, it also has bearing on the study of emotions. Just as certain identity characteristics were seen to be bodily, emotions can likewise be seen to have a bodily aspect. The production of negative affect can thus be taken as an indicator that the embodied performance of masculinity is neither simple nor unproblematic.

AUTHORSHIP: A POTENTIAL OBJECTION

As noted above, the purpose of this chapter is not to uncover 'real life' attitudes to emotion nor historical modes of emotional expression. Rather, my focus is explicitly literary. One might reasonably question, however, whether an anonymous work such as *Njáls saga*, the authorship of which has been a matter of such debate, can truly support readings which aim to uncover seemingly purposeful narrative techniques shaping the use of emotion scenes in the text. The easiest – but nevertheless, perhaps, the most significant – response to this critique is, essentially, that the textual genesis of the saga does not matter. If we accept that the Author is Dead[38] (surely in this case twice over) then it is only the text in its extant form that is of concern to us: if narrative effects and techniques can be perceived as operating within the text, then they must indeed be regarded as being present, regardless of whether we might be tempted to mistakenly fall back on medievalizing – and condescending – arguments about 'primitive' forms of authorship. The second response is that, despite the fact that debate over the

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[38] cf. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text* (London, 1977), 142-148.

genesis of *Njála* has been lively, it is now more or less accepted that the narrative was shaped by an author, and a masterful one at that.[39] Consequently, in this chapter, I will read the deployment of emotion scenes within the narrative as purposeful.

APPROACHING EMOTION SCENES IN *NJÁLA*

In what follows, it is my intention to approach the emotion scenes in *Njáls saga* from two very different perspectives, both of which, in their own right, will hopefully be seen as productive – and enlightening – for the study of the relations between the depiction of emotion in saga narrative and the dominant ideologies of masculinity portrayed within those narratives. My analysis will thus have a bipartite structure. The first set of analyses will seek to elucidate the social significance of emotions within the saga. (I must here make explicit that when I talk of 'social significance' I of course mean 'social significance within the saga society as depicted by the text'. I do not claim direct relevance of my readings for the understanding of historical, extra-textual reality.) In doing so, I hope to explore the gendered interpersonal relations between the characters who both prompt, and appear to experience, emotions, focusing on how the representation of these relations is affected by their association with ideals of masculinity. The second approach, rather than attempting to produce a reading

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[39] Although Finnur Jónsson, over a century ago, asked '[h]vorledes er det muligt [...] at fastholde antagelsen af én oprindelig saga af én forfatter?' (how is it possible to hold on to the assumption of one original saga by one author?) ('Om Njála', *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed of Historie* 19.2 (1904), 89-166 (166)), the critical consensus is to the contrary. See, for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson who argues that '[s]agan er bersýnilega verk eins listamanns' (the saga is clearly the work of one artist) (*Á Njálsbúð,* 8, translation mine). For further support of the idea that *Njála* is structured by an author, see: Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 304; Whitney French Bolton, 'The Njála Narrator and the Picture Plane', *Scandinavian Studies* 44 (1972), 186-209 (*passim.,* but especially 204); Vésteinn Ólason, '*Njáls saga*', 433; and, of course, Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes.*

of the social significance of the emotions portrayed within the saga, will instead focus on the narrative significance and function of emotion scenes, arguing that they are put to a particular and significant literary purpose. Consequently, this latter part of the chapter, while drawing on the discussion of the former, will perhaps be more attuned to the literary artifice of the saga.

THE FIRST APPROACH: SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EMOTION SCENES

It is my conviction that scenes in the saga which deal with the expression of emotion can be read productively in the light of the model of hegemonic masculinity outlined in the introduction to this thesis, and in doing so are revealed to have social significance that is both determined by, and has important implications for, the construction of gender.

As Miller has noted, despite the common impression that the sagas are *un*emotional, they are in fact 'tense with emotions barely repressed, all the more moving to the reader because they are not obsessed upon or talked about.'[40] And as is typical of saga's ostensibly objective, externally focalized narrative, we are rarely told explicitly the interior mental states of characters. Instead, we are left to infer these from the externally observable bodily signs with which the saga author chooses to provide us. In this chapter, I will look at four different types of these bodily signs in order to understand their relation to masculinity, namely laughter, grinning, facial reddening, and tears. I will, for the most part and given the topic of this thesis, restrict myself here to instances where these somatic signs are displayed by male characters.

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[40] Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', 109.

LAUGHTER

Just as there are innumerable situations which may prompt us to laugh, works which deal with the concept of laughter are likewise virtually innumerable. Those that discuss the aetiology of laughter, however, can be largely (and somewhat crudely) broken down into three groups. The first group tends to see laughter as a form of mockery; the second sees laughter as a response to something that is surprising, unexpected, or nonsensical; and the third sees laughter as the bodily response to a release of pent up emotional energy.[41] Of course, not only is this division simplistic, but also it is apparent that the three different models cannot readily be reconciled. Rather, the critic must choose the most appropriate conceptualization for the material under consideration.

With particular reference to medieval Icelandic literature, Kirsten Wolf has produced an overview, and taxonomy, of laughter in the Old Norse corpus.[42] She concludes, rightly, that there is little evidence to indicate an overarching attitude toward laughter in this body of literature but does note that it is '[s]cornful of [sic] mocking laughter [that is] the most common kind of laughter in the Sagas of Icelanders and in Old Norse-Icelandic literature in general'.[43] This type of laughter then would be most in accord with the first model of laughter discussed above. Wolf also notes that *Njáls saga* is the richest source among the sagas for examples of laughter, 'with twenty-one occurrences of *hlæja* and ten occurrences of *glotta*'.[44] Jacques Le Goff, in a brief article, has also attempted to characterize the type of laughter evident in *Njála*, but his focus is mainly to try

[41] For a useful overview of approaches to laughter, see the first, second, and third chapters of Mary Beard's *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014), 1-69.
[42] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature'.
[43] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 98.
[44] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 94.

and disentangle that laughter which he sees as 'a pagan cultural expression' from laughter which carries the 'mark of Christianity'.[45] While Le Goff conceptualizes this as 'the problem of the relationship between this laughter and paganism and Christianity' and ties it to his larger research project focusing on pagan and Christian forms of laughter, we may question whether this is really a problem at all for saga literature and, indeed, whether his focus when studying Old Norse laughter should not be placed elsewhere.[46] Considering that all extant saga literature is written post-Conversion, the idea of separating out pagan elements from Christian in the *Íslendingasögur* is as fallacious as trying to elucidate the pagan elements in Beowulf. However, one type of laughter to which Le Goff briefly makes allusion is that which he claims 'calls into doubt a man's morals.'[47] Although Le Goff devotes only nine lines to this type of laughter, it is, in my view, central to the type of laughter that operates within *Njáls saga* and clearly calls for deeper consideration.

After the *Alþing* at which Hrútr challenges Mǫrðr to a duel, in response to the legal suit brought against the former by the latter, Hrútr and his brother Hǫskuldr stay overnight at Lundr in Reykjardalr. While there, some impoverished children – two boys and a girl – act out, as a game for themselves, what has transpired between Mǫrðr and Hrútr:

> Annarr þeira mælti: 'Ek skal þér Mǫrðr vera ok stefna þér af konunni ok finna þat til foráttu, at þú hafir ekki sorðit hana.' Annarr svaraði: 'Ek skal þér Hrútr vera; tel ek þik af allri fjárheimtunni, ef þú þorir eigi at berjask við mik.' Þetta mæltu þeir nǫkkurum sinnum; þá gerðisk hlátr mikill af heimamǫnnum. Þá reiddisk

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[45] Le Goff, 'Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga'*, 164.
[46] Le Goff, 'Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga*', 164.
[47] Le Goff, 'Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga*', 163.

> Hǫskuldr ok laust sveininn með sprota, þann er Mǫrðr nefndisk, en sprotinn kom í andlitit, ok sprakk fyrir.[48]
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> One of them spoke: 'I will be to you Mǫrðr and summon you to forfeit your wife, and bring forward the charge that you have not screwed her.' The other answered: 'I will be to you Hrútr; I declare that you forfeit the entire claim, if you do not dare to fight with me.' They said this a number of times; then much laughter was made by the householders. Then Hǫskuldr became angry and struck the boy, that one who called himself Mǫrðr, with a stick, and the stick landed on the face, and broke the skin.

Hrútr's problem is intimately bound up with his masculinity. After Gunnhildr's curse that he should have no sexual pleasure with his wife, he is – whether the cause is supernatural or psychological – unable to have sexual intercourse with Unnr.[49] We hear from Unnr (addressing her father) that Hrútr's inability stems from the abnormally large size of his erect penis: 'Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hǫrund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik' (When he comes to me, his penis [lit. flesh] is so large that he may not have enjoyment from me).[50] It is of course possible that the full details of the issue have not been made public knowledge, but either way, what is clear is that Hrútr is unable, with Unnr at least, to fulfil his role as penetrative partner in a sexual relationship. Consequently, he is unable to live up to the sexual demands of hegemonic masculinity. That laughter arose at this impromptu and likely unexpected mockery of Hrútr's apparent sexual failings suggests – essentially – that such

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[48] *Njáls saga*, 29

[49] *Njáls saga*, 21: 'Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur.' (If I hold as much power over you as I believe, then I lay this upon you: you will not have pleasure from that woman, who you intend to have for yourself in Iceland, but you will be able to further perform your desire with other women.)

[50] *Njáls saga,* 24.
This episode is discussed in Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 430-32.

failings are something at which to laugh. Laughter here functions to ostracize Hrútr, who has failed in his masculine duties to keep a wife and have successful sexual relations with her. This laughter is made all the more poignant when we consider that it is prompted by the actions of poor children, who are socially disadvantaged by both their age and economic status. So great is Hrútr's masculine failing that such people – who would otherwise surely be his social inferiors – are able to prompt mockery of him.[51] As Wolf notes, '[s]cornful or mocking laughter invariably has as its object a person who is regarded as somehow inferior. This kind of laughter therefore, often serves as an indicator of the social, moral, and aesthetic standards of the Sagas of Icelanders.'[52] This is clearly the type of laughter in operation here and such laughter of scorn questions a subject's claim to masculinity. Both Hrútr's failing and the function of laughter here is illustrated well by his brother Hǫskuldr's anger: by association with Hrútr the laughter also displaces him outside of the community of laughers and he must act violently – and quickly – to restore their masculine status. Only once this has been done is Hrútr able to treat the transgressing child favourably.

In chapter 44, Hallgerðr, holding an audience at Hlíðarendi, invents insulting nicknames for Njáll and his sons. She suggests that they start to call Njáll 'karl inn skegglausa, en sonu hans taðskegglinga' (the beardless old man and his sons dung-beardlings).[53] These nicknames suggest a lack of bodily masculinity on the part of Njáll and his sons: Njáll, not being able to grow a

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[51] It is of course also possible that the laughter arose instead – or, perhaps better, also – at the mockery of Mǫrðr for not daring to fight Hrútr in a duel. If this is the case, then a similar argument still holds. Mǫrðr, by refusing to fight, shows a cowardice that would also be considered unmanly, and the laughter functions to condemn this. The fact that Hǫskuldr is angry, however, clearly suggests that at least part of the mockery is aimed at his brother.
[52] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 100.
[53] *Njáls saga*, 113.

beard, is not a *real* man, and his sons, because they need to fertilize their facial follicles with dung to make them produce hair – as the standard reading goes – likewise have a precarious claim to masculinity.[54] To make the insult even worse, Hallgerðr has Sigmundr Lambason versify the insults. Hallgerðr is clearly pleased with the result, but their amusement is short lived:

> Þá kom Gunnarr at í því; hann hafði staðit fyrir framan dyngjuna ok heyrt ǫll orðtœkin. Ǫllum brá við mjǫk, er hann sá inn ganga; þǫgnuðu þá allir, en áðr hafði þar verit hlátr mikill. Gunnarr var reiðr mjǫk[55]
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> At that point Gunnarr came in; he had stood outside of the room and heard every word they said. They reacted greatly when they saw him come in; they all became silent, but there had previously been great laughter there. Gunnar was very angry[.]

As in the first example, laughter is the response to perceived deficiencies in the proper performance of masculinity and, indeed, this laughter is clearly directed at those who are thought to fail to live up to the ideal. Even though the targets of this mockery are not physically present at this point in the narrative the laughter nevertheless has a similar effect. As will be seen later on in this chapter, once they are made aware of the insult retaliation is not far behind. However, this does not mean that no response is given to the laughter in the scene in which it is discussed. In fact, Gunnarr fulfils a similar function in this episode to that which Hǫskuldr does above. Gunnarr – whether purely for the sake of his absent friend and his sons, or because his close relationship with them means that any flaw in

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[54] But see Miller*, Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 105, where he suggests that the sons of Njáll may have come by their nickname through a different route: 'How do you get dung on your face? You engage in sloppily performed coprophagy, the sterilized Greek term for shit-eating. Or you can come by coprophagy and the face-smearing incidentally, as an inevitable side-effect of engaging in oral–anal sex with farm animals.' Whether one accepts the standard reading or Miller's, the insult functions in a similar way to question their masculinity.

[55] *Njáls saga*, 113.

their masculine performances might reflect badly on his own – becomes angry at the group's derisive laughter, a laughter which seeks to destabilize and make perilous claims to masculinity. Although only temporarily, his anger silences their exclusionary laughter, and in doing so it reasserts masculine dominance.

In chapter 118, the sons of Njáll laugh at his foster-son, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, for wearing clothing that they do not deem to be appropriate. We are told that '[þ]eir Njálssynir hlógu at honum, er hann var í kasti mórendu, ok spuruðu, hvé lengi hann ætlaði at hafa þat' (the sons of Njáll laughed at him when he was wearing a russet wadmal cloak, and they asked how long he intended to wear it).[56] As Ármann Jakobsson notes, the word used to describe the cloak – *kast* – is, in post-medieval Iceland, an exclusively female garment worn by milk-maids.[57] If the gendered associations for saga society were the same – which, it should be noted, is impossible to ascertain with certainty as this is the only attestation of the word in the medieval corpus[58] – then the laughter may again function as a sign of derision. In this reading, then, the laughter would, in effect, police the young Þórhallr's gender performance, encouraging him to conform to the accepted norms of masculinity. And this is indeed what happens. Immediately after his brothers' mocking words, he replies to them: 'Kastat skal ek því hafa, þá er ek á at mæla eptir fóstra minn' (I will have cast it off by the time I have to lead the prosecution for the slaying of my foster-father).[59] This can of course correctly be read as a powerful – and punning – retort to his foster-brothers. However, Þórhallr nevertheless confirms in his statement that he will

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[56] *Njáls saga*, 295.
[57] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', 198.
[58] *Njáls saga*, 295, n. 3, cited in Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', 198, n. 36.
[59] *Njáls saga*, 295.

conform to the expectations of gender performance for a man, by undertaking to 'cast off' the offending *kast*.

Perhaps the most fatal laugh in the entirety of the saga comes in chapter 123. Flosi has come to the law court to examine the money paid out by Njáll, his sons, Kári, the arbitrators, and other parties at the *Alþing*, and at first he is pleased with both the quantity of silver paid out and also the speed with which it has been assembled. But then he notices the *slœður* sitting on top of the pile of money, and things swiftly take a turn for the worse:

> Síðan tók hann upp slœðurnar ok spurði, hverr til mundi hafa gefit, en engi svaraði honum. Í annat sinn veifði hann slœðunum ok spurði, hverr til mundi hafa gefit, ok hló at, ok svaraði engi. Flosi mælti: 'Hvárt er þat, at engi yðvarr veit, hverr þenna búning hefir átt, eða þorið þér eigi at segja mér?' Skarpheðinn mælti: 'Hvat ætlar þú, hverr til hafi gefit?' Flosi mælti: 'Ef þú vill þat vita, þá mun ek segja þér, hvat ek ætla: þat er mín ætlan, at til hafi gefit faðir þinn, karl inn skegglausi – því at margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona.'[60]
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> Then he picked up the robe and asked who had given it, and no one answered him. A second time he waved the robe and asked who had given it, and laughed, and no one answered. Flosi spoke: 'Which is it, that none of you knows who owned this clothing or that you do not dare to tell me?' Skarpheðinn spoke: 'What do you suppose, who might have given it?' Flosi spoke: 'If you want to know that, then I will tell you what I think: it is my supposition that your father gave it, the beardless old man, for there are many, who see him, who cannot tell whether he is a man or a woman.'

There has been disagreement over whether the *slœður* should be regarded as a feminine – or at least an ambiguous – garment.[61] Many have suggested that the *slœður* do indeed – at least in *Njáls saga* – have female connotations, and that it is

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[60] *Njáls saga*, 313-4.
[61] See, for example: Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes*, 13; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 333, n. 2; Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', 428; and Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 10.

this perceived insult that triggers the dissolution of the settlement. Miller, however, has argued that since Egill is able to wear *silkislœður* in *Egils saga*, then it surely cannot be a gendered insult based on the associations of the garment.[62] However, the associations that the garment may have in one saga may not necessarily be the same as those with which it is imbued in another (and moreover, we cannot be sure that the term signifies the same type of garment in each saga). Indeed, Ármann Jakobsson has suggested that it is indicative of *Njáls saga*'s attitude to gender that an innocuous garment – which can even have masculine associations in another saga – is transformed in *Njála* into the basis for a gendered insult.[63] And it does indeed seem to have a gendered association in this scene: why else would Flosi respond to Skarpheðinn's question with another clearly gendered insult aimed at Njáll? But even if we follow Miller, and refuse to read the garment as having a gendered or ambiguous implication itself, its presence can still nevertheless be seen to function as a gendered insult. The *slœður* here draped over the pile of silver cannot fail but to remind Flosi of the *skikkja* (cloak) which just seven chapters earlier Hildigunnr, his niece, had thrown over his shoulders as part of a *hvǫt* designed to make him take vengeance for the killing of her husband, Hǫskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði.[64] The *skikkja*, as a gift given by Flosi to Hǫskuldr, is a physical reminder of their relationship to one another, and of Flosi's masculine duty to take blood vengeance. Being reminded now, at the settlement, of that duty – which by accepting the settlement he would effectively be abandoning – highlights his

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[62] Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 218.
[63] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics, 199-200.
[64] *Njáls saga*, 291.
This episode will be discussed in further detail below.

masculine failure. A true man, the cloak suggests to Flosi, would never accept a settlement but would seek vengeance instead. As Flosi is on the verge of accepting monetary payment in lieu of the vengeance that he is expected to take, his masculinity is called into question.[65] In either reading of the cloak, it appears to suggest a deficiency in masculinity on Flosi's part.[66] And indeed, Flosi here acts as if he is partaking in a typical flyting, which, in effect he is: gendered insult is traded for gendered insult.

But what of Flosi's laugh when he asks, for the second time, who has given the *slœður*? Considering the gendered implications of the garment, we may read his laugh as an anticipatory version of the laughter of scorn. Having seen the *slœður* and reading it as a slur against his masculinity, Flosi laughs. The laugh is pre-emptive: if he is the laugher in the situation, and laughter is a way of undermining masculinity, then by laughing first he protects his masculinity from such an attack. The laugh transfers the focus of masculine scorn in the scene from himself to Njáll. In this instance, Flosi perhaps considers the best defence to be a good offence. More simply, the laughter indicates that he is in a position from which he is able to laugh. As in the first two examples of laughter given above – aimed at Hrútr at Lundr, and at Njáll by Hallgerðr and the itinerant women at Hlíðarendi – laughter is a marker of group identity, and both others and ostracizes those who are either the object of ridicule or who do not laugh.

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[65] As Miller notes, paraphrasing what he thinks Flosi must feel is the message behind the offending *slœður*: 'the manly thing to do is seek vengeance, not settle; a man wouldn't even be here, unless in the role we Njálssons are in, that is, as defendants' (*Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 330).
[66] Whether the cloak – added of course by Njáll – was *intended* to be taken as an insult has been the subject of debate. For example, Miller suggests that the gift was 'well-intentioned', but simply misjudged (*Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 218), while Yoav Tirosh has suggested that it is part of Njáll's plan – whether conscious or unconscious – to punish his sons' disobedience ('Víga-Njáll: A New Approach Toward *Njáls saga*,' *Scandinavian Studies* 86.2 (2014), 208-226).

In chapter 130, we are witness to the burning of Skarpheðinn at Bergþórshváll. Here, Gunnarr Lambason – one of the burners – leaps up on a wall of the burning house and suggests – with what, as we shall see below, is a gendered insult – that Skarpheðinn is crying. While accusing Skarpheðinn of shedding tears Gunnarr laughs and states that it is the first time he has done so since the death of Þráinn.[67] Gunnarr's laughter functions here in two ways. Firstly, it functions, as above, to belittle the failed masculine performance of Skarpheðinn, signalled by his tears which, in this saga at least, are coded feminine. Secondly, it signals that Þráinn has, by contributing to the death of Skarpheðinn, reasserted his own masculinity. Gunnarr Lambason has fulfilled his masculine obligations by taking vengeance for the death of Þráinn, and can therefore partake in a mode of expression suitable for the dominant and those who fulfil the demands that masculinity has placed upon them. It is a laughter that signals his collusion with other men of his kin group and the exclusion of Skarpheðinn and his family, who have challenged the position of the Sigfússon clan. Similar attitudes to laughter are evident elsewhere in the saga. In chapter 136, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson is able to deduce that the group of people riding toward Tunga are not those who are seeking vengeance for Njáll: 'þessir menn fara með hlátri ok gapi, en frændr Njáls, slíkir sem Þorgeirr er, munu eigi hlæja, fyrr en hans er hefnt' (these men come with laughter and scoffing, but the kinsmen of Njáll, such as Þorgeirr, will not laugh before he is avenged).[68] Laughter is only seen as appropriate when the masculine demands for vengeance have been carried out, and unavenged deaths no longer impact upon a

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[67] *Njáls saga*, 333.
[68] *Njáls saga*, 360.

character's masculine standing. Laughter also occurs – or, rather, is predicted – when a man is to be proven superior to another in some way. For example, in chapter 142, Flosi says to Eyjólfr Bǫlverksson, the lawyer who has been bribed to represent the burners, that '[þ]at hlœgir mik nú, Eyjólfr [...] í hug mér, at þeim mun í brún bregða ok ofarliga kleyja, þá er þú berr fram vǫrnina' (it makes me laugh now Eyjólfr [...] to think that they will be shocked and their heads will itch when you present the defence).[69] Laughter thus highlights and expresses the tendency of masculinity to move to dominate others.

Laughter, then, has a clear link with the dominant model of masculinity. It can function as a means by which the socially disenfranchised may question and undermine the dominance of those in a superior position, as is the case of the laughter aimed against Hrútr. In doing so, it functions, as Wolf has noted, 'as a social corrective as means of maintaining group standards and values.'[70] But it can also be a tool used by those who would occupy dominant social positions to simultaneously question the masculinity of opponents, while asserting their own claim to masculinity and to membership of the group consisting of such men who can do so. While Wolf suggests that such laughter – in this case the scornful laughter aimed at failed masculinity – is 'not uniformly negative, for it can serve as a social corrective, recalling class distinction or maintaining codes of behaviour within a particular group', we may question this conclusion.[71] It is certainly true that laughter – as has been suggested above – has a socially corrective function, but we can take issue with the idea that this phenomenon is *positive*. Indeed, such a function could only be viewed as positive if we view the

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[69] *Njáls saga*, 391-2.
[70] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 102.
[71] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 113.

maintenance of masculinity's hegemony as an ideal: 'socially corrective' could equally be viewed as conservative, reactionary, and oppressive. Considering the negative effects that the dominance of masculinity has on all characters – regardless of gender – throughout the *Íslendingasögur*, we cannot, I feel, see the preservation of the dominant model of gender as desirable.

Grinning

It will undoubtedly have been noticed that the above discussion on laughter only takes into account instances of *hlæja* – 'to laugh' – and does not discuss examples of *glotta* – commonly translated as 'to grin'. While both Wolf and Le Goff discuss both *hlæja* and *glotta* together, the latter is not truly a form of laughter and should instead be discussed separately. Indeed, as Soon Ai Low notes 'the grin is different from the laugh';[72] Low's assertion is based on her etymological reading of 'grin', which, as she notes, for much of its history did not denote a smile of mirth or happiness, but rather denoted 'the specific facial movement of drawing back the lips and showing the teeth'.[73] Rather than warmth or amusement, it suggests 'pain, anger, embarrassment or contempt', and indeed this meaning is still preserved in grin's metathesized form 'girn'.[74] It is therefore from a very different category of expression than laughter.

There are ten instances of *glotta* in the saga – nine as *glotti* and one as *glottir*. The first grin of the saga belongs to Þjóstólfr, who ominously grins after Hallgerðr has asked him to refrain from avenging the slap which her husband,

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[72] Soon Ai Low, 'The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin', *Medium Ævum* 65.1 (1996), 101-8 (103).
[73] Low, 'The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin', 102.
[74] Low, 'The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin', 102.

Glúmr, has dealt her.[75] He ignores the request. The other nine grins present in the saga all belong to Skarpheðinn. The first of Skarpheðinn's grins occurs when his father, as they ride to the *Alþing* at the end of chapter 36, produces the pouch of money that Gunnarr had previously paid Njáll for the killing of his servant, Svartr.[76] That he has brought the money to the Alþing suggests that Njáll is anticipating a further development in the feud. Skarpheðinn's second grin occurs in the following chapter after he has heard of the death of Hallgerðr's servant, Kolr; just before grinning he has noted that slaves are now, unlike in the past, seeking to kill each other.[77] His third grin occurs just after his mother, Bergþóra, has urged him to take vengeance to repay Sigmundr Lambason's malicious verses. He grins in spite of the evident displeasure that his other somatic changes suggest he experiences (he sweats and red flecks appear on his cheeks, as will be discussed below).[78] His fourth – reported only in the speech of another – occurs in chapter 119, where Ásgrímr and the Njálssynir are attempting to drum up support from among the other attenders at the Alþing, prior to the case for the slaying of Hǫskuldr. When in the booth of Snorri *goði*, Snorri enquires – in something of a set piece – of the fifth man in the line up of visitors, saying '[h]verr er sá maðr, er fjórir ganga fyrri, fǫlleitr ok skarpleitr ok glottir við tǫnn ok hefir øxi reidda um ǫxl?' (who is that man, who has four in front, pale-faced, sharp-featured, grinning with teeth, and has an axe carried on his shoulder?).[79] After Snorri's refusal to join them, Skarpheðinn insults the *goði* for having left his father go unavenged, which functions as a slur on his masculinity. In the very

[75] *Njáls saga*, 48.
[76] *Njáls saga*, 96.
[77] *Njáls saga*, 98-9.
[78] *Njáls saga*, 114.
[79] *Njáls saga*, 299.

next chapter, following several failed attempts to gather support for the case, they decide to try their luck at the booth of Þorkell *hákr*. Before they do so, Ásgrímr asks Skarpheðinn to remain silent during the conversation. He grins his fifth grin of the saga immediately following this request.[80] After asking, like all those they approached before him, the identity of the man fifth in line, Þorkell is subjected to a torrent of abuse from Skarpheðinn, which includes suggestions that he behaved badly toward his father, has not taken part in lawsuits or come to the Alþing frequently enough, that he is suited to woman's work, that he is of little financial means and has few kin, that he has perhaps taken part in bestiality, and also includes an – unfavourable – comparison with a shepherd.[81] All of the insults are clearly targeted at Þorkell's masculinity. Unsurprisingly, Þorkell responds with a threat of violence. At this, Skarpheðinn grins his sixth grin, and threatens to kill Þorkell at once, at which Þorkell backs down.[82] His seventh and eighth both occur in chapter 123. After Síðu-Hallr has announced the settlement between Flosi and the sons of Njáll, witnesses are named and Njáll offers his thanks. Skarpheðinn, however, remains silent and grins. A few lines later, Njáll speaks to his sons and asks that they not jeopardize the settlement. At this request, 'Skarpheðinn strauk um ennit ok glotti í móti' (Skarpheðinn stroked his forehead and grinned in response).[83] Needless to say, Skarpheðinn fails to hold his tongue and returns the favour when Flosi hurls a gendered insult at Njáll, thus contributing to the dissolution of the settlement. Skarpheðinn's final grin comes in chapter 128 when Kári pays Skarpheðinn a

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[80] *Njáls saga*, 303.
[81] *Njáls saga*, 304-5.
[82] *Njáls saga*, 305.
[83] *Njáls saga*, 313.

compliment after he has killed Hróaldr Ǫzurarson, saying the he is 'vár frœknastr' (the bravest of us all).[84] In response, Skarpheðinn 'brá við grǫnum ok glotti við' (drew back his lips and grinned).[85]

Attitudes to masculinity – whether conscious or unconscious – are reflected in each of the grins. The grins reflect a revelling in the demands of masculinity and in establishing dominance over other men. Þjóstolfr's grin anticipates the vengeance he is to carry out against Glúmr, which he sees as his duty; in doing so he will of course demonstrate his physical superiority over the other man. Skarpheðinn's first grin suggests that he relishes the idea that vengeance will be sought to redress the injury that has been inflicted upon his family through the death of Svartr. By repaying this injury, Skarpheðinn's kin group will be – for the moment at least – the dominant group. His second grin – on hearing of Kolr's death and the inter-group killing of slaves – likewise shows a crazed appreciation of the pressure to feud, and also his anticipation of retaliatory violence. His third grin is prompted by Bergþóra's whetting. Its authenticity has been questioned, however.[86] If it is genuine, it shows that he revels in the violent revenge that he is about to undertake. But even if we read it as forced we still see a similar relationship with masculinity in the grin. If instead of showing pleasure in his participation in the feud cycle it is instead meant to mask his discomfort, the fact that it is meant to operate as a mask suggests that grins – when genuine – do suggest complicity with violent feuding and masculine dominance. Skarpheðinn's fourth grin anticipates the linguistic domination he will enact over Snorri. His fifth, at Ásgrímr's plea for silence, signals not only his

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[84] *Njáls saga*, 327.
[85] *Njáls saga*, 327.
[86] Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', 100.

imminent disobedience, but also his intent to prove himself superior to Þorkell *hákr*. It is the subduing of Þorkell which elicits the sixth. His seventh and eighth both show imminent disobedience, and anticipate the breakdown of legal process back into the underlying feud fuelled by the imperatives for vengeance and social dominance. His final grin occurs in response to an affirmation of his masculine pre-eminence.

All grins in the saga can thus be read as indicating something particular about a subject's relationship with masculinity. When not apparently forced, a grin indicates a happy complicity with the demands of masculinity and suggests a revelry in the violence that this leads to. Even when used as a mask it indicates that the expected meaning of the grin is that it indicates such complicity. It is thus very different from the laugh, which is used to police masculinity and ridicule failures to live up to its ideals.

FACIAL REDDENING

Although instances of facial reddening are far less frequent in *Njáls saga* than either laughter or grins, they are nevertheless highly significant. Indeed, like both laughter and grins, turning red indicates something particular about a subject's relationship with masculinity. At a bare minimum it shows that masculinity plays a significant role for the subject at the moment in which it occurs. As Elspeth Probyn notes in her seminal work on the topic, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, '[o]nly something or someone that has interested you can produce a flush of shame'; she similarly suggests that 'whatever it is that shames you will be

something important to you, an essential part of yourself'.[87] Likewise Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have suggested that '[w]ithout positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush.'[88] Men within the society depicted by *Njáls saga* – and indeed, in real life today – cannot help but be invested in the project of masculinity if they are to perform as men and draw what sociologists of gender have labelled the 'patriarchal dividend'.[89] This does not of course mean that men who draw such a dividend are wholly approving of the masculine project, or of masculinity itself, nor does it mean that they are exceptionally masculine, but rather that by considering themselves men – and being considered to be so by others – it is inevitable that they must become complicit with masculinity. Indeed, as Sedgwick and Frank further note, 'unlike contempt or disgust, shame is characterized by its failure ever to renounce its object cathexis, its relation to the desire for pleasure as well as the need to avoid pain'.[90] Renouncing masculinity is of course something that the men in the saga are unable to do. Masculinity cannot be abjected from their subjectivity as it is

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[87] Probyn, *Blush*, x.
It should also be noted at this point that when I discuss 'shame' here I am primarily referring the emotion as experienced by characters in the saga, and only secondarily to shame as implicated in the ostensible 'shame-honour' culture of medieval Iceland and of saga society. The two are clearly linked, however, as what constitutes shame in the 'shame-honour' dynamic of saga society will encompass the shame that may be experienced by individual characters in *Njála*. For an overview of shame-honour cultures and the applicability of the theorization to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Reading Þrymskviða', in Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (eds.), *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology* (London, 2002), 180-94 (186-7). For a general overview of honour and shame cultures, see Charles Stewart, 'Honor and Shame', in James D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 11, 2nd edn. (Amsterdam, 2015), 181-184. Particularly interesting is Stewart's suggestion that the honor and shame model is increasingly being replaced by a gender studies model (183).
[88] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Pedagogy, Performativity, Affect* (Durham, NC, and London, 2003), 116.
[89] Connell, *Masculinities*, 79-80.
[90] Sedgwick and Frank, *Touching Feeling*, 117.
Probyn similarly argues that '[w]hen we feel shame it is because our interest has been interfered with but not cancelled out' (*Blush*, 15).

central to its formation. Thus facial reddening indicates a problematic relationship with masculinity, but a continued relationship nonetheless. Scientists have conceptualized the operation and function of shame and embarrassment in similar terms to Humanities scholars and theorists. Michael Lewis, for example, has characterized shame as a self-conscious emotion, which involves the self-assessment of behaviour.[91] These self-assessments occur against so-called SRGs, or 'standards, rules, and goals', which are culture specific. As Lewis notes, 'SRGs differ across different societies, across groups within societies, across different time epochs, and among individuals of different ages.'[92] Considering the centrality of masculinity to saga society identity formation, it would be surprising if it were not a central aspect of the saga society's SRGs (if we are to use such a conceptualization). If this is the case we can view the characters that produce these somatic signs as assessing themselves – consciously or otherwise – against saga society's dominant model of masculinity. Lewis, in a way akin to Probyn, and Sedgwick and Frank, also sees those who are shamed as being invested in an SRG, the violation of which has caused them to experience shame. Moreover, he suggests that shame, because of its unpleasantness, causes subjects to want to purge themselves of it. As he notes, '[b]ecause of the intensity of this emotional state, the global attack on the self-system, all that individuals can do when presented with such a state is to attempt to rid themselves of it.'[93] Shame then is likely to provide motivation for

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[91] Michael Lewis, 'Self-Conscious Emotions: Embarrassment, Pride, Shame, and Guilt', in Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd edn. (New York, 2008), 17-31.
[92] Lewis, 'Self-Conscious Emotions', 746.
[93] Lewis, 'Self-Conscious Emotions', 748.

characters to realign themselves with the ideals of masculinity and to show themselves as adhering to its social demands. For saga characters, facial reddening certainly seems to indicate that their relation to masculinity has been shaken, and seems to encourage swift action to rectify the perceived masculine failure.

In chapter 11, Þorvaldr hits Hallgerðr across the face so hard that he draws blood. In retaliation she prompts Þjóstolfr to avenge her injury, and he does so by killing Þorvaldr. This is a task that Þjóstolfr undertakes eagerly. In the following chapter, Ósvífr, Þorvaldr's father, asks Hǫskuldr Dalla-Kollson, Hallgerðr's father, for compensation for his son. Although Hǫskuldr does not feel that he owes him compensation as he did not personally kill Þorvaldr, nor did he arrange for him to be killed, Hrútr counsels his brother that compensation should be given so that the case will be dropped and Hallgerðr's reputation preserved. Hǫskuldr asks Hrútr to arbitrate the case – which he does – but before doing so he warns his brother that 'mun ek ekki hlífa þér í gerðinni, því at, ef satt skal um tala, þá hefir dóttir þín ráðit honum banann' (I will not spare you in the arbitration, because if truth must be told, your daughter caused his death).[94] In response to this we are told that '[þ]á setti Hǫskuld dreyrrauðan ok mælti ekki nǫkkura hríð' (Hǫskuldr then turned blood-red and said nothing for a little while).[95]

It is interesting to further note that, at least in subjects studied in our own period, the experience of shame leads to an increase in cortisol levels in the body – see Michael Lewis and Douglas Ramsay, 'Cortisol Response to Embarrassment and Shame', *Child Development* 73, 1034-1045. Cortisol is the so-called 'stress hormone', and thus can be seen as encouraging the embodied subject to take on – and accomplish – difficult tasks. Shame could thus potentially be seen as useful in a whetting ceremony for this reason: the whetting produces shame, which in turn produces cortisol, which in turn impels a man to carry out vengeance.

[94] *Njáls saga*, 39.

[95] *Njáls saga*, 39.

Hǫskuldr has failed in his patriarchal duty to manage the actions of his daughter. Moreover, he has failed to recognize this failing in his initial refusal to provide compensation to Ósvífr. To make matters even worse, his shortcomings are highlighted by his own brother. This is first achieved through the proverbial phrase Hrútr uses – '[n]áit er, bróðir, nef augum' (the nose, brother, is near to the eyes)[96] – which, as Cook notes, draws attention to the duties that accompany kinship.[97] Perhaps the closest modern English proverb would be 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree', although this does not have the same implication of familial responsibility present in the Old Icelandic proverb. Secondly, Hrútr draws attention to Hallgerðr's – and by extension, Hǫskuldr's – culpability in the situation, and furthermore that Hǫskuldr was wrong to try and avoid responsibility for Hallgerðr's actions. Hǫskuldr subsequently experiences facial reddening and immediately afterwards fulfils his responsibility to reach a settlement with Ósvífr, before following it up with swift payment. We may see Hrútr's warning over his judgement partly, of course, as managing his brother's expectations in the situation, but we may simultaneously see Hrútr as purposefully causing his brother to flush red so that his advice will be followed and a satisfactory settlement achieved.

In chapter 44, Bergþóra incites her children to take vengeance for the insulting verses that Sigmundr Lambason has produced about both their father and themselves. The insults themselves function as slurs upon their masculinity (and indeed this is why they are able to function as insults at all), but Bergþóra also appeals to an idea of proper masculine conduct in order to encourage her

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[96] *Njáls saga*, 39.
[97] Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 314.

children to seek violent revenge. Indeed, Bergþóra suggests that '[g]jafir eru yðr gefnar feðgum, ok verðið þér litlir drengir af, nema þér launið' (gifts are given to you all, father and sons, and you will be rendered little men, unless you return the favour).[98] She reinforces that their masculine status is in jeopardy when she repeats the offending insults to them, noting that the sons have been called 'taðskegglingar' (dung-beardlings) and their father 'karl inn skegglausi' (the beardless old man).[99] Although Skarpheðinn attempts to sidestep his mother's whetting by attempting to code furious reaction as feminine, she prevents this by further noting that Gunnarr – a supremely masculine man, although one known for not being rash – nevertheless became furious at the insults directed at them. Bergþóra suggests that if a person like Gunnarr – who the insults were not even directed at – reacted negatively to them then surely Skarpheðinn should too. Bergþóra's attack clearly hits its mark, as Skarpheðinn's reaction demonstrates: '"Gaman þykkir kerlingunni at, móður várri," segir Skarpheðinn ok glotti við, en þó spratt honum sveiti í enni, ok kómu rauðir flekkar í kinnr honum, en því var ekki vant' ('The old woman is amused by this,' says Skarpheðinn and grinned, but sweat burst out on his forehead and red flecks appeared on his cheeks, and this was not usual).[100] A red flush spreads across Skarpheðinn's face, and has the effect that his mother intended: that evening the brothers set off to seek vengeance. Also interesting in this scene are the different reactions that the brothers have to Bergþóra's whetting. While Skarpheðinn flushes red, his brothers react rather differently: Grímr is silent and bites on his lip, while Helgi shows no reaction whatsoever. We may hypothesize that the reactions reflect

[98] *Njáls saga*, 114.
[99] *Njáls saga*, 114.
[100] *Njáls saga*, 114.

each individual son's responsibility to fulfil the obligations that come with masculinity. Skarpheðinn, as the eldest son, has the greatest obligation to uphold family honour: his investment in masculinity is thus the greatest, the emotional upheaval he feels at the whetting the most acute, and the somatic reaction the most obvious. Grímr, as the second son, has much less of a burden than Skarpheðinn and this is reflected in his much less pronounced somatic response. Finally, Helgi, as the youngest of the three, is in a way shielded from the responsibility by his two elder brothers, and so can show no physical change in response to the goading.[101]

In chapter 116, in one of the most dramatic – and indeed, most discussed – scenes in *Njáls saga*, Hildigunnr incites her uncle, Flosi, to take vengeance for her dead husband, Hǫskuldr Þráinsson.[102] She achieves this aim through a series of personal attacks, which suggest that he is yet to have carried out appropriate vengeance and that his manhood is under question as a result. First, at his arrival at Ossabœr, she has prepared the high seat for him, which draws attention to Hǫskuldr's absence, and thus his slaying. Next, she enters the room, draws back her hair and weeps in front of Flosi, suggesting that the emotional pain she has experienced has not been assuaged. Following this, she suggests that, if the situation were reversed, Hǫskuldr would have avenged Flosi's death; this highlights his failure to exact due vengeance. She also notes that Flosi's brothers took revenge upon Þórðr Freysgoði Ǫzurarson for a much less grievous crime; this unfavourable comparison suggests that Flosi is less masculine than his close

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[101] The sons of Njáll and Bergþóra are introduced, in birth order, on pages 70-1 of *Njáls saga*.
[102] See, in particular, Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger' and Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament'.

male family members. She concludes her attempts to incite vengeance in a dramatic – and almost cinematic – climax:

> Hildigunnr gekk þá fram í skála ok lauk upp kistu sinni; tók hon þá upp skikkjuna, er Flosi hafði gefit Họskuldi, ok í þeiri hafði Họskuldr veginn verit, ok hafði hon þar verðveitt í blóðit allt. Hon gekk þá innar í stofuna með skikkjuna. Hon gekk þegjandi at Flosa. Þá var Flosi mettr ok fram borit af borðinu. Hildigunnr lagði þá yfir Flosa skikkjuna; dunði þá bloðit um hann allan.[103]
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> Hildigunnr then went out of the hall and opened up her chest. Then she picked up the cloak which Flosi had given to Họskuldr and in which Họskuldr had been killed, and which she had kept there in all the blood. She then went back into the room with the cloak. She walked in silence toward Flosi. Flosi had finished his meal and the food had been cleared from the table. Hildigunnr then draped the cloak over Flosi; the blood rained down all over him.

That the cloak was a gift from Flosi reminds him of his homosocial links with the slain Họskuldr and the responsibilities that come with them – responsibilities that, as yet, have not been met. That it has been soaked in Họskuldr's blood makes present the bodily absence of Họskuldr, the bloody remnants of his bodily being themselves urging blood vengeance. Finally, by placing the cloak over Flosi, and having Họskuldr's blood shower over him, Hildigunnr makes a tangible connection between Flosi and the dead man that still lies unavenged, reinforcing Flosi's obligation to avenge him. Hildigunnr then goes on to make the implicit explicit:

> Hon mælti þá: 'Þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi, Họskuldi, ok gef ek þér nú aptr. Var hann ok í þessi veginn. Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek sœri þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlemennsku

[103] *Njáls saga*, 291.

> þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella.'[104]
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> Then she spoke: 'This cloak, Flosi, you gave to Hǫskuldr, and I now give it back to you. He was also killed in this. I call God and all good men to witness, that I adjure you by all the powers of your Christ and by your manhood and manliness, that you should avenge all of those wounds which he had on him in death, or else be called each man's *níðingr*.'[105]

As we can see from Hildigunnr's speech not only does she draw attention to the meaning of the cloak in the ritual, but also she explicitly – and repeatedly – suggests that Flosi's masculinity is in question. She not only refers to his 'manhood' and 'manliness', both of which will be in jeopardy if he does not seek vengeance, but likewise that public opinion – that of 'good men' – will be against him as a result.[106]

It is this explicit suggestion of unmanliness – that he might be considered a *níðingr* – that is too much for Flosi to bear. Upon his masculinity being impugned, we are told that 'Flosa brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum fǫlr sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel' (Flosi was so affected by this, that he was sometimes as red as blood in the face, and sometimes as pale as grass, and sometimes as blue-black as Hel).[107] Although the triple colour change seems to go beyond the bounds of naturalistic representation, we can read at least the first two colour changes as realistic. That his face turns red as blood seems entirely plausible given that he has just been given cause to assess his actions against the prevailing norms of masculinity –

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[104] *Njáls saga*, 291.
[105] See chapter 2, page 56, n. 68, for discussion of my decision to leave *níðingr* in the original.
[106] See Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger', 186, for the suggestion that the threat – that one must comply with the demands of the *hvǫt* or be considered a *níðingr* to all men – is always at least an implicit feature of the ritual.
[107] *Njáls saga*, 292

and that he has reason to find himself wanting. Hildigunnr explicitly, and repeatedly, invokes masculinity, and his red face is the somatic index of his self-acknowledgement that his actions have failed to live up to societal expectations. Becoming pale, on the other hand, seems to me to be a likely natural next step after flushing red: once the red flush subsides the skin will of course be paler by comparison.[108] This experience of facial reddening may be seen as causative, leading Flosi eventually to the burning of Njáll and his family at Bergþórshváll.

In chapter 136, Flosi and his men ride to visit Ásgrímr at Tunga with the express intention of getting a rise out of him. Ásgrímr prepares food for his enemies and gives them hospitality – indeed, rationally, he has little other option considering that he could be easily overpowered by Flosi and his men. This is not to say that Ásgrímr is unperturbed by their presence, however. We read that 'Ásgrímr þagði um matmálit ok var svá rauðr á at sjá sem blóð' (Ásgrímr was silent during the meal and was as red to look at as blood).[109] His emotional turmoil at having to be hospitable to the killers of Njáll is evident from the change in colour of his face. As in the previous examples, such facial flushing quickly leads him to a violent reaction in an attempt to alleviate the unpleasant emotions he experiences. As soon as Flosi and his men have finished eating, Ásgrímr attempts to attack Flosi with a wood-axe. He is prevented from doing so by Glúmr Hildisson, who, along with the rest of Flosi's men, is ready to attack him in response. Flosi prevents them from doing so, however, and explains his reasoning, suggesting that 'vér hǫfum gǫrt honum ofraun, en hann gerði þat at,

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[108] Although much more rare than blushing, it is also possible for pallor to indicate shame. See, for example, Theodate L. Smith, 'Notes on the Psychology of Emotion', *The American Journal of Psychology* 26.2 (1915), 229-235 (230).
[109] *Njáls saga*, 361.

sem hann átti, ok sýndi þat, at hann var ofrhugi' (we have made too great a trial of him and he did that which he had to do, and showed that he was courageous).[110] Flosi highlights that Ásgrímr has been forced into this course of action in order to prove and preserve his masculine status.

In chapter 142, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson counsels other members of his group as to how they should behave in the legal case for the burning. After doing so he experiences facial reddening. We are told that 'var andlit hans at sjá sem á blóð sæi, en stórt hagl hraut ór augum honum; hann bað fœra sér spjót sitt; þat hafði Skarpheðinn gefit honum, ok var in mesta gersimi' (his face was like blood to look at, and great hail sprang from his eyes; he asked for his spear to be brought to him; Skarpheðinn had given it to him, and it was the greatest treasure).[111] We must remember that at this point it seems as if his leg injury will prevent him from taking part in the proceedings of the case, whether they be peaceful or violent. Although Þórhallr's body has a tendency to be over-emotional, and therefore poses some interpretative difficulties, we may perhaps read his reddened face in a similar way to those discussed above. Not only does his injured leg impact negatively upon his performance of masculinity, but also it hinders him from actively participating in the legal case.[112] Being so excluded from the masculine arena of the court might well subsequently elicit a powerful emotional reaction. Although no violent response is immediately forthcoming here as it is in the cases discussed above, we can see that such action is anticipated following this somatic performance. After departing from Þórhallr,

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[110] *Njáls saga*, 361.
[111] *Njáls saga*, 378.
[112] The relation of physical impediments to masculinity is discussed in the 'Impairment / Disability' section of chapter 2 of this thesis, 113-18.

his father Ásgrímr notes that '[e]igi var Þórhalli frænda gott í hug, er hann var eptir í búðinni, ok eigi veit ek, hvat hann tekr til' (my kinsman Þórhallr was not in a good mood when he was in the booth just then, and I do not know what he will take to).[113] His father is indeed right to expect some kind of action from his son after his emotional outburst: just three chapters later Þórhallr's emotional turmoil is commuted into violent action. Hearing that their homicide cases have been quashed, he leaps out of bed, cuts out the boil from his leg using a spear, strides purposefully all the way to the Fifth Court, and kills Grímr *inn rauði*.[114]

From these examples we can see that facial reddening in *Njála* signals an awareness of masculine failure, of not living up to the expectations of society. It is the embodied response to the recognition of this failure. Like laughter, it fulfils a socially corrective role, encouraging subjects to attempt to regain a securely masculine position. But unlike laughter, the socially corrective function of which is externally mediated through other subjects, facial reddening, and the accompanying action it prompts, is a self-reflexive process. Facial reddening further signals the strain that masculinity places upon embodied subjects: although male characters are of course complicit with the hegemony of masculinity, flushing red at their failures to adhere to masculine imperatives highlights these failures, signalling to the reader their ubiquity. Facial reddening thus draws attention to the unreasonable – and unpalatable – demands of masculinity. Nevertheless turning red, as Probyn suggests, 'always produces effects'.[115]

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[113] *Njáls saga*, 378.
[114] *Njáls saga*, 402.
[115] Probyn, *Blush*, xii.

TEARS

The final somatic index of emotion to be discussed here is the production of tears, which is the somatic response that has probably received the greatest attention from scholars of Old Norse literature. Much of this body of work suggests that tears are to be seen as unmanly or feminine, although it has also been suggested that this association is context specific and not to be seen as absolute or operating in all Old Norse texts.[116]

While in some texts tears can have a healing function (for example, *Guðrúnarkvíða in fyrsta*),[117] can serve to consolidate a community and provide resistance to a deceased's successor (several texts covering the death of Magnús *inn góði*),[118] or allow male characters to express grief without gendered opprobrium (*Laxdœla saga*),[119] it is agreed that in general the *Íslendingasögur* present male crying negatively.[120] This is particularly the case for *Njáls saga*, where tears are unanimously seen to be a form of expression antithetical to a masculine gender performance.[121]

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[116] Mills, 'Grief, Gender, and Genre'.
[117] Hill, '*Guðrúnarkvíða in fyrsta*: Guðrún's Healing Tears'.
[118] Goeres, 'How to do Things with Tears'.
[119] Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 117, n. 16.
[120] For example, Ármann Jakobsson suggests that '[c]rying is not considered masculine in the sagas' ('Masculinity and Politics', 202); Helga Kress argues that '[g]rátur er kvenlegt tjáningarform' (crying is a feminine form of expression), and that '[í] þessum menningarheimi er ókarlmannlegt að gráta, það er tákn um kvenleika og ergi' (in this culture it is unmanly to cry; it is a symbol of femininity and *ergi*) (*Máttugar Meyjar*, 33 and 77); and Cook suggests that 'men are not supposed to weep in the world of the sagas' (*Njal's saga*, xx).
[121] For example, Helga Kress has noted that '[e]t tradisjonelt tegn på svakhet er gråt, og i Njåls saga er det å grate en egenskap som utelukkende tilhører kvinner' (a traditional sign of weakness is crying, and in *Njáls saga* to cry is a characteristic that belongs exclusively to women) ('Manndom og Misogyni', 40), while Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has suggested that '[i] islændingesagaerne græder rigtige mænd ikke, i hvert fald ikke *Njáls saga*' (real men do not cry in the *Íslendingasögur*, at least not in *Njáls saga*) ('"Græder du nu, Skarpheðinn?" Nogle betragtninger over form og etik', in Heiko Uecker (ed.), *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck* (Berlin and New York, 1994), 480-9 (485, n. 15)).

Although tears have already been the focus of extensive investigation, I will here – for the sake of a full exploration of the relation of somatic indices to masculinity – give a brief overview of instances of crying in the saga.

Women seem to be able to weep in *Njála* without attracting opprobrium. In chapter 16, Hallgerðr weeps after being struck by Glúmr. The crying does not seem to be purposefully performative, and Hallgerðr appears to be genuinely upset by what has happened. Indeed, it is said that '[h]on unni honum mikit ok mátti eiga stilla sik ok grét hástǫfum' (she loved him greatly and could not calm herself, and wept out loud).[122] The fact that Þjóstólfr takes this as a reason to kill Glúmr cannot be used to suggest that this was the intentioned function of her tears: indeed, she requests that he not take vengeance for Glúmr's violence. Rather, her tears appear to be an uncontrollable expression of grief at the breakdown of her marriage. Apparently genuine grief is also expressed through crying in chapter 134. Here Yngvildr, the mother of Þorkell *fullspakr* Ketilsson and Þorvaldr Ketilsson, weeps because she foresees the death of Þorvaldr.[123] Again, the weeping does not appear to be performative – or at least not successfully so.

This does not mean that some female weeping is not performative, or that it does not have bearing upon the operation of masculinity in the saga. In chapter 6, Unnr cries when asked by her father what is wrong after it must have become apparent to her that she is physically unable to have sexual intercourse with Hrútr. While her tears no doubt indicate frustration – and likely embarrassment – at having to approach her father about such a matter, the tears also seem to

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[122] *Njáls saga*, 48.
[123] *Njáls saga*, 351-2

function performatively. Mǫrðr immediately sends for Hrútr and Hǫskuldr in order to discover what is bothering his daughter. The tears, we may suggest, function to remind Mǫrðr of his paternal duty toward Unnr. Hildigunnr's weeping at Flosi's whetting can also be read as performative.[124] Although Hildigunnr's tears here must be read as operating in conjunction with the multiple other ways in which she urges Flosi to take vengeance (discussed above), after Flosi has been incited he is quick to take action. The performance clearly relies on the gendered associations of crying as feminine and on the expected obligations of men. Indeed, as Helga Kress has noted in her discussion of this scene, 'Hildegunn grater når hun vil få Flose til å hevne drapet på Hoskuld, og understreker dermed sin kvinnelighet og hans plikt til å vise manndom' (Hildigunnr cries when she wants Flosi to avenge Hǫskuldr's death, and so emphasizes her femininity and his obligation to show manliness).[125] Tears, when shed by women, may therefore have a socially corrective function.

But it is not possible for men in *Njáls saga* to shed tears without attracting gendered opprobrium. In chapter 53 Skammkell, in attempting to slander Gunnarr, suggests that he had cried when Otkell struck him on the ear with his spur.[126] In the next chapter, a shepherd tells Gunnarr of Otkell's words and Gunnarr is clearly displeased. This is obvious not least from the words of his mother, Rannveig, who speaks to Gunnarr after he has saddled his horse and collected his weapons and helmet: 'Reiðuligr ert þú nú, sonr minn, ok ekki sá ek þik slíkan fyrr' (You look angry now, my son, and I have never seen you like this

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[124] *Njáls saga*, 289-92.
[125] Kress, 'Manndom og Misogyni', 40.
[126] *Njáls saga*, 135.

before).[127] Gunnarr is quick to seek vengeance for the slur and, together with Kolskeggr, kills eight men in revenge. The accusation of crying throws Gunnarr's masculinity into question, and he acts quickly – and violently – to restore it.

A similar insult is levelled at Skarpheðinn at his death. In chapter 130, Gunnarr Lambason mocks Skarpheðinn, suggesting that he is crying while trapped inside the burning house. Indeed, he asks him '[h]várt grætr þú nú, Skarpheðinn?' (what, are you crying now, Skarpheðinn?).[128] The question clearly functions as a gendered insult. Further evidence of this is given toward the end of the saga where Kári kills Gunnarr Lambason in Orkney for again suggesting that Skarpheðinn cried at his death.[129] Although Skarpheðinn claims that he manages to prevent himself from crying at the end of his life, it is interesting that a verse he speaks – perhaps posthumously – refers to a woman crying. The first *helmingr* of Skarpheðinn's verse is as follows:

> Mundit mellu kindar
> miðjungs brúar Iðja
> Gunnr um geira sennu
> galdrs bráregni halda[130]
>
> The Gunnr of the spell of Iði
> would not withhold eyelash-rain
> over the quarrel of spears of the warrior
> of the bridge of the offspring of the troll-woman[.]

The reference is somewhat cryptic. The saga nowhere mentions a woman with whom he is in a relationship that would likely cry over his death. Of course, if we want to rely on the idea of a historical reality behind the text, we could argue that the text simply neglects to mention her. But reading the extant text as it is,

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[127] *Njáls saga*, 136.
[128] *Njáls saga*, 333.
[129] *Njáls saga*, 443.
[130] *Njáls saga*, 336.

we may wonder – in the absence of an appropriate female character – whether the reference to a woman crying is instead the abjected weeping in which Skarpheðinn may want to take part, or perhaps even does so but refuses to admit. Indeed, Skarpheðinn, while denying that he is crying, does admit that 'hitt er satt, at súrnar í augunum' (it is true that the eyes are smarting).[131] This could easily be read as an excuse designed to cover his tears. Weeping – coded as a feminine mode of expression – is not available to the dying Skarpheðinn without attracting opprobrium. But it is possible, however, that Skarpheðinn thus abjects and projects this feminine element of himself onto an imagined other.

From the above discussions, it can be seen that tears function in different ways depending upon the gender of the weeper, and subsequently have different relationships to masculinity as a result. Women can cry tears of grief without opprobrium, and they can also use tears – whether intentionally or otherwise – to spur men on to vengeance, thereby ensuring they live up to their masculine obligations. To this extent, tears can have a socially corrective function much like laughter. For men, however, weeping is entirely unacceptable, and is to be considered an indicator of masculine failure. But that such masculine failure is clearly not beyond the bounds of the imaginable – and indeed clearly constitutes a textual anxiety – suggests a tacit recognition that masculinity cannot be unproblematically performed by all subjects.

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[131] *Njáls saga*, 333.

THE OVERLY EMOTIONAL BODY OF ÞÓRHALLR ÁSGRÍMSSON

It will have been noted that, in my above discussions of the relation of somatic indices to masculinity, I have given somewhat short shrift to Þórhallr Ásgrímsson. Þórhallr presents an exception to the standard mode of emotional representation in the saga, and also some interpretative difficulties. As William Miller notes, 'Þórhallr had a most expressive body whose actions were beyond his conscious control'.[132] The expressions that his body produces cannot in any way be deemed to be 'normal', if indeed we may hazard that an emotional norm may be produced for *Njála*. At the very least we may say that his bodily indicators of emotion are such that they would be conspicuous if attributed to any other character. He does not blush, laugh, or cry (at least not in any standard way) as other characters in the saga do. His emotional reactions are peculiarly particular to him. On hearing of Njáll's death, for example, grief causes Þórhallr to have an extreme physical reaction; we are told that 'hann þrútnaði allr ok blóðbogi stóð ór hvárritveggju hlustinni, ok varð eigi stǫðvat, ok fell hann í óvit' (he swelled up completely and a gush of blood came out of each ear, and it did not stop and he fell into a faint).[133] Not only does Þórhallr expressly state that this had been 'lítilmannliga' (unmanly), but also that others will call it shameful. Also particularly interesting is that he states that he wants to take vengeance on those who have burnt Njáll – *not* to avenge his dead foster father, but to avenge 'er nú hefir mik hent' (what has now befallen me).[134] It is the threat to his masculinity and masculine reputation that prompts him to action.[135]

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[132] Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', 98.
[133] *Njáls saga*, 344.
[134] *Njáls saga*, 344-5.
[135] Also noted by Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 241.

In chapter 135, in a section of the saga where preparations are being made for the legal case for the burning, we read of Þórhallr's leg injury. In particular, we are told that 'fyrir ofan ǫkkla var fótrinn svá digr ok þrútinn sem konulær, ok mátti hann ekki ganga nema við staf' (above the ankle the leg was as thick and swollen as the thigh of a woman, and he was unable to walk without a staff).[136] Even if we may take Carolyn Anderson's reading of the staff as a phallic support as tendentious, we must still agree with her that he is here feminized – by the simile to the woman's thigh – and that this feminization occurs as a result of his failure to immediately avenge the burning.[137] It is not until ten chapters later when he undertakes to take vengeance, after the loss of the legal battle, that he is able to purge himself of the infection and, along with it, his acquired feminine characteristic. He achieves this by a method that no reader could mistake as unmanly. He drives a spear into his leg before excising the boil, causing blood and pus to flow out of the wound. He then immediately walks out of the booth, without a limp, and kills the first of his enemies that he comes across.[138]

Finally, we must turn to chapter 142, where Þórhallr has hailstones shoot from his eyes when counselling the other members of his group on how to proceed in the legal case. While it seems likely that this extreme somatic response is tied to masculinity, it does not seem to me that it should be elided with tears. These hailstones do not attract the same opprobrium and it is not actually said that he weeps or cries (the verb *gráta* is not used), nor are the stones said to be tears. We are simply told that 'stórt hagl hraut ór augum

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[136] *Njáls saga*, 359.
[137] Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', 430.
[138] *Njáls saga*, 402.

honum' (great hail sprang from his eyes).[139] It would thus be incorrect to conflate this somatic expression with crying, and I therefore omitted it from the above discussion on tears. Rather, we can read these hailstones much like those shed by Víga-Glúmr in *Víga-Glúms saga*. Víga-Glúmr turns pale, laughs manically, and has hailstones fall from his eyes when a 'víghugr' (killing mood) comes upon him.[140] Instead of being a sign of unmanliness, such hailstones should be read as an indication that violent action – that is, action that clearly does not depart from the ideals of masculinity – is about to be undertaken. Such is the case not only for Víga-Glúmr, but also Þórhallr in this scene who, as we have seen above, will soon take appropriate action.

Social Significance: Concluding Remarks

From these discussions of the social significance of emotion scenes, we can clearly see that the production of somatic indices is inextricably linked with a subject's performance of, and relationship to, masculinity. Grinning – surely the most voluntary of all the somatic signs discussed here – seems to indicate a willing complicity with masculinity, although it is certainly the exception for this reason. A male character's masculinity can be undermined by laughter, while facial reddening and tears suggest a masculinity that has already been undermined.[141] Both laughter and flushing red are able to provide a socially

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[139] *Njáls saga*, 378.
[140] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 26.
It should be noted that, unlike in *Njála*, the hailstones in *Víga-Glúms saga* are described as *tár* (tears).
[141] It is of course interesting to note that both blushing and tears are also regarded as feminine today. I would not, however, wish to suggest that the gendered associations of a given somatic expression are somehow innate to it, or that it has a particular gendered meaning that can be abstracted from the context in which it is represented as occurring.

corrective function, encouraging male characters to fulfil their masculine obligations. However, while this function is fulfilled by other subjects in the case of laughter, facial reddening's socially corrective function is self-reflexive, relying on a male character to appraise his own actions against the norms of masculinity in order to produce effects. Tears only seem to be able to fulfil this function either when they are shed by female characters, or when other characters claim that a male character has been crying – both ways prompt action to be taken in order to prove masculinity. What laughter, facial reddening, and tears all have in common, however, is that their very presence – or even possibility – highlights the fact that masculinity fails to be totalizing in its inscription of the masculine subject. These somatic responses underscore the strain that the demands of masculinity places upon the subject. What must also be noted is that what links all of these instances of embodied emotion – perhaps with the exception of grins – is that that they are central to plot. Almost invariably, an instance of a somatic response will either be the cause or the result of a character's masculinity being called into question, and the display of such emotion will lead to action being taken. The display of emotion is therefore central to the author's method of plot development and mode of representing causation.

THE SECOND APPROACH: NARRATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF EMOTION SCENES

While the above approach focused on elucidating what I called the 'social significance' of gendered displays of emotion in the saga, this section will take a very different approach and will instead investigate the narrative significance of scenes in which somatic indices of emotion are represented. This second

approach challenges received ideas about about how we can – and indeed, *should* – read saga narrative.

Readings of emotion in saga narrative generally assume that we are able to read emotion from the somatic indices that would suggest that an emotion event is taking place; that we are able to infer – using common sense, our own experiences of emotions, or historical context – motive and emotion. Essentially, it assumes that we are able to 'read between the lines' of the saga narrative. Or that, in the words of William Ian Miller, '[e]motion in the sagas [...] must be inferred'.[142] This is something that Miller does most successfully and convincingly, using his vast knowledge of both the legal and social background to the sagas to infer what he believes to be the emotions and motives driving individual characters. Indeed, such readings have formed the basis of his recent monograph on *Njáls saga*. Miller is completely transparent about his idiosyncratic approach to the saga in this study, noting in the opening to his work that he will 'unashamedly attempt to ferret out the motives that drive the action, because deep saga realism forces that task upon us.'[143] This method certainly has its advantages, and can prove seductive. Indeed, as Judith Jesch notes, '[t]his emphasis on motives and emotions has the effect of rounding out some of the characters which the classically laconic style of the original text does not.'[144] While we may view this contribution to our understanding of the social

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[142] Miller, 'Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic', 111.
Miller is not the only critic who suggests such an imperative. Thomas Hill, for example, suggests that '[s]aga narrative is characteristically dense and cryptic; the reader is forced to elucidate, to explain, and to expand the text which he or she reads or listens to' ('The Red Faced Saint, Again', 544).

[143] Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, 14.

[144] Judith Jesch, 'Courtroom saga' [Review of William Ian Miller's *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?: A Reading of Njáls saga*], *The Times Literary Supplement* 5833 (16 January 2015), 25.

dynamics of the saga as a positive, it should also be noted, as Heather O'Donoghue indeed has in her foreword to Miller's book, that '[t]raditional literary criticism has always taken a dim view of readers taking it upon themselves to re-create backstories, or invent inner lives for fictional characters'.[145] While O'Donoghue ultimately suggests that Miller's readings will appeal to 'academics who are willing to loosen up a bit' – and this is unquestionably true – we might nevertheless wonder whether there is not a virtue in clinging to literary criticism's traditional refusal to draw conclusions about the text for which there is not clear textual support.[146] Indeed, an unforgiving critic of Miller's work might question whether he is not, in seeking out extra-textual information, asking the saga scholarship equivalent of 'how many children had Lady Macbeth?'[147]

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has written with clarity on this (potential) problem. While critics such as Miller and Jürg Glauser have recently shown us the ways in which bodies might communicate meaning[148] – and thus be read in ways which allow us to access or elucidate this meaning – Einar pointed some time ago to the potential pitfalls of approaches which attempt to move beyond the evidentiary base provided by the text itself. It is worth quoting Einar in some detail here. Noting that critics should abide by the maxim 'Quod non est in actis, non est in mundo' (what is not in the text is not in the world),[149] he further

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[145] Heather O'Donoghue, 'Foreword', in William Ian Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?: A Reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford, 2014), vii-ix (vii).
[146] O'Donoghue, 'Foreword', ix.
[147] cf. Lionel Charles Knights, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?: An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism* (Cambridge, 1933).
[148] Jürg Glauser, 'The Speaking Bodies of Saga Texts', in Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (eds.), *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honor of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout, 2007), 13-26.
[149] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 34.

claims that it is the task of the critic to avoid untenable flights of critical fancy, suggesting that it is the responsibility of the reader 'að komast hjá að leggja frá sjalfum sér inn í verkið hugmyndir, sem eru þar alls ekki til' (to avoid projecting his own ideas into the work, ideas which do not exist there).[150] According to Einar, the critic 'verður að gera sér innlífan hinn stranga stíl sagnanna og læra að færa sér í nyt hin smáfelldustu blæbrigði í orðfæri, læra að skilja hálfkveðna vísu' (must familiarize himself with the austere style of the sagas; he must learn to appreciate the significance of the slightest nuances in phraseology and to understand the art of the half-sung song).[151]

This section then asks what happens when we – as critics – merely seek to understand and appreciate the half-sung song as it stands, rather than attempting to fill in the notes that we perceive to be missing. Indeed, what happens when we refuse to infer emotion, contrary to Miller's claim that we must? Or, likewise, when we shirk the task of ferreting out emotions that has ostensibly been thrust upon us? And while it might be asked – following Einar's suggestion that '[s]álfræðileg rýni vill brjóta listarregluna, listarreglan vill slæva rýnina' (psychological analysis tends to encroach upon artistic convention, and artistic convention threatens to dull analysis) – whether an approach that refuses such apparent critical imperatives will not invariably be limited in its success, it is at this point that I am more optimistic than Einar for the possibilities of rigidly sticking to the terms of an analysis that doggedly clings to the limits set by artistic convention.[152] By refusing to (mis)read so far into the

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[150] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 34. Translation: Schach, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, 45.
[151] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 35. Translation: Schach, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, 45-6.
[152] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 74. Translation: Schach, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, 95.

saga that our conclusions become no longer supportable by textual evidence, we are instead able to appreciate the purposeful ambiguity that I believe is central to saga narrative and, indeed, to the critique of hegemonic models that is so prevalent in *Njáls saga*.

Ambiguity in Saga Narrative

One of the best-known features of saga prose is its apparently objective, externally focalized narrative style. And, for the most part, this style means that, although the narrative may be laconic, there is little room for misinterpretation. Narratives are presented as history, with the ostensibly factual narrative style tying down meaning. But where there are ambiguities, critics have tended to attempt to force a single meaning onto the text rather than appreciate the plurality of possible meanings that an ambiguous phrase, event, or sign might signify. But such an attempt to derive a unitary meaning from a given textual event seems to deny the spirit of the saga which, as Dronke noted, '[f]or the critic […] seems as slippery as an eel the size of Miðgarðsormr'.[153] Indeed, it has been more than eighty years since Empson characterized the types of ambiguity that literary language may engender, and argued for the importance of our appreciation thereof, but saga studies does not yet seem to have fully adopted a literary critical methodology which is properly attuned to such ambiguities.[154]

This is not by any means to say that ambiguity in saga literature has not been appreciated at all. Ármann Jakobsson, for example, in a brilliant article briefly – but convincingly – sketches some different types of ambiguity that can

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[153] Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes*, 3.
[154] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930).

be seen to operate in the sagas of Icelanders.[155] Ármann focuses on several types of ambiguity, including paradoxes, linguistic ambiguities, grammatical ambiguities, and ambiguous characterization. What Ármann does not focus on, however, is the way in which scenes depicting somatic changes, seemingly linked to emotion, may also be ambiguous. Similarly, Torfi Tulinius has suggested that ambiguity may be central to a poetics of the *Íslendingasögur*, but he likewise does not discuss the ambiguities that the representation of emotion through somatic indices produces.[156] As I hope the below examples will demonstrate, rather than seeing emotional ambiguities as a problem to be solved, they should be seen as an inherent part of the saga author's literary art. Moreover, such ambiguities surrounding the presentation of somatic events, I will suggest, can be seen as opening up a space from which a critique of the hegemony of masculinity may be launched, or at least from which it may begin to be imagined.

REVISITING SOMATIC SCENES

In order to demonstrate the productive ambiguity that I argue operates in the representation of somatic changes in *Njála*, it will be necessary to revisit some of the scenes already covered in the above section discussing the social significance of emotion events. I will not, of course, return to each emotion scene covered above: not only would it prove tedious for the reader, but also is unnecessary to

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[155] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 119 (2004), 37-54.

[156] Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Towards a Poetics of the Sagas of Icelanders: The Examples of *Hallfreðar saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Grettis saga*', in Annegret Heitmann (ed.), *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik 14: Arbeitstagung der deutschsprachigen Skandinavistik, 1.-5.9.1999 in München* (New York, 2001), 45-59.

establish my point. Instead, I will discuss three scenes which best illustrate my argument.

It is extremely interesting to note that scenes in which somatic changes are represented – and which are therefore used by critics to infer emotion – in fact correlate extremely badly with points at which the saga narrative plainly states that a particular emotion is being felt. For example, of the five scenes of facial reddening that were discussed earlier, in only one – Bergþóra's whetting of her sons in chapter 44 – are specific emotions terms used at all. And even here the terms used – 'reiðask' (to be angry) and 'skömm' (shame) – do not refer to the underlying emotion that the somatic change might indicate, but instead are used elsewhere in the scene to refer to emotions in the abstract.[157] Emotion terms are not used at all in relation to the other four instances of facial reddening in *Njála*. One might of course argue that this is simply a function of the fact that 'saga authors and saga characters do not especially like to indulge themselves in emotion talk and that somatic description is also rather rare'; and this argument might imply that somatic scenes and emotion terms do not coincide simply because both happen so infrequently that for both to be present at the same time is unlikely.[158] Not only would such an argument be flawed since we might well expect an author to link emotion terms to the somatic scenes which supposedly indicate emotions, but also because this position becomes untenable when we consider the number of times that emotion terms are in fact used in the saga. By my count, 'reiðr' (angry) and its derivatives occur forty-five times throughout the

[157] *Njáls saga*, 114.
[158] Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', 92.

saga.[159] Similarly I have been able to count twelve instances of 'skǫmm' (shame) and its derivatives in *Njála*.[160] While it might be fair to say, then, that the saga is not littered with emotion terms, they are nevertheless far from infrequent. It is all the more compelling, then, to note that that they are never used to qualify the somatic scenes that seem to suggest emotion, and which critics so frequently use as a basis for interpretation. The apparent avoidance of linking somatic scenes with emotion terms seems to suggest that the ambiguity which arises as a result is being put a specific – and purposeful – literary end. Indeed, that the saga author clearly does not shy away from the use of emotion words elsewhere in the saga makes their absence specifically – and seemingly only – at points in which somatic changes are in evidence all the more conspicuous and compelling.

Also interesting is the fact that saga characters are apparently able to read each other's emotions from physical appearance. For example, Rannveig, as discussed in the first section, is able to visually determine her son's anger, noting to Gunnarr, '[r]eiðuligr ert þú nú, sonr minn, ok ekki sá ek þik slíkan fyrr' (you look angry now, my son, and I have never seen you like this before).[161] Likewise Hákon *jarl*'s anger is visually apparent when he is unable to locate Hrappr in chapter 88, with the author telling us of Þráinn and his men that, 'sá þeir, at hann

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[159] Attestations of 'reiðr' and its derivatives: 'reiddisk' (*Njáls saga*, 4; all subsequent page references in this footnote are to the same text); 'reiddisk' (29); 'reiddisk' (33); 'reiðisk' (89); 'reiðr' (93); 'reiddisk' (102); 'reiði' (107); 'reiðr', 'reiði' (113); 'reiðimsk', 'reiddisk' (114); 'reiddisk' (124); 'reiðr', 'reiðir' (128); 'reiðasti' (130); 'reiðuligr' (136); 'reiðr' (154); 'reiðr' (156); 'reiðr' (158); 'reiði' [twice] (176); 'reiðr' (217); 'reiðr [three instances], 'reiðari' (218); 'reiðr' [twice], 'reiði' (219); 'reiðr' (269); 'reiði' (287); 'reiði' (289); 'reiðask' (300); 'reiði' (305); 'reiði' (354); 'reiðastan', 'reiði' (355); 'reiði' (356); 'reiði' (365); 'reiðr (367); 'reiddisk' (371); 'vígreiðir' (421); reiðasti' (439); 'reiðir' (446); 'reiðr' (447).

[160] Attestations of 'skǫmm' and its derivatives: 'skammar' (114); 'skǫmm' (137); 'skǫmm' (149); 'skǫmm' (187); 'skǫmm' (189); 'skǫmm' (315); 'skǫmm' (330); 'skammar' (345); 'skǫmm' (371); 'skǫmm' (372); 'skǫmm' (402); 'skammarvíg' (417).

[161] *Njáls saga*, 136.

var reiðr mjǫk' (they saw that he was very angry).[162] Although the somatic changes which indicate to the other characters that an emotion is being felt are not shown to us, the saga author, here at least, seems to have no qualms about linking apparent somatic changes with emotion terms. That he avoids their qualification when describing somatic events to the reader is, I think, significant. While Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has suggested in his introduction to *Njála* that '[e]ins og við er að búast af manni með þvílíka sjóngáfu, kann höfundurinn vel að beita þeirri aðferð Íslendingasagna að lýsa skapi manna með því að segja frá líkamlegum viðbrögðum' (as is to be expected of a man with such a gift for the visual, the author is well able to employ the techniques of the *Íslendingasögur* to show the mood of men by telling of physical responses), it is not altogether clear that we are able to – or indeed, meant to – determine exactly the mood being felt.[163]

I will now re-examine three scenes in which somatic changes are represented while refusing to infer emotion or detail not specifically given in the text. The first scene is Bergþóra's whetting of her sons in chapter 44. In order to appreciate the use – and indeed absence – of emotion terms in this section, it is worth quoting Bergþóra's goading, and her sons' reactions, at length:

> Bergþóra mælti, er menn sátu yfir borðum: 'Gjafir eru yðr gefnar feðgum, ok verðið þér litlir drengir af, nema þér launið.' 'Hvernig eru gjafir þær?' segir Skarpheðinn. 'Þér synir mínir eiguð allir eina gjǫf saman: þér eruð kallaðir taðskegglingar, en bóndi minn karl inn skegglausi.' 'Ekki hǫfu vér kvenna skap,' segir Skarpheðinn, 'at vér reiðimsk við ǫllu.' 'Reiddisk Gunnarr þó fyrir yðra hǫnd,' segir hon, 'ok þykkir hann skapgóðr; ok ef þér rekið eigi þessa réttar, þá munuð

[162] *Njáls saga*, 218.
[163] *Njáls saga*, cxxxii.

> þér engrar skammar reka.' 'Gaman þykkir kerlingunni at, móður várri,' segir Skarpheðinn ok glotti við, en þó spratt honum sveiti í enni, ok kómu rauðir flekkar í kinnr honum, en því var ekki vant. Grímr var hljóðr ok beit á vǫrrinni. Helga brá ekki við. Hǫskuldr gekk fram með Bergþóru. Hon kom innar í annat sinn ok geisaði mjǫk.[164]

> Bergþóra spoke, when the men sat at the table: 'Gifts are given to you all, father and sons, and you will be rendered little men, unless you return the favour.'
> 'What are those gifts?' says Skarpheðinn.
> 'You, my sons, all have the same gift: you have been called dung-beardlings, and my husband called the beardless old man.'
> 'We do not have the disposition of women,' says Skarpheðinn, 'that we become furious about everything.'
> 'Yet Gunnar became angry on your behalf,' she says, 'and he is thought to be good-tempered. If you do not take vengeance for this, then you will never avenge any shame.'
> 'The old woman is amused by this,' says Skarpheðinn and grinned, but sweat burst out on his forehead and red flecks appeared on his cheeks, and this was not usual.
> Grímr was silent and bit his lip. Helgi did not react. Hǫskuldr went out with Bergþóra. She came inside a second time and raged furiously.

Many critics seem to claim that they are able to read this scene with clarity. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, for example, suggests that:

> Hér er öllum aðiljum lýst með því, hvernig þeir bregðast við illmælinu, og það svo vel, *að ekki þarf í grafgötur að ganga um skaplyndi þeirra*. Skarpheðinn svarar með kæruleysislegum, háðslegum orðum og glottir, en þó sprettur honum sveiti á enni og rauðir flekkir koma í kinnar honum.

> Here all the participants in the scene are characterized by means of their outward reactions to the slander, and this is so skillfully done that the reader is in *no doubt regarding their inner reactions*. Skarpheðinn replies

[164] *Njáls saga*, 114.

> with indifferent, scoffing words and a grin, yet sweat breaks out on his forehead and red spots appear on his cheeks.[165]

For William Miller, 'the sweat and flushing confirm a desperation in the grin. Clearly, Skarpheðinn is furious, consumed with indignation, but he also is shamed and humiliated, hence, in fact, his fury.'[166] Similarly, for Ármann Jakobsson, Skarpheðinn 'is visibly angry; the saga mentions sweat on his brow and red spots on his cheeks.'[167] All three critics claim to be able to read the specific emotions being felt by characters in this scene based on somatic signifiers. But what, exactly, are we told by the saga itself?

The first thing to note is that emotion terms are not absent from this scene. Skarpheðinn suggests that to become angry is a feminine attribute, which Bergþóra subsequently recodes as masculine by using Gunnarr as an example of a paradigmatic male who experiences the same emotion. Bergþóra further suggests that unless vengeance is taken the sons will be shamed. We are also told that Bergþóra herself goes into a rage at the end of the scene. But none of these four emotion terms – 'reiðimsk', 'reiddisk', 'skammar', 'geisaði' – are used to qualify the somatic changes that are said to afflict the brothers. While we may be tempted to draw inferences about the meaning of the changes based on the content of the conversation about anger that takes place between Skarpheðinn and his mother, to automatically assume that the emotion being experienced is subsequently also anger would be fallacious. The reader is simply told that Skarpheðinn grins, sweats, and that red flecks appear on his cheeks. No

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[165] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, 115. Translation: Schach, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, 141. Emphasis mine.
[166] Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', 101.
[167] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics', 192.

interpretations of these somatic events are given by the saga prose, and the reader is left to her own devices, and her own – subjective – interpretations. There are of course multiple interpretations possible for each of the signs recounted. The red flecks, for example, may indeed be blushing, the tell tale sign of shame. They may signify anger. They may – perhaps less plausibly, but still possibly given the sweating – suggest he is simply too hot. If we have in mind religious iconography, we may even be tempted to read the reddening – as Thomas Hill suggests is the case for the red face of Guðlaugr Snorrason in *Heiðarvíga saga* – as 'a sign of fervent charity'.[168] Multiple interpretations are possible for this, as any other, sign, but the saga refuses to collapse this plurality of possible meanings into one singular, unitary reading.[169] By not providing an in-text interpretation, the text ensures that the polysemy of somatic signs is preserved for the reader in this episode. But – in being forced to be the ultimate arbiter of meaning in this scene – the reader is left with too wide an array of potential meanings to choose just one as dominant, despite some interpretations perhaps seeming more likely than others. All that we, as readers, can be certain of is that the range of emotions suggested through the presence of somatic indices is in some way related to, or more likely caused by, the demands of masculinity. Indeed, in this scene, not only does Bergþóra suggest that her sons will become 'little men' if they do not avenge the insults that have been launched

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[168] Hill, 'Guðlaugr Snorrason', 152. It should be noted that William Sayers has critiqued Hill's argument, suggesting that explanations based on the idea of failed honour are more likely ('The Honor of Guðlaugr Snorrason'). For Hill's reply to Sayers' critique, see 'The Red Faced Saint, Again'. The disagreement over the 'meaning' of Guðlaugr's reddened face highlights the multiple interpretations possible of a single somatic event.

[169] The difficulty of using a reddening or flushing of the face as an indicator of a particular, discrete emotion has been noted by experimental psychologists. See Lewis, 'Self-Conscious Emotions', 748.

at them, but she emphasizes the threat posed to their masculinities by repeating the offending insults. Masculinity is clearly implicated in the production of emotion in this scene even if the quality of the emotion produced is far from clear.

Similar ambiguity arises around the meaning of somatic indices in chapter 116 when Hildigunnr incites her uncle Flosi to vengeance. The scene is quoted and discussed above, so I shall refrain from repeating myself at length here. It is certainly worth mentioning once again, however, the somatic changes that afflict Flosi following Hildigunnr's *hvǫt*; we are told that 'Flosa brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum fǫlr sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel' (Flosi was so affected by this, that he was sometimes as red as blood in the face, and sometimes as pale as grass, and sometimes as blue-black as Hel).[170] The interpretation is left open: only two more brief sentences remain of the scene before the focus of the narrative shifts to Ingjaldr at Keldur. No emotion terms are used in the scene to qualify the somatic changes. Once again, then, no guide is given in the text as to how the reader is meant to interpret the somatic changes. Instead, we are left with a plurality of possible interpretations. The face red as blood could signify all those emotions that Skarpheðinn's red-flecked cheeks might suggest above. The blanching pale could signify fear, an adrenaline rush, anxiety, cold, sickness, shock. And finally, the face as blue-black as Hel, although almost certainly not naturalistic, might suggest fear, anxiety, hyperventilation, sickness, or sadness. It also, importantly, contains a reference to the goddess Hel, who Snorri – in *Gylfaginning* – describes as 'blá hálf en hálf með hǫrundar lit'

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[170] *Njáls saga*, 292.

(half blue-black and half flesh-coloured) and as being 'heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig' (rather stern-looking and fierce).[171] The simile 'blár sem hel' could also be taken as a reference to postmortem lividity, in which the blood pools in the (positionally) lower portion of a corpse, thereby causing the skin to take on a dark purple colour. The cyclical nature of the colour changes in this scene may also signify not one single emotion but rather multiple intense emotions in flux. Indeed, the text itself provides no key for a precise, unitary interpretation of these somatic events, but instead seems to revel in plurality. It is also worth noting that this is the only example of a series of three consecutive similes in the entire *Íslendingasögur* corpus: if one such simile used to describe somatic changes causes ambiguity, a triple simile heightens the ambiguity produced through an increase in the number of potential meanings which can be ascribed to these bodily signs.[172]

It is interesting to set this passage against some parallels found elsewhere in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, for example, when Þorgeirr Hávarsson learns of his father's death, it is said that he has no physical reaction. But in telling us he has no physical reaction, the author suggests what the expected reaction might have been:

> Víg Hávars spurðisk skjótt víða um heruð, ok er Þorgeirr spurði víg fǫður sins, þá brá honum ekki við þá

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[171] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edn. (London, 2005), 27.
Richard F. Allen also notes the mythological reference, suggesting that 'Flosi's face is stamped with the colors of fear and death whose power he is now forced to serve' – see *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls* saga (Pittsburgh, 1971), 169.

[172] Paul Schach, 'The Use of the Simile in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 24 (1952), 149-165 (150).
It should be noted, however, that Schach identifies a corpus of 'thirty-two Icelandic Family Sagas' (150), which, of course, is fewer than the number generally accepted to belong to this genre today. From these thirty-two sagas, Schach identifies 'a total of one hundred and forty-eight comparisons which can be classified as similes' (150).

> tíðenda sǫgn. Eigi roðnaði hann, því at eigi rann honum reiði í hǫrund; eigi bliknaði hann, því at honum lagði eigi heipt í brjóst; eigi blánaði hann, því at honum rann eigi í bein reiði[173]
>
> News of Hávarr's death shot far and wide across the district, and when Þorgeirr heard of his father's killing, he showed no reaction to that news. He did not redden because no anger ran through his flesh; he did not grow pale because no fury lay in his breast; he did not become blue because no anger coursed through his bones[.]

Here, somatic indices are given precise corresponding emotions, which tie down the possible interpretations, in this text, for such bodily changes. The author ensures that we, as readers, must draw from the somatic changes the conclusion that Þorgeirr should, if he were like other men, be angry (reiðr) and feel fury (heipt). That the author felt it necessary to give the corresponding emotions in this mock-learned passage might suggest an awareness that otherwise the somatic indices would be open to other interpretations.

In *Tóka þáttr Tókasonar*, found in *Flateyarbók*, Tóki recounts a time when, at the court of Hrólfr *kraki*, he attempted to dislodge the legendary hero Bǫðvarr *bjarki* from his place on the bench. Tóki is unable to do so, and Bǫðvarr displays a somatic response to his attempts. The event is told in Tóki's words:

> Treysta ek þá á af öllu afli, en hann sat kyrr, svá at hvergi gat ek honum vikit. En stundum var hann rauðr sem blóð, en stundum bleikr sem bast eðr blár sem hel eðr fölr sem nár, svá at ýmsir þessir litir færðust í hann, svá brá honum við.
>
> Then I tried with all of my strength, but he sat still so that I could not move him anywhere. And sometimes he was as red as blood, and sometimes as pale as bast or as

[173] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, 127-8.

> blue as Hel or as pale as a corpse, so that by turns these colours came to him, so affected was he by this.[174]

As in *Njála*, no qualification is made about the type of emotion or emotions that we assume Bǫðvarr must be feeling. We may perhaps guess at its range from the context – that it has been caused by his manly honour being challenged – but we are given no clue as to specifics. Instead, the narrative moves swiftly onwards, and the reader is left to the task of interpretation herself.

In chapter 21 of the late *fornaldarsaga Hjálmþés saga ok Ǫlvis*, Hjálmþér loses the body of the seemingly deceased Hǫrðr (who later turns out to be the king, Hringr, in a different form), and he swears not to be happy until he has found him. When Hringr subsequently bids Hjálmþér and his sworn-brother, Ǫlvir, to be happy at his court, Hjálmþér has a particularly somatic response; we are told that 'Hjálmþér át hvárki né drakk. Hann var stundum bleikr, stundum rauðr sem blóð' (Hjálmþér neither ate nor drank; he was sometimes pale, sometimes as red as blood).[175] The saga does not qualify the emotions signified by the somatic change. The potential polysemy of the physical change is in fact put to literary effect. It is not until several lines later that we are told that Hjálmþér's red face has been noted by his sworn-brother Ǫlvir, and that Hjálmþér has drawn his sword. But we are still not given an emotion term which would tie down meaning definitively; instead, the range of possible meanings is simply narrowed. It then takes two strophes to be spoken before we discern the reason for Hjálmþér's reaction: King Hringr looks too similar to Hǫrðr for Hjálmþér's liking. But even then we are not given an emotion term to qualify

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[174] Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Flateyarbók*, 4 vols. (Akraness 1944-5), II. 221.
[175] *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, in Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (eds.), *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3 vols. (Reykjavík, 1943-4), III. 229-282 (277).

Hjálmþér's reaction. Indeed, the saga allows the tension to increase – with Hjálmþér wanting to use his sword and the king becoming angry – until the very end of the chapter. It is only at this point that Hringr reveals himself to be Hǫrðr, enabling the two men to be happily reunited. In this example, somatic indices can be used to be build tension precisely because they do not signify emotion perfectly. Indeed, the multiplicity of potential meanings is employed for a meaningful literary purpose.

In chapter 8 of the fifth branch of *Karlamagnús saga*, Rollant experiences a change in colour upon hearing that Karlamagnús is besieged in a castle and requires his help to escape. Indeed, the saga tells us that, '[e]n er Rollant heyrði þessi tíðendi, þá skiptust litir hans, ok var hann stundum bleikr sem bast, en stundum rauðr sem blóð' (and when Rollant heard these tidings, then his colour changed, and he was sometimes as pale as bast, and sometimes as red as blood).[176] While the exact emotion being experienced is not specified by the text, the range of possible meanings is tied down somewhat. Rollant's verbal response to the news – 'Jlla líkar mér nú, ef Karlamagnús konungr frændi minn verðr yfirstiginn af heiðnum mönnum, ok er þat eigi vel er vér erum honum nú svá fjarri staddir' (I would now be displeased, if my kinsman King Karlamagnús is to be to be overcome by heathen men, and it is not well that we are now so far away from him) – limits the somatic change to signifying a negative emotional response.[177] But the precise nature of the emotional response is nevertheless left open to interpretation.

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[176] Carl Rikard Unger (ed.), *Karlamagnus saga ok kappa hans: Fortællinger om keiser Karl Magnus og hans jævninger* (Christiania, 1860), 380.
[177] *Karlamagnus saga*, 380.

One further parallel can be found in chapter 20 of the translated romance *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*. Here, one of the king's servants tells the king that he has seen Elóris and Blankiflúr sleeping peacefully in bed. However, the boy has mistaken Flóres for Elóris, as Flóres has no beard. As soon as the king is told what the boy has seen he immediately experiences a change of colour: 'Skipti konungr nú litum, var hann stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum bleikr' (Now the king changes colour, he was sometimes as red as blood, and sometimes pale).[178] The king has realized the mistake since he has only recently spoken to Elóris. In this text, any potential ambiguity in the somatic response is quickly resolved: the king draws his sword, and launches – in a 'reiði' (rage) – toward the tower in which the lovers sleep.[179] But once again, that the somatic event needs to be qualified – in this instance as rage – suggests that unqualified somatic indices are polysemous and ambiguous.

These parallels to Flosi's physical response to Hildigunnr's whetting indicate that such emotional responses do not always go unqualified in saga narrative. And indeed, the fact that qualification is sometimes used suggests that such qualification is necessary for the reader to derive a particular singular meaning from the text. Without it, the reader is left with a multitude of possible interpretations for a given sign, and this productive polysemy is moreover something which can be put to a purposeful literary end. The absence of emotion terms as qualifiers for somatic events in *Njála* then – not least given the author's clear artistry – should also be seen as purposeful.

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[178] Eugen Kölbing (ed.), *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* (Halle, 1896), 66-7.
[179] *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*, 67.

The third and final scene that I wish to discuss in terms of the creation of productive ambiguity is found in chapter 123, where a settlement is attempted for the death of Hǫskuldr. The scene, again, has been discussed at length above, so here I only wish to focus on Flosi's response at seeing the robe set on top of the pile of silver:

> Síðan tók hann upp slœðurnar ok spurði, hverr til mundi hafa gefit, en engi svaraði honum. Í annat sinn veifði hann slœðunum ok spurði, hverr til mundi hafa gefit, ok hló at, ok svaraði engi.[180]
>
> Then he picked up the robe and asked who had given it, and no one answered him. A second time he waved the robe and asked who had given it, and laughed, and no one answered.

Flosi's laugh here has been interpreted in different ways. Wolf has suggested that although not easy to read, it might suggest 'uneasiness' or may be 'a type of scornful laughter'.[181] Low suggests it is a 'nervous noise' prompted by his fears of public humiliation.[182] For Tirosh, the laugh is taken as a signifier that 'there is nothing special about Flosi's first inquiry' as to who has given the robe.[183] There is no consensus. This is unsurprising given that the saga does not qualify the emotion that Flosi might be experiencing at this moment. Instead, the reader is once again left to determine the quality of emotion for herself. And once again the contextual clues suggest the importance of masculinity to the provocation of this somatic response: as discussed above, the garment (whether itself gendered or not) throws Flosi's masculinity into question, as is confirmed by the gendered slurs he throws immediately afterwards.

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[180] *Njáls saga*, 313-4.
[181] Wolf, 'Laughter in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', 107.
[182] Low, 'The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin', 103.
[183] Tirosh, 'Víga-Njáll', 214.

By revisiting some somatic scenes, we can see that ambiguity seems to be a purposeful effect used in the representation of bodily changes that appear to be caused by emotions. By studiously avoiding the use of emotion terms to qualify somatic indices of apparent emotion, the saga author instead ensures the proliferation of possible meanings. Indeed, unitary meanings are eschewed for polysemy. Furthermore, we can see that as with the 'social significance' approach above, masculinity still plays a central role in the production of somatic responses. The only difference is that, while suggesting that masculinity is implicated in the production of emotion, a close reading of the saga does not in fact indicate any more than that emotion seems to be being felt. But since the avoidance of emotion terms, and the creation of ambiguity, seems purposeful – if not, to avoid the wrath of conventional literary criticism, *intentional* – we must, of course, ask 'but why?' – to what specific literary purpose is this ambiguity being put in saga narrative?

AMBIGUITY AND THE POETICS OF SAGA NARRATIVE

Just as there is more than one way of reading a given somatic signifier in saga narrative, there is equally more than one way in which we might view as purposeful and literary the ambiguities produced by saga narrative. In this section I would like to discuss two ways of reading the narrative significance of emotion events that are ambiguous in their meaning. The first reads the ambiguity produced by such emotion scenes as inhibiting the unproblematic running of emotion simulations in the mind of the reader. The second views the ambiguous emotion scenes as providing a feminine disruption and

destabilization of the signifying system of the text, which is itself viewed as masculine. The two readings can be seen as complementary, with the inhibition of emotion scripts and the disruption of gendered textual practice working in tandem. Finally, it should be noted that such readings – which some may well view as overly speculative – are meant to be suggestive rather than definitive.

Inhibiting Emotion Simulation

Although we may feel that Alan Berger is overly optimistic when he argues that saga authors are able to use their narrative art to 'generate an orderly emotional response in their audiences', he nevertheless raises the important issue of the emotions felt by the reader while reading *Njála*.[184] The notion of emotion simulation, derived from experimental psychology, holds that a reader automatically simulates the emotions being portrayed in the text (in this case, the saga) that they are reading.[185] As Ed Tan suggests, 'readers seem to mentally represent emotional states of characters, including the emotional significance of the situation'.[186] Similarly, Keith Oatley has suggested that '[a] play or novel runs on the minds of the audience or reader just as a computer simulation runs on a computer. Just as a computer simulation has augmented theories of language, perception, problem solving, and connectionist learning, so fiction as simulation illuminates the problem of human actions and emotions.'[187] And what is true for plays and novels is clearly true, in this instance at least, for saga narrative. But it

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[184] Alan J. Berger, 'The Meaning of *Njáls saga*', *Skandinavistik* 11 (1981), 1-8 (1).
[185] The concept of emotion simulation has been productively used by Larrington in an investigation into language-specific systems of emotion in translations into Old Norse ('Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?').
[186] Tan, 'Film-Induced Affect', 19.
[187] Keith Oatley, 'Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation', *Review of General Psychology* 3.2 (1999), 101-17 (105).

of course follows that for emotions to be simulated in the mind of the reader, it must be apparent what the emotions being felt by characters are. Without the text functioning – to use Oatley's analogy – as a program that the mind is able to run, then a simulation will not be possible. Saga narrative is, for the most part, entirely unambiguous, with meaning being conveyed unproblematically to the reader. We might even note that the complex grammar of Old Icelandic goes a long way to tying down meaning, and preventing much of the grammatical ambiguity that can be present in Modern English texts. But, as we have seen, somatic scenes *are* ambiguous features of saga narrative. Since these scenes do not represent a single emotion – but rather suggest a range of possible emotions – then they will clearly prevent the simulation from running in the mind of a reader. We might hypothesize that scenes of somatic change then block and disrupt the emotional simulation which would otherwise run, unimpeded, from the rest of the saga narrative in which meaning is not ambiguous. It is obvious in these somatic scenes that an emotion is taking place – and the reader will be stirred correspondingly – but the lack of a clear emotion qualifier inhibits the proper running of the emotion simulation. Such a disruption of emotion processing will inevitably cause a cognitive assessment of the source of the disruption. Indeed, since the '[e]motions that are produced by narrative are the participant's own'[188] – that is, as readers feel the emotions as *genuine* – then a disruption to these emotions will, I believe, lead to a more cognitive evaluation of what has caused the emotional disturbance. Or, to conceptualize it in a slightly different way, we may suggest that these scenes cause the reader to experience

[188] Oatley, 'Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact', 115.

what Sianne Ngai has called 'the inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation in general – what we may think of as a state of feeling vaguely "unsettled" or "confused," or more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling.'[189] In trying to remedy this confusion over one's own feelings, a reader will only have recourse to evaluation of what has caused the affective disorientation. Since the saga of course does not provide emotion terms in the representation of somatic changes, the reader is left solely with the clues given in the surrounding narrative. As noted above, masculinity and its demands on individual subjects are heavily implicated in scenes in which characters display somatic changes. We may thus suggest that by disrupting emotion simulations through the deployment of ambiguous somatic indices, precisely at moments at which the influence and burden of masculinity are emphasized, the author of *Njála* prompts the reader to reflect upon the status and role of masculinity in at least the saga, and perhaps society. It has been suggested that the experience of emotions while reading can have a transformative effect on the reader and the way in which they view themselves, which persists beyond finishing a text.[190] We may then suggest that by prompting a critical re-evaluation of the relation between the individual and the forces of masculinity, the saga perhaps enacts, through moments of ambiguous somatic representation, a kind of social intervention into the representation, and

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[189] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2005), 14.

[190] See, for example, Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Maja Djikic, and Justin Mullin, 'Emotion and Narrative Fiction: Interactive Influences Before, During, and After Reading', *Cognition and Emotion* 25.5 (2011), 818-833; Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, Sara Zoeterman, and Jordan B. Peterson, 'On Being Moved by Art: How Reading Fiction Transforms the Self', *Creativity Research Journal* 21 (2009), 24-29; Don Kuiken, David S. Miall, and Shelley Sikora, 'Forms of Self-Implication in Literary Reading', *Poetics Today* 25.2 (2004), 171-203; and David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, 'A Feeling for Fiction: Becoming What We Behold', *Poetics* 30 (2002), 221-241.

perhaps even praxis, of models of gender. Ármann Jakobsson has rightly argued that 'paradox activates the mind of the reader'; so too does emotional ambiguity.[191]

Disrupting the Masculine Text

Just as emotion scenes may disrupt, through the production of ambiguity, emotion simulation in the mind of the reader, such ambiguity may also be seen as a feminine disruption to the masculine signifying system of the saga text.

The apparently objective, externally focalized nature of saga narrative is frequently noted.[192] As, of course, is the importance of law to the saga. Indeed, not only is the law to be seen as a central theme in the *Íslendingasögur*,[193] but the law – its theories, practice, procedure, and stories that have arisen as a result of legal battles – has also been seen as central to the genesis of saga narrative.[194] This is nowhere more the case than in *Njála*, which, as Guðbrandur Vigfússon noted, 'is the Saga of Law, *par excellence'*.[195] Indeed, the fabric of the saga is

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[191] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Some Types of Ambiguities', 42.

[192] See, for example, O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 35; Dronke, 'The Role of Sexual Themes', 31; and Denton Fox, '*Njáls Saga* and The Western Literary Tradition', *Comparative Literature* 15.4 (1963), 289-310 (292).

[193] Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca, 2006), 121. See also, Hannah Burrows, 'Cold Cases: Law and Legal Detail in the Íslendingasögur', *Parergon* 26.1 (2009), 35-56, in which Andersson is cited (35).

[194] See, for example, Torfi Tulinius, who speaks of the 'intimate links between saga writing and the practice of law' ('Towards a Poetics of the Sagas of Icelanders', 57), and Carol Clover, who notes that the legal trial 'has had profound consequences in popular narrative from the early Middle Ages on' ('Law and the Order of Popular Culture', in Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (eds.), *Law in the Domains of Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 97-119 (100, n. 7)).

[195] Guðbrandur Vigfússon (ed.), *Sturlunga saga: Including the Islendinga saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1878), I. xlii, as cited by Lars Lönnroth in *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley, 1976), 6.

For the importance of law to the saga, see, for example: Ian R. Maxwell, 'Pattern in *Njáls saga*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 15 (1957-61), 17-47 (24); Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?, passim.,* but especially 17-8; Fox, '*Njáls Saga* and The Western Literary Tradition', 296; Henry Ordower, 'Exploring the Literary Function of Law and Litigation in *Njal's saga*', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 3.1 (1991), 41-61; Allen, *Fire and Iron*, 60 and 173;

saturated with legal formulae, so much so that characters sometimes parrot – on occasion 'incorrectly' – large sections of procedure from law codes. Both the externally focalized narrative, in which signifier and signified seem for the most part to align unproblematically, and the centrality of law in the saga can – when seen through the lens of French feminist and psychoanalytic thought – be regarded as rendering the saga prose a masculine text. Indeed, Lacanian theory sees the realm of linguistic signification – the Symbolic – as being structured by the Law of the Father, the prehistoric incest taboo that is held to structure all human endeavour.[196] The law – in its legal sense – can likewise be seen as deriving its power from the Law of the Father and the Symbolic order.[197] In the terminology of Julia Kristeva, then, saga prose is predominantly to be seen as phenotext, as it 'issue[s] from societal, cultural, syntactical and other grammatical constraints' and therefore is able to 'insure communication'.[198] A genotext, on the other hand, resists meaning and frustrates clear communication, reflecting the complexities and ambiguities of the body which produces it. However, texts are usually made up of a mixture of both phenotext and genotext, and *Njáls saga* is no exception.[199]

Jesch, 'Courtroom saga', 25; Cook, *Njal's saga*, xxiii; Karl Lehmann and Hans Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Die Njálssage insbesondere in ihren juristischen Bestandtheilen: ein kritischer Beitrag zur altnordischen Rechts- und Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin, 1883); and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð* (10, 26, and 51).

[196] As Jacques Lacan suggests, '[i]t is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law' - see 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York, 2001), 33-125 (74). See also 67 and 73.

[197] For links between the law and Lacanian theory, see David S. Caudill, 'Lacan and Legal Language: Meanings in the Gaps, Gaps in the Meanings', *Law and Critique* 3.2 (1992), 169-210. Anderson also equates the law of the *Alþing* with the Symbolic order ('No Fixed Point', 427).

[198] Leon S. Roudiez, 'Introduction', in Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984), 1-10 (5).

[199] The suggestion that *Njála* may be regarded as a masculine text as a result of its legal density is bolstered by comparison with *Laxdœla saga*. *Laxdœla* is the only saga with a female protagonist, and it has been noted that it reflects on the position, status, and experiences of women more than

As Heather O'Donoghue, along with many others, has suggested, one of the central themes of this saga is 'the power struggle between the two genders'.[200] Not only is this struggle played out on a human, interpersonal level by the characters in the saga, but the saga narrative itself may be seen to enact a struggle between masculine and feminine, between phenotext and genotext. While the majority of the saga prose is clearly phenotext, we may see emotion scenes as moments at which the saga is more genotext than phenotext. As we have seen above, emotion scenes are moments of acute ambiguity in an otherwise transparent narrative. Therefore we can see these moments of ambiguity as representing an irruption of what Kristeva designates as the Semiotic into the Symbolic signifying order of the saga. The Semiotic refers to a pre-linguistic realm in which the distinction between signifier and signified, object and subject, is collapsed. It is a phase of confusion, polysemy, and indeterminate meaning, most often associated with – and indeed, defining – poetic language, which must be repressed in order for the Symbolic order to arise.[201] The Semiotic is also, of course, intimately associated with the somatic – particularly the maternal body – and so the linking of moments of somatic expression with semiotic irruption is particularly compelling. The presence of these moments dominated by the Semiotic, broadcast through the medium of the

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any other saga. It is interesting then that the author of this text, as Burrows suggests, seems to consciously 'exclude detailed legal reference' ('Cold Cases', 47) and, moreover, that what legal reference there is relates to 'family law [...] areas which women may be expected to have an interest in and familiarity with' ('Cold Cases', 49). For studies discussing women in *Laxdœla*, see: Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 193; Finlay, 'Betrothal and Women's Autonomy'; Loren Auerbach, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdœla Saga*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 25 (1998-2001), 30-52; and Robert Cook, 'Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*', *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992), 34-59.

[200] O'Donoghue, 'Women in *Njáls saga*', 92.

[201] It is interesting to note that William Empson argues – although obviously from a different critical perspective – that 'the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry' (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3).

body, can be seen as a return of the repressed, providing resistance against the masculine Symbolic text. This is not, of course, to suggest that *Njáls saga* is a previously undiscovered example of *écriture féminine*: the saga clearly cannot, in general, be seen as an inscription of the feminine. Indeed, quite the opposite. But the saga certainly gives brief glimmers of the polysemy and multiplicity, the 'profusion of meanings', that are the hallmarks of *écriture féminine*.[202] Indeed, these moments certainly – to use Hélène Cixous' phrase – 'blow up the law', and by extension the masculine text it constitutes, producing an explosion of ambiguity, its shockwaves rippling through both text and reader. [203] Furthermore, it is compelling that such moments of ambiguity, of feminine resistance to the hegemony of the masculine text, coincide so perfectly with points at which masculinity is foregrounded so that it may be examined and questioned. The text functions to provide resistance to masculine narrative at the same points at which the narrative shows characters experiencing an embodied resistance to the demands of a violent hegemonic masculinity. Scenes

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[202] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976), 875-893 (885).
The work of French feminist thinkers has previously been used in dialogue with Old Icelandic texts by Helga Kress in *Máttugar Meyjar*, where it is also suggested that the feminine manifests as a disruption of language.
Mats Malm has also suggested that a notion of effeminate language can be seen to operate in Old Icelandic literature. Whether or not this is imported from classical tradition, however, is debateable. Nevertheless, Malm argues that 'saga style [...] should be seen as a deliberate choice, one which avoids the florid style' – see 'The Notion of Effeminate Language in Old Norse Literature', in Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (eds.), *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout, 2007), 305-20 (320). The deliberateness of choice clearly also holds true – if not more so – for deviations from the norm of saga style, as discussed in this chapter. Lönnroth has similarly argued that narrative style in the sagas is linked to social structures, suggesting that 'their heroic ideal was the strong silent man, and this idea is reflected in their way of telling a story' (*Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*, 162). Although not theorized in the same way, or to the same extent, both Malm and Lönnroth likewise suggest that gender can be inscribed in narrative.
[203] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 887.

of somatic disturbance coincide with, and indeed are intimately linked with, moments of semiotic destabilization.

NARRATIVE SIGNIFICANCE: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Scenes in which the somatic indices of emotion are represented in *Njáls saga* are inherently ambiguous. If we refuse to read beyond the information supplied by the text itself – as traditional literary criticism would advocate – then we must necessarily see somatic signifiers as polysemous, suggesting a multitude of possible interpretations. Rather than seeing this as a problem to be unpicked, we should instead see such ambiguity as productive, and as an essential facet of the style of the saga. Indeed, I do not think it would be to go too far to speak of a poetics of affect in saga narrative – or at least in *Njála* – which hinges upon the ambiguity that representations of affect engender. Such ambiguity is amenable to interpretations from the perspective of both cognitive psychology and French feminist thought, although the conclusions drawn from these approaches should not, for the moment, be viewed as more than suggestive. But their ability to explicate the destabilizing effect that emotion scenes have on narrative cohesion is nevertheless compelling.[204]

[204] It may perhaps be interesting to consider the effect of emotion scenes in saga narrative in relation to the similarly destabilizing effect produced by skaldic verses that do not mesh perfectly with the saga prose that surrounds them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has interrogated the relationship in *Njáls saga* between masculinity and episodes in which emotions seem to be represented through somatic indices. This has been achieved through two very different approaches.

The first approach sought to elucidate the social significance of emotion scenes. It was productive in viewing somatic changes as being governed by, and indeed as *being*, gendered forms of social practice. Indeed, masculinity was seen to heavily affect, and inflect, the production of laughter, grinning, facial reddening, and tears in this saga. Emotional displays were seen to be a method of social control and simultaneously an indicator that the embodiment of masculinity, and the fulfilment of its demands, may be seen as a burden.

The second approach rejected the idea that there is any deeper meaning to the emotion scenes that can legitimately be accessed. Instead, such emotion scenes were regarded as purposefully ambiguous, and as occurring at points in the narrative at which the unreasonable demands of masculinity are highlighted. This perhaps suggests that the reader is *meant* to be confused and uncertain at these points, so that they will reflect upon the status and function of masculinity. Moreover, it was suggested – tentatively – that the text itself may enact a resistance to the dominance of masculine textuality. Such a reading of textual resistance to masculinity appears all the more compelling when we recall that the two protagonists – Njáll and Gunnarr – both embody, through their respective beardlessness and distaste for violence, resistance to the traditional model of masculinity.

Whichever approach is preferred, or viewed as more valid, it is clear that masculinity plays an important function in the production and representation of

emotion in *Njáls saga* and, furthermore, that a study of emotion scenes in this saga sheds light upon the construction and function of masculinity itself.

CHAPTER 4:
THE LIMITS OF SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE MASCULINITY

In the two preceding chapters I examined the construction and operation of masculinities in the sagas, and interrogated the role that the body can play in undermining the masculine ideal. In doing so, I demonstrated that masculine subject positions are almost invariably seen as flawed, as a result of both the intersectional nature of subject formation and the nigh-on-impossibility of living up to the demands of hegemonic masculinity. Consequently, in performing gender, characters inevitably fall short of the masculine ideal, and characters' bodies indicate this strain through somatic signifiers, which themselves function to highlight the burden that masculinity places upon the embodied subject. Most male characters in the *Íslendingasögur*, then, fail to live up to the demands of masculinity.

But what of those characters whose masculinity appears to remain untarnished and whose claim to a masculine subject position seems entirely legitimate? While these characters, as we have seen, are few and far between in saga literature, they do crop up occasionally.[1] Considering the power that this masculine ideal clearly holds over the Old Icelandic literary *imaginaire*, it would be unsurprising if these characters were glorified in saga literature for achieving

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[1] That such characters appear at all seems significant. We would never encounter – in non-fictional, 'real life' – a man capable of embodying masculine ideals so exceptionally, which perhaps suggests not only that ideals of masculinity are unreachable, but also that literary works that deal with exceptionally masculine men serve to explore the limits of masculinity. Literature can be seen to function as a space in which masculine ideals can be pushed to extremes so that their consequences may be explored. While Grettir (this chapter will argue) enables extreme masculinity to be seen as socially problematic, and therefore negative, a character like Superman (to take a modern example) may be considered to be a positive incarnation of masculine ideals. Whether such portraits of extreme masculinity are positive or negative clearly has implications for wider attitudes towards masculinity.

that which is impossible for most characters. But this does not appear to always be the case. Rather, such characters can experience an equally problematic, though qualitatively different, relationship with masculinity, which impedes their integration into society and hinders their social acceptability.

This section will therefore take a different investigative strategy from those which have preceded it. Rather than examining the ways in which a character may fail to live up to the ideal of masculinity, this chapter will explore the representation and treatment of a character that appears to embody masculinity to an exceptional degree, and perhaps even too well. Through a study predominantly focusing on the character Grettir of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* – but with reference to other texts as appropriate – it will be seen that (hyper)masculinity problematizes a character's relation to self, family, society, and the very notion of masculinity itself. When masculinity is successfully totalizing in its discursive inscription of the embodied subject it is just as problematic, it will be argued, as it is when it fails. This chapter will therefore examine the following: Grettir's personal attributes as shown in his childhood and as an adult; his heterosocial relations; his typically anti(homo)social relations with other masculine characters; his few, atypically positive, interpersonal relations with other male characters; and his relations with supernatural beings in the saga. Finally, it will consider the possibility that through this social failure, the figure of Grettir, like other characters studied so far, serves to offer a critique of the hegemony of masculinity, albeit by very different means.

At this point, before beginning a close textual analysis, it is worth briefly discussing the manuscript context of *Grettis saga*. This saga, which has been

notably, if contentiously, described as the 'last of the great Icelandic sagas',[2] was likely written in the early fourteenth century.[3] Although classed as an *Íslendingasaga* – and more specifically an outlaw saga – by modern literary critics, the surviving manuscripts problematize this classification somewhat. *Grettis saga* is attested in five 15th and 16th century manuscripts (and a number of later, 17th century, paper copies). The content of these parchment manuscripts is relevant to our understanding of the contemporary reception of *Grettis saga*. In AM 556a-b 4to *Grettis saga* is found alongside two other outlaw sagas – *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Harðar saga* –, as well as three late romances, and one *fornaldarsaga*. It is also the only manuscript to preserve the sexually explicit poem *Grettisfærsla*, which is alluded to in chapter 52 of *Grettis saga*, and which will be discussed in more detail below.[4] AM 152 fol. contains eleven sagas, of which *Grettis saga* is the only *Íslendingasaga*; the remaining ten are all either romances or *fornaldarsögur*. AM 551 4to contains three sagas – *Bárðar saga*, *Víglundar saga*, and *Grettis saga* – all of which, while classed as *Íslendingasögur*, are outliers of the genre. The manuscript AM 571 4to is what remains of a codex which contained at least four sagas. In its extant form it contains one romance, two *fornaldarsögur*, and a small fragment of *Grettis saga*. Finally, in DG 10 fol.,

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[2] Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (trans.), *Grettir's Saga* (Toronto, 1974), vii.
[3] Fox and Hermann Pálsson, *Grettir's Saga*, vii; Peter Foote, 'Introduction', in George A. Hight (trans.) and Peter Foote (ed.), *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (London and New York, 1965), v-xv (v); Kirsten Hastrup, 'Tracing Tradition: An Anthropological Perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*', in John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (eds.), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense, 1986), 281-313 (292).
[4] *Grettis saga*, 168.
For an edition and English translation of *Grettisfærsla* see: Kate Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*: The Handing on of Grettir', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 30 (2006), 65-94.

Grettis saga is to be found unaccompanied in the manuscript.[5] *Grettis saga* then, it can reasonably be inferred, was classified – if it was at all – on the basis of its fantastical and romantic elements, rather than its socially realist mode. Indeed, as Kirsten Hastrup has argued, 'the scribes of the 15th-16th century Iceland made *Grettis saga* part of a distinct category of popular tales of outcasts, supernatural beings, and romantic figures'.[6] This classification, however, need not prevent the discussion of *Grettis saga* – as here – under its generic label of *Íslendingasaga*. For my purposes, its status as an outlier of the genre is crucial: while its prevailing mode is clearly that of the *Íslendingasaga* genre, its popular narratives of outcasts and the supernatural enable the exploration and interrogation of social themes which are here writ large and pushed to their limit. It has rightly been suggested that the character of Grettir is multidimensional and polysemous,[7] and that despite the fact that many interpretative approaches have been employed in the literary analysis of the character of Grettir, it still remains the case that '[n]o single label exhausts the complexity of Grettir's nature'.[8] This is undoubtedly true, and I make no claims to propose an all-encompassing 'theory' of the character of Grettir. What I do hope to achieve, however, is a contribution to the multifaceted interpretative discourse which surrounds *Grettis saga*, by approaching the text from the critical vantage point of masculinity studies. If we regard Grettir as a hypermasculine character – as I

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[5] For a more detailed discussion of the manuscript witnesses see Hastrup, 'Tracing Tradition'; and Robert Cook, 'Grettis saga', in Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 1993), 241-3.
The fact that *Grettis saga* is attested by more than one manuscript witness means that there are variations between versions. However, these are so minimal that we can still talk of *Grettis saga* in the singular for the purposes of literary analysis.
[6] Hastrup, 'Tracing Tradition', 287.
[7] Russell Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society in *Grettis saga*', *Alvíssmál* 11 (2004), 3-16 (6); Hastrup, 'Tracing Tradition', 290.
[8] Hastrup, 'Tracing Tradition', 289.

argue below we should – we can begin to unlock the motivations or impulses which lie behind many of his actions and colour his interpersonal relationships. Such a strategy enables us to move beyond problematically simplistic, but ubiquitous, appeals to Grettir's 'ill-fated' nature which are used to explain many facets of the saga, and it likewise allows us to account for the way in which 'he reacts differently depending on his circumstances'.[9] As will be demonstrated below, whether or not Grettir acts positively or negatively to other characters is dependent upon the interaction of his and their masculinities.

GRETTIR AS A CHILD

Both in the initial portrait of Grettir and at several points throughout the saga, mention is made of his personal attributes. When Grettir is first introduced to the reader as a child he is described as both 'mjǫk ódæll' (very troublesome) and 'óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum' (hostile, trickish in both words and deeds).[10] Immediately, then, attention is drawn to his fundamentally antisocial nature. We are also given a physical description of Grettir:

> Grettir Ásmundarson var fríðr maðr sýnum, breiðleitr ok skammleitr, rauðhærðr ok næsta freknóttr, ekki bráðgǫrr, meðan hann var á barnsaldri.[11]
>
> Grettir Ásmundarson was a handsome man, broad-faced and short-faced, red-haired and rather freckly, not precocious while he was in childhood.

Despite what is – given his later prowess – a rather unremarkable initial picture of Grettir, his childhood upbringing is anything but ordinary. His *ódæll* nature

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[9] Kathryn Hume, 'The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73.4 (1974), 469-486 (476).
[10] *Grettis saga*, 36.
[11] *Grettis saga*, 36.

first manifests itself in his fraught relationship with his father, Ásmundr. Immediately after the introduction of Grettir we are told that '[e]kki hafði hann ástríki mikit af Ásmundi, fǫður sínum' (he did not receive much affection from Ásmundr, his father).[12] Whether Grettir's troublesome nature is cause or effect of his father's coldness is an open question, although it is worth noting, as Robert Cook points out, that the way in which the reader learns first of Grettir's troublesomeness, and only then of Ásmundr's lack of affection, may imply that the fault lies with Grettir.[13] However, the saga's earlier mention of Ásmundr's problematic relationship with his own father – the saga suggests, perhaps proleptically, that 'var fátt um með þeim feðgum' (there was a coolness between father and son) – foreshadows Ásmundr's relationship with his own son, and perhaps indicates that such hostility may be a family trait rather than a personal failing on Grettir's part.[14]

Regardless, the manifestations of this troubled relationship are startling. Once Grettir has begun to grow in strength, his father asks him to contribute to the running of his farm by doing some work for him.[15] Grettir reluctantly acquiesces, and Ásmundr tasks him with looking after his geese. Before Grettir begins this task, his father explicitly notes that their future relationship is dependent upon Grettir's successful undertaking of this job: 'Leys þú þetta vel af hendi, ok mun þá batna með okkr' (Perform this well, and it will get better

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[12] *Grettis saga*, 36.
[13] Robert Cook, 'The Reader in *Grettis saga*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 21 (1984), 133-54 (136).
[14] *Grettis saga*, 34.
This has also been noted by Cook, 'The Reader in *Grettis saga*', 136, and Marlene Ciklamini, 'Grettir and Ketill *hængr*, the Giant-Killers', *Arv* 22 (1966), 136-55 (143).
[15] *Grettis saga*, 37.

between us).[16] Ásmundr's paternal affection, then, is dependent upon Grettir's subordination and deference to his dominance.[17] Unsurprisingly, Grettir does not – or cannot – heed these words. We are told that Grettir had trouble herding the geese, and found the goslings particularly difficult to deal with. This irks Grettir and he is unable to maintain his composure. Not long afterwards, the goslings are found dead, and the geese are found to have had their wings broken. When questioned by his father, the young Grettir, in a chilling verse, freely admits that he is the cause of the birds' deaths:

> Þat gerik víst, es vetrar,
> vind ek hals á kjúklingum;
> enn þótt ellri finnisk,
> einn berk af sérhverri.[18]
>
> Truly I do that, when winter comes,
> I twist the necks of the goslings;
> and even if the older ones are to be found,
> I alone overcome each one.

Not only does this verse alert us to Grettir's potential for physical violence, but also it demonstrates his need – mirroring his father's – to dominate others and to place himself in a superior position. Further, as Heather O'Donoghue has noted, '[t]he verbal echo of the duel – "bera af" (to get the better of) – underscores the verbal indeterminacy of Grettir's reference to "ellri" (older ones).'[19] That is to say, that there is ambiguity in Grettir's use of the word 'ellri', which at the same time as ostensibly being a reference to the older geese, simultaneously functions as a thinly veiled declaration of his desire to do violence to his father, and to overcome his father's position of paternal dominance. Likewise, de Looze also

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[16] *Grettis saga*, 37.

[17] A similar point is made by Ármann Jakobsson in 'Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 27 (2003), 5-24 (16).

[18] *Grettis saga*, 37.

[19] Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford, 2005), 189.

notes that here Grettir displaces his wish for patricide from the physical to the verbal plane.[20] Such an interpretation is reinforced by the presence of the phrase 'es vetrar' (when the winter comes) when it is read as referring to the advancing age of his father and not simply as a seasonal reference. There is also perhaps a shadow of a concealed threat in Grettir's use of the word 'hals' (necks), since 'hals' is also the genitive singular form of the poetic noun 'halr' (man).[21] The phrase 'vind ek hals', while grammatically awkward, may nevertheless conceal a further subtle allusion to Grettir's insubordination and his desire to do harm to his father.

Grettir's violently insubordinate urges do not remain confined to the linguistic realm, however. After Grettir fails to look after the geese adequately, his father decides to give him a second job. This time he is to rub his father's back by the fireside. Grettir characterizes this task as 'verkit lǫðrmannligt' (work fit for a feeble man).[22] His disdain is clearly fuelled by the fact he perceives the job to be of no challenge to a man such as himself. And indeed, as Carolyne Larrington notes, this task also forces him into the much-maligned position of a *kolbítr*.[23] Nevertheless, he holds the job for a time. However, when Ásmundr accuses him of being lazy, and 'mannskræfan' (a miserable coward) – an insult which, through its association with cowardice, touches dangerously close to functioning as a *níð* insult – things take a turn for the worse.[24] After this insult, Grettir intentionally takes his father's urge to rub his back harder too literally,

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[20] Laurence de Looze, 'The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 106 (1991), 85-103 (93).
[21] Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v. 'halr'.
[22] *Grettis saga*, 38.
[23] Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', 151.
[24] *Grettis saga*, 38.

violently scratching his back with a comb; indeed, we are told that 'Grettir sér nú, hvar stóðu ullkambar í setinu, tekr upp kambinn ok lætr ganga ofan eptir baki Ásmundar' (Grettir now sees where the wool-combs stood on the bench, takes up the comb and drags it down over Ásmundr's back).[25] In response to Ásmundr's belittling insults, which call into question his masculine status, Grettir responds in such a way as to try and assert his own dominance over the situation and, in particular, over Ásmundr. By indicating that Ásmundr is not able to subordinate him – and indeed, that he is a physical threat to his father – Grettir suggests that his masculinity is not one to be marginalized. Beyond this act of violence, Grettir indicates his wish to do further violence to his father in a verse addressed to his mother. The second *helmingr* of this verse is as follows:

> lætk á hringa hreyti,
> hǫr-Gerðr, tekit verða
> gørr, sék gildra sára
> gǫgul, óskornum nǫglum.[26]
>
> I will make the scatterer of rings,
> Linen-Gerðr, be seized by
> – I see blood of great wounds –
> uncut nails.

The reference to 'óskornum nǫglum' (uncut nails) appears to function as an allusion to the talons of carrion birds. Grettir's professed intention to see his father seized by uncut nails thus suggests that he wishes to kill him, thereby rendering him suitable food for scavengers. We may, perhaps, also wonder whether this verse contains a reference to the rite of the blood-eagle.[27] The image also, of course, serves as a metaphor for the bloody violence he does

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[25] *Grettis saga*, 38.
[26] *Grettis saga*, 39.
[27] For discussion of the blood-eagle see: Roberta Frank, 'Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle', *English Historical Review* 99 (1984), 332-43.

against his father with the wool-combs. After the incident we are unsurprisingly informed that, '[e]kki batnaði frændsemi þeira Ásmundar við þetta' (their relationship was not improved by this).[28]

In true folkloric style, Ásmundr assigns a third task to Grettir after he has failed to execute the first two to his satisfaction. Grettir is to look after Ásmundr's horses and, in particular, he is to heed the desires of the mare Kengála: he is to follow her, and look after the horses wherever she chooses to lead them to graze.[29] Grettir is more approving of this work than the other two jobs that he was previously assigned. While he called those jobs '[l]ítit verk ok lǫðrmannligt' (petty work fit for a feeble man) and 'verkit lǫðrmannligt' (work fit for a feeble man), this job he classifies as 'karlmannligt' (manly).[30] He does, however, have a reservation about the task, suggesting that 'illt þykki mér at treysta merinni' (it seems ill to me to rely on the mare).[31] We can perhaps infer from this that his dissatisfaction with this task stems from the fact that he will be subordinate to another. This is a situation made worse, perhaps, by the fact that his new master is both an animal and female, making his subordination to her all the more shameful for him. We learn that due to Kengála's grazing habits, Grettir is forced to stay out in the cold all day, every day, and he takes umbrage at this. Indeed, we are explicitly told that 'Grettir hugsar þá, at hann skal gera eitthvert þat bellibragð, at Kengálu yrði goldit fyrir útiganginn' (Grettir then thinks that he

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[28] *Grettis saga,* 39.
[29] *Grettis saga*, 39-40.
[30] *Grettis saga*, 37, 38, and 40.
We may also wonder whether the first two tasks are unacceptable to Grettir because of their association with women's work: herding geese is evocative of the folkloric figure of the 'goose-girl', while rubbing his father's back at the fireside forces Grettir both into a space of domesticity and to undertake a task that we may have expected to be his mother's responsibility.
[31] *Grettis saga*, 40.

should perform some trick so that Kengála would be repaid for grazing out in the winter).[32] And, as we have come to expect from Grettir, he reacts with rash violence: he mounts her and, amid a violent struggle, uses a sharp knife to flay the hide off her back.[33] This mutilation is without doubt the most repulsive and violent of Grettir's rebellious childhood acts. We are told that the horse is no longer able to tolerate the cold of the pasture and must stay indoors. When Ásmundr learns of Grettir's cruelty he is furious and blames him for the horse's condition. Grettir's chilling reaction to his father's accusation underscores the fact that Kengála's mutilation was an action deliberately designed to provoke his father: we are simply told that 'Grettir glotti ok svaraði engu' (Grettir grinned and said nothing in reply).[34] After this third attempt to make Grettir work for him, he gives up on his son, but notes that Grettir will be treated worse by him as a result.[35] This particular vignette also sheds light on the ability and tendency of a subject's masculinity to dominate and subordinate other subjects. While Grettir clearly bests his father with his unrelenting insubordination, Ásmundr himself in turn dominates his wife, Ásdís. Indeed, following the incident with Kengála, Ásmundr speaks the last verse of the chapter, in response to Ásdís' premature praise of her son. The first *helmingr* of this verse is as follows:

> Fyrst hefir flegna trausta,
> fær prettat mik, Grettir,
> fljóð eru flest en prúðu
> fullmólug, Kengólu[36]

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[32] *Grettis saga*, 40.
[33] *Grettis saga*, 40.
[34] *Grettis saga*, 41.
His silent grin is, of course, reminiscent of those of Skarpheðinn in *Njáls saga*, as discussed in chapter 3, pages 157-61.
[35] *Grettis saga*, 42.
[36] *Grettis saga*, 41.

First Grettir has flayed
trusty Kengála,
he has deceived me;
proud women are the most overly talkative.

Not only does Ásmundr here admit that he has been defeated by Grettir, and thereby shows his subordination to him, but he simultaneously silences his wife, displaying his own masculine dominance over her.[37]

With regard to these instances of childhood rebellion Ármann Jakobsson has suggested that 'Grettir's violence has no purpose: it is meaningless and uncalculated.'[38] While it may, perhaps, be considered uncalculated, it cannot be seen – and should not be treated – as meaningless. An understanding of Grettir's motivations in these incidents is crucial to an appreciation of his character and, more specifically, of one facet of his masculinity. It also clearly sheds light on his later behaviour and actions. In each of the three examples above, Ásmundr tries to force Grettir into a subordinate position. And in each case, Grettir resists this attempt, his violent actions being bids to assert his own dominance over his father or the unfortunate creatures which come to stand in for him. As discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, the attempted oppression of other men (and women) is an intrinsic facet of masculinity, both today and in Old Norse saga society. In particular, it is the preserve of hegemonic masculinity – the culturally exalted form of masculinity – to subordinate *all* other masculinities.[39] Grettir's childhood need to dominate other subjects therefore indicates his will – undoubtedly unconscious – to perform hegemonic masculinity. Part of Grettir's masculinity can thus be seen as the need to oppress any other characters that might pose a

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[37] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 191-2.
[38] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', 17
[39] Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', 587.

threat to his masculine identity. In this respect he is clearly *hyper*masculine. And indeed, we might here begin to see one of the reasons that hypermasculinity is seen as problematic. The extreme assertion of dominance that is characteristic of hypermasculinity runs contrary to the cultural imperative to obey one's father, and thus disrupts the usual social hierarchy.

Noting that Grettir's extreme will to masculine domination is a function of his hypermasculine subjectivity describes an essential character trait which will below be seen to affect the character's entire life. But it does not go far enough in examining *why* Grettir strives to inhabit such a subject position.

The distinctive family dynamic which surrounds Grettir as a child easily lends itself to psychoanalytic readings. The most explicit reading in this vein has come in the form of Russell Poole's article 'Myth, Psychology and Society in *Grettis saga*',[40] although more general comments, which imply the possible value that a psychoanalytic reading might hold, have also been made.[41] No psychoanalytic interpretation which focuses on the cause of Grettir's hypermasculinity has been produced to date, however. In the initial portrait of Grettir, we read that '[e]kki hafði hann ástríki mikit af Ásmundi, fǫður sínum, en móðir hans unni honum mikit' (his father Ásmundr gave him little affection, but

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[40] Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society'.

[41] For example, Davide Zori and Jesse Byock note that 'lack of affection surrounds Grettir even as a boy', ('Introduction', in Jesse Byock (trans.), *Grettir's Saga* (Oxford, 2009), vii-xxv (xiv)), while O'Donoghue notes that in Grettir's adult life, '[i]t is as if the fundamental split in his relationship between his father on the one hand, and his mother on the other, is being constantly replayed' (*Skaldic Verse*, 192).
The validity of psychoanalytic approaches to medieval literature is of course a matter of debate but, as Carl Phelpstead notes, 'psychoanalysis has become so thoroughly embedded in contemporary discourse that it inevitably informs one's thinking about sex and sexuality' ('Size Matters', 421). We must nevertheless, of course, ensure that we keep in mind the distinction between actual subjects and literary creations.

his mother loved him dearly).[42] Grettir is seen to mirror these feelings, stating a little later that 'at bezt es barni […] móðir' (the mother is best for the child).[43] Given the interactions detailed above, in which Ásmundr attempts to subordinate Grettir and make him do his bidding, Russell Poole's suggestion that '[i]n true Lacanian fashion, Ásmundr stands for the Law and for control' is clearly compelling.[44] Poole does not, however, explore fully the consequences of such an interpretation. Also, while rightly noting that 'Grettir's father competes with this resolute mother for dominance in their son's upbringing', and that scholarship often overlooks Ásdis' role in the formation of her son's character, Poole overlooks the gender performance of Grettir's mother, viewing Ásmundr and Ásdís as paradigms of paternal masculinity and maternal femininity, respectively.[45] While it is true that Ásmundr takes on the role of 'archetypal father', Ásdís clearly is not an archetypal mother. Indeed, if both parents performed the roles of feminine mother and masculine father to the letter of a psychoanalyst's case-book, we would expect Grettir to behave very differently from the way in which he does. As Richard Klein notes:

> In the normal development of the little boy's progress toward heterosexuality, he must pass […] through the stage of the "positive" Oedipus, a homoerotic identification with his father, a position of effeminized subordination to the father, as a condition of finding a model for his own heterosexual role.[46]

This clearly does not map onto Grettir's situation in which he resists occupying a position of effeminized subordination to Ásmundr. His Oedipal situation then, is

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[42] *Grettis saga*, 36.
[43] *Grettis saga*, 50.
[44] Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society', 10.
[45] Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society', 9.
[46] Richard Klein, [Review of *Homosexualities in French Literature*], *MLN* 95.4 (1980), 1070-80 (1077), as cited in Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 23. See also: Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', 31-5.

abnormal for a male subject, and his Oedipal crisis is not resolved in the way that would be expected. In fact, Grettir's Oedipal state resonates more strongly with a situation which ostensibly produces the 'abnormal' homosexual subject today: 'the development of the male homosexual requires the postulation of the father's absence or distance and an abnormally strong identification by the child with the mother, in which the child takes the place of the father'.[47] Both of the conditions for this Oedipal scenario are met – Ásmundr is cold and emotionally distant, while Grettir is extremely close to his mother – and yet we can detect no hint of aberrant sexuality or feminine identification in the character of Grettir.[48] His sexual encounters are entirely with female characters, and his hypermasculinity in fact precludes a feminine gender performance. These facets of his identity are best seen as the result of Ásdís' pseudo-paternal role, and her own performance of a modality of (female) masculinity.[49] When the young Grettir elects to travel abroad to Norway, his father is, as is to be expected, distant and unsupportive. In particular he refuses to furnish Grettir with a weapon when he requests that he be given one.[50] This can be seen as an extension of Ásmundr's reluctance to acknowledge or validate his son's masculine subject position. Crucially, it is Ásdís who fulfils this role for Grettir:

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[47] Klein, [Review of *Homosexualities*], 1077. See also: Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* (London 2001), 123-245 (144-7).

[48] Grettir's tendency to associate predominantly with women cannot be seen as evidence for his own femininity. Rather, it is better seen as indicative of his hypermasculinity: women pose little challenge to his masculinity, so he is able to interact heterosocially with fewer problems than he experiences in homosocial relations, which must usually be combative in order to satisfy his own sense of superiority.

[49] For further discussion of female masculinity see the epilogue to this thesis.
We may also conjecture that the saga author had an (extremely *avant la lettre*) understanding of Oedipal scenarios and was anxious that the family situation in which Grettir is placed would, given an actual subject, produce an effeminized hero. It is perhaps in part for this reason that the saga author emphasizes the masculine performance of both Grettir and Ásdís.

[50] *Grettis saga*, 49.

> Hon tók þá undan skikkju sinni sverð búit; þat var allgóðr gripr. Hon mælti þá: 'Sverð þetta átti Jǫkull, fǫðurfaðir minn, ok inir fyrri Vatnsdœlar, ok var þeim sigrsælt; vil ek nú gefa þér sverðit, ok njót vel.'[51]
>
> Then she took from under her cloak an ornamented sword; it was an exceptional treasure. She then spoke: 'Jǫkull, my grandfather, owned this sword, as did previous Vatnsdalr men, and it was victorious for them. Now I wish to give the sword to you – use it well!'

As Heather O'Donoghue has noted, '[i]t is hard not to interpret the sword as a symbol of Grettir's manhood, and thus especially significant as his mother's gift, withheld by his father.'[52] This is undoubtedly true, but we may also read more into Ásdís' own possession of the sword before she gives it to her son. If the sword is a symbol of manhood, then what does it mean that Ásdís has clearly possessed it for a time herself? The fact that the sword is brought out 'undan skikkju sinni' (from under her cloak) – rather than retrieved, for example, from a chest – may be seen to naturalize her possession of the phallic symbol: as far as the reader is concerned, Ásdís always keeps the weapon on her person. Her possession of a phallic symbol suggests that she herself is to be seen as enacting a form of female masculinity. Indeed, we may compare her with the heroine of the *fornaldarsaga Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. In this saga, the shield-maiden Hervör breaks into her father Angantýr's barrow in order to claim as her inheritance the sword Tyrfingr.[53] She retains Tyrfingr for a time, until her son – Heiðrekr – is capable of taking over possession of the sword. Carol Clover has argued that Hervör is here to be seen as a 'functional male' since in breaking into

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[51] *Grettis saga*, 49-50.
[52] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 192.
[53] Christopher Tolkien (ed.), *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (London, 2014), 10-23.

the barrow and appropriating the sword, she is adopting a male 'role'.[54] Rather than 'roles', I am more inclined to see such female characters as inhabiting masculine subject positions – that is to say, that they exhibit a form of female masculinity. If we thus view Ásdís as inhabiting such a subject position, then the dynamic of the Oedipal triangle between Ásmundr, Ásdís, and Grettir changes dramatically. In a 'normal' resolution of the Oedipal crisis there are different routes for the female and the male child. As Coppélia Kahn notes:

> though she [the female subject] follows the same sequence of symbiotic union, separation and individuation, identification, and object love as the boy, her femininity arises in relation to a person of the *same* sex, while his [the male subject's] masculinity arises in relation to a person of the *opposite* sex. Her femininity is reinforced by her original symbiotic union with her mother and by the identification with her that must precede identity, while his masculinity is threatened by the same union and the same identification. While the boy's sense of *self* begins in union with the feminine, his sense of *masculinity* arises against it.[55]

This is the expected trajectory assuming one masculine male and one feminine female parent. Given Ásdís' gender performance, this is clearly not the Oedipal situation in which Grettir finds himself, however. While his masculinity might still arise against a female sexed subject – his mother – his sense of self cannot be regarded as being originally in union with the feminine (or at least not solely so). Considering Ásdís' performance of a modality of masculinity, his sense of self is from the outset masculine. His is a masculine subjectivity originating in union with the masculine, but whose individual subjectivity simultaneously necessarily arises against this same masculine, as performed by Ásdís. Grettir then, from a

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[54] Clover, 'Maiden Warriors', 40.

[55] Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (California and London, 1981), 10, as cited in Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 24-5.

psychoanalytic point of view, is a character whose masculinity is unquestionable from inception but, at the same time, this masculinity must constantly assert itself over other masculinities in order to validate itself *as* a masculine self; as a result, Grettir's investment in the project and performance of masculinity exceeds that of other male characters. This reading clearly resonates with Grettir's later behaviour in the saga, and functions as a model of his interpersonal relationships.

Grettir's father, Ásmundr, further functions in such a way as to generate a heightened sense of masculinity in his child. According to the work of Nancy Chodorow, when a father is emotionally distant,

> boys tend to seek identification with the category of (hyper) masculinity as a means to make a symbolic ("positional") connection with a father who is not personally available. This transference to, and identification with, the phallic imagery of masculinity eventuates in a familiar hypermasculine stance[.][56]

Ásmundr is clearly one such distant father, and it is compelling to see this problematic initial father-son relationship as formative of Grettir's hypermasculine subjectivity.[57] Furthermore, considering the lack of paternal approval or affirmation of his masculine subjectivity, it is unsurprising that Grettir, later in life, constantly seeks to prove his masculinity. Indeed, as Michael

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[56] Glen O. Gabbard, Bonnie E. Litowitz, and Paul Williams, *Textbook of Psychoanalysis*, 2nd edn. (Washington, 2012), 138, here paraphrasing Nancy J. Chodorow, 'The Enemy Outside: Thoughts on the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 3 (1998), 25-38.

[57] To recast this in explicitly Lacanian terms, Ásmundr's emotional distance means that Grettir identifies not with his own biological father – whose masculine subject position is not, of course, one and the same as the hegemonic masculine position – but instead with the Symbolic Father, the Lacanian *Nom-du-père*, which *can* be equated with hegemonic masculinity. Further evidence of such a positional identification is suggested by Grettir's linguistic virtuosity: Lacan explicitly identifies the Name- or Law-of-the-Father as being purely linguistic in nature (Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', 73). Indeed, for Lacan, the phallus is the master signifier from which all language derives – see Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 2001), 311-22.

S. Kimmel has noted, '[w]e [men] are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant us our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval.'[58] Grettir's manhood is neither accepted nor approved of by his father in his formative years; he is left to seek such male approval in the world outside of the family unit. Such initial experiences of male-approval (or lack thereof) are clearly formative of what Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson call 'Grettir's obsessional feeling that he must be superior to everything.'[59]

A study of the saga's account of Grettir's childhood relations with his parents reveals that he has an intensely strong need to dominate other characters, which can manifest itself in violently physical altercations with those who would challenge him. This facet of his character can be seen as a function of his hypermasculinity. Furthermore, if we accept a psychoanalytic reading of the story of Grettir's formative years, this hypermasculinity may be considered to be a direct result of the relations with, and between, his parents during his youth.[60] But his simultaneous needs to dominate other characters and to constantly prove his masculinity are by no means the only markers of Grettir's hypermasculinity. Indeed, Grettir displays many other hypermasculine traits.

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[58] Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (New York, 2005), 33. See also the 'Men Judging Men' section of chapter 2 of this thesis, 56-61.
[59] Fox and Hermann Pálsson, *Grettir's saga*, x.
[60] For a foil to this parental situation, which suggests the impact of parenting on later behaviour, we may look to *Finnboga saga*. Here, the young Finnbogi (Urðarköttr), although initially rejected by his father, finds himself in the care of loving foster-parents. It is telling that Finnbogi – who appears preternaturally strong much like Grettir – does not display the same need to dominate others or to prove his masculinity incessantly.

FURTHER (HYPER)MASCULINE ATTRIBUTES

Once Grettir is no longer a child, greater focus is placed upon his physical attributes. We are told that he grew 'mikill vexti' (very large in stature),[61] and there are multiple instances in the saga where Grettir's size is used as a feature by which to recognize him.[62] Concomitant with his extraordinary size is his prodigious strength. This is displayed continuously throughout the saga, and in various ways. He conquers all (human) opponents he comes across (as long as they do not outnumber him more than four to one: indeed, we are explicitly told that Grettir's strength is greater than that of four able-bodied men).[63] Even the revenant Glámr, despite the curse he pronounces on Grettir, is ultimately overcome by Grettir's physical strength. Grettir's prodigious strength is also memorialized by Sturla *lögmaðr* in the final chapter of the saga: it is said that Sturla thought 'at hann var sterkastr á landinu sinna jafnaldra' (that he [Grettir] was the strongest in the land among his peers).[64] When Grettir lacks human opponents he demonstrates his strength by trying it against the landscape itself. Indeed, as Foote acutely notes, Grettir 'has a rash strength which will respond to any physical challenge.'[65] For example, after the *Alþing* at which he is sentenced to lesser outlawry disbands, Grettir is said to display his strength by lifting a large boulder: 'Þá hóf Grettir stein þann, er þar liggr í grasinu ok nú heitir Grettishaf. Þá gengu til margir menn at sjá steininn, ok þótti þeim mikil furða, at

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[61] *Grettis saga*, 42.
[62] *Grettis saga*, 154 and 233.
[63] For example, in the wrestling match against two brothers who are both named Þórðr, we are told that 'var þat dómr þeira, er hjá sátu, at þeir væri eigi sterkari tveir en Grettir einn, en hvárr þeira hafði tveggja manna megin, þeira sem gildir váru' (it was the judgement of those who were sat there that the two of them were not stronger than Grettir alone, and each of them had the strength of two men of worth) (*Grettis saga*, 236).
[64] *Grettis saga*, 289.
[65] Foote, 'Introduction', in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, xii.

svá ungr maðr skyldi hefja svá mikit bjarg' (It was at that time that Grettir lifted that stone, which lies there in the grass and which is now called Grettir's-Lift. Then many people went to see the stone, and they thought it a great wonder that so young a man should raise so great a boulder).[66] Grettir is thus shown to be stronger than other men; concurrently, the fact that people go to marvel at Grettir's strength suggests that such approval – notably lacking in childhood – is part of his motivation in undertaking such feats.[67] Indeed, Grettir's actions frequently appear to be motivated by the need to in some way prove his masculinity.[68] In bodily terms, then, Grettir clearly lives up to the physical ideals of hegemonic masculinity, going beyond what could reasonably be expected of any ordinary man.

Sexually, too, Grettir seems to adhere to the dictates of the hegemonic masculinity of saga society. According to the saga, he only ever has sexual relations with women, and no hint of an aberrant sexuality is given in the text. There is one point at which this facet of his masculinity may at first appear to be questioned, but his claim to a masculine position ultimately remains untarnished. In chapter 75, the size of Grettir's penis appears, for a moment, to be smaller than would otherwise be expected of a man of his strength and stature. Grettir has fallen asleep in the hall of the farm at Reykir, to which he has swum in an effort to procure fire for Drangey. While sleeping, the covers have fallen off his naked body, and in the morning a maidservant at the farm enters

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[66] *Grettis saga*, 48. See also *Grettis saga*, 102, for another Grettishaf on which Grettir tests his strength.

[67] Cook offers a similar interpretation, arguing that Grettir undertakes such feats in order to prove himself stronger than other men so that he does not need to also defeat them in violent combat ('The Reader in *Grettis Saga*', 147).

[68] See, for example, the discussion of his interpersonal interactions below.

the room. She speaks thus to the farmer's daughter: 'Svá vil ek heil, systir, hér er kominn Grettir Ásmundarson, ok þykki mér raunar skammrifjamikill vera, ok liggr berr. En þat þykki mér fádœmi, hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri, ok ferr þetta eigi eptir gildleika hans ǫðrum' (So I will be blessed, sister: Grettir Ásmundarson is here. And to me he seems to be rather broad of chest, and lies there naked. But it seems extraordinary to me how small he is shaped down below. This is not in accordance with the rest of his perfection).[69] In the service of his psychoanalytic reading, Russell Poole has prematurely, given the events immediately following the maidservant's comments, suggested that this observation provides 'anatomical reason to doubt his full maturation'.[70] Following the maidservant's comment on the apparently laughably small size of his flaccid penis, however, Grettir violently demonstrates that he has indeed reached sexual maturation. But first he speaks the following *helmingr*:

> alllengi má ungum,
> eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
> lágr í læra skógi,
> lotu, faxi mér vaxa.[71]
>
> far greater for me, a young man,
> may grow the little critter
> in the forest of the thighs;
> Stone-Freyja, brace yourself!

Grettir clearly suggests that while in a flaccid state he may indeed be rather physically unimpressive, but that this is not the case under the appropriate circumstances of sexual arousal. To Grettir's mind, the appropriate circumstances have clearly arisen and, after speaking the verse, he violently

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[69] *Grettis saga*, 239.
[70] Poole, 'Myth, Psychology and Society', 13.
[71] *Grettis* saga, 241.

demonstrates his sexual prowess by raping the woman.[72] Indeed, as Carl Phelpstead has noted, Grettir here 'demonstrates his manhood by subjugating […] the woman who has mocked him.'[73] Grettir thus convincingly establishes that the fact that his penis only appears to be diminutive when he is not aroused, and thus in a flaccid state, is not an impediment to his claim to masculinity. This is the only point at which the reader has cause to question Grettir's ability to live up to the medieval Icelandic masculine ideal as a result of his sexual status or physicality. But such doubts are quickly banished by Grettir's actions.

Indeed, elsewhere in the saga there is no hint that Grettir is endowed with an aberrant or lacklustre sexuality that is not both appropriately masculine and (hetero)normative in its expression. In fact, quite the opposite is true. In chapter 52, for example, allusion is made to the sexually explicit poem *Grettisfærsla*.[74] The saga tells us that this poem was composed for amusement, and the poem is indeed amusing for its gross obscenity.[75] Despite its ostensible mockery, if we may call it that, the poem in fact functions to reinforce Grettir's masculine status.[76] The poem, as noted above, is only preserved in one manuscript, AM

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[72] O'Donoghue similarly notes that here he 'substantiates his claims with appropriate action' (*Skaldic Verse*, 225).
[73] Phelpstead, 'Size Matters', 430.
Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir similarly notes that this scene 'suggests that sexual violence against women was generally regarded as a powerful weapon to keep them in their place' (*Women in Old Norse Literature*, 125).
[74] *Grettis saga*, 168.
[75] *Grettis saga*, 168.
[76] It should be noted that doubt has been cast on whether the Grettir of *Grettisfærsla* should be seen as one and the same as the protagonist of *Grettis saga* (see Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*', 67-72). However, whether at the time of the poem's original composition the two Grettirs were seen as manifestations of the same character is of little importance to this study. Through intertextual association, a reader of *Grettis saga* today is unable to help eliding the Grettir of the saga with the Grettir of *Grettisfærsla*. And this latter literary representation of Grettir, whether originally based on Grettir Ásmundarson or not, clearly colours our reading of the protagonist of the saga that bears his name. Likewise, the compilation of AM 556a-b 4to which, as noted above, preserves both *Grettis saga* and *Grettisfærsla*, clearly suggests that we may legitimately read the saga in light of the poem, and vice versa.

556a-b 4to, and the witness is physically poor, having been subject to censorship at some point in its history, likely as a result of the poem's obscenity.[77] Furthermore, nineteenth-century attempts to restore some of the lost text instead proved detrimental and further damaged the witness.[78] Nevertheless, the extant lines give us a clear flavour of the poem in which, as Kate Heslop has noted, 'the protagonist's indiscriminate sexuality is itself the focus'.[79] The poem reads as a catalogue of the sections of society with whom Grettir has had sexual relations. It is said that he 'fucks' or 'screws'[80] all manner of people, including maidens, men, widows, other men's wives, farmers' sons, farmers themselves, provosts, courtiers, governors, bishops, abbots, kings, barons, dukes, counts, knights, earls, abbesses, nuns, and reverends.[81] Indeed, it seems to be almost an understatement when the poem tells us that 'streður hann þat er kvikt er flest' (he fucks most living things).[82] Crucially, it is Grettir who, in every given pairing, is the active partner: he is never himself penetrated and thus his masculine status is not called into question.[83] In fact, by having a sex life that is, in both

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[77] Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*', 69.
[78] Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*', 69.
[79] Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*', 66.
[80] Old Norse 'serður' and 'streður' (*Grettisfærsla*, *passim*.).
[81] *Grettisfærsla*, 82-3.
[82] *Grettisfærsla*, 83.
[83] It should be noted that there is one point in the poem which could potentially suggest that Grettir has been the passive partner in homosexual anal sex. Line 175 reads 'svó [ok] rassragur sefi', which Heslop suggests has two possible interpretations. According to Heslop this could either be rendered as 'so too an arse-fucking one might soothe him' or 'so too an arse-fucked one might soothe him'. However, neither 'arse-fucking' nor 'arse-fucked' are ideal translations for 'rassragur' and so the two alternative translations proposed by Heslop collapse into one: 'so too might one whose aberrant sexuality is concerned with the arse soothe him'. Nevertheless, an ambiguity remains. Given that the soothing that the 'rassragur' is said to provide quite possibly refers to anal sex, it is possible to interpret the line as casting Grettir as the passive partner in such a relation, but given the extant content of the rest of the poem, this seems unlikely. The alternative interpretation, in which Grettir is placed in an active position, seems far more likely. Another translation which would avoid this issue entirely is also possible and perhaps more plausible. The line could simply be rendered 'thus might one whose aberrant sexuality is concerned with the arse calm down', or perhaps in this context, 'thus might one whose aberrant

senses of the word, quite so active, his adherence to the masculine imperative to be the penetrative partner in sexual relations with others is here taken to hyperbolic extremes.

But it is not just the sheer number of people whom Grettir sexually dominates that is of significance here. The focus, as Heslop has noted, is not simply upon the act of penetration itself, but rather is also placed upon the objects of these sexual acts. And, as she notes, the list of these objects reads as 'an inventory of worthies, male and female'.[84] This is of significance to our reading as it suggests that one of *Grettisfærsla*'s functions is to demonstrate not only that Grettir adheres to the masculine dictate that he must penetrate others, but also that he goes beyond this by sexually subjugating all others, many of whom would otherwise be thought socially superior to him. By violently penetrating effectively all others, he asserts his power, using his masculine sexual prowess to demonstrate his social, physical and sexual superiority. Much like the rape of the maidservant discussed above, Grettir uses his ability to violently penetrate others as a means of dominating them. In *Grettisfærsla*, Grettir's masculinity subjugates and marginalizes that of all others, ensuring that his masculinity is dominant and all others are subordinate to it. Through intertextual allusion to *Grettisfærsla* in *Grettis saga*, the sexual facet of the saga-Grettir's masculinity is confirmed as hypermasculine, being reinforced by the poem-Grettir's voracious sexual appetite. Not only is Grettir hypermasculine in his physicality, then, but he is to be seen as hypermasculine in his sexuality also.

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sexuality is concerned with the arse work off the frustration'. Translating the line in this way does not give rise to the ambiguities inherent in the other translations.

[84] Heslop, '*Grettisfærsla*', 70.

It is easy to agree, then, with Lotte Motz's observation that 'the proofs of manhood [are] so easily given by Grettir' (even if we may not be convinced by her larger reading of *Grettis saga* as repeatedly re-enacting age-old ritualistic patterns of withdrawal and return).[85] Similarly, it is hard not to be drawn to Gillian R. Overing's reading of the character of Grettir as embodying 'an exclusively masculine ideal'.[86] Indeed, as demonstrated above, Grettir does not fall short of any of the facets of ideal saga society masculinity as circumscribed in chapter 1 of this thesis. So much was the character of Grettir regarded as meeting the requirements of hegemonic masculinity that he was used by authors of other sagas as a figure who functioned as a kind of cultural shorthand for extreme masculine prowess.[87] As Foote acutely observes, 'heroes gain in stature because they can be matched with Grettir, who was evidently regarded as the extreme example of strength and endurance.'[88] And of course, we can reconceptualize what Foote saw as 'the extreme example of strength and endurance' as an extreme example of the culturally exalted form of masculinity.

With reference to Grettir's masculinity, Overing further suggests that it is to be seen as 'death-driven (at least in the sense of heroism's demand for decisive action, closure and resolution).'[89] Such a reading is compelling, and suggests again that Grettir's masculinity is not to be regarded as unproblematic. Indeed, perhaps what we can see hinted at in Overing's claim that Grettir's masculinity is somehow 'death-driven' may in fact be a recognition of the

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[85] Lotte Motz, 'Withdrawal and Return: A Ritual Pattern in the Grettis saga', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 88 (1973), 91-110 (103).
[86] Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis, 1994), 104.
[87] *Ljósvetninga saga*, 3; *Gísla saga*, 22; *Bjarnar saga*, 162-3.
[88] Foote, 'Introduction', in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, vi.
[89] Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, 104.

excessive brand of masculinity which I earlier argued that Grettir performs in this saga, and which I have called *hyper*masculine. Indeed, it is his hypermasculinity which is seen to cause problematic interpersonal relations in childhood. And it continues to cause problems in his adult life.

HOMO(ANTI)SOCIAL RELATIONS

While Kirsten Hastrup has claimed that '[a]s outlaw Grettir is by definition asocial', such an assertion must be viewed as patently untrue in the light of the multiple interpersonal relationships in which he participates in the saga.[90] Grettir has a vast number of interpersonal relationships, a large proportion of which are with other men. In a moment of typically acute self-reflexivity in chapter 19, Grettir reflects upon these interpersonal relationships, noting that 'eigi geri ek mér alla menn jafna' (I do not myself treat all men as equals).[91] This incisive statement is clearly accurate, and indeed the majority of men in the saga – but not all – are treated badly by Grettir. And the basis of distinction for Grettir seems to be his assessment of these other men's masculinities. If their masculinities are perceived to be subordinate to his, then they are likewise treated as subordinate to him. Indeed, as Robert Cook notes, Grettir's 'nastiness is directed only toward those he considers inferior'.[92] Since Grettir is 'nasty' to almost all men he encounters, we can safely assume that he considers himself superior to the majority of men. Grettir typically, then, forms negative relations

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[90] Hastrup 'Tracing Tradition', 292.
Indeed, as Frederic Amory has noted, '[w]hen a man was outlawed in Iceland for killing […] he did not leave a social void behind him as the full severity of the law would have us believe' ('The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw: Life-style, Saga, and Legend', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1992), 189-203 (198)).
[91] *Grettis saga*, 65.
[92] Cook, 'The Reader in *Grettis* saga', 140.

with men rather than positive ones: we can thus characterize him as usually being opposed to homosocial bonds.[93]

As noted earlier, Grettir's upbringing has led to a situation in which he must continually prove his masculinity, either by proving himself through feats of prowess or by otherwise demonstrating that his manliness is superior to that of others. Indeed, Kathryn Hume has suggested that 'Iceland offers few appropriate opportunities [for Grettir to prove his prowess]' and that 'Grettir's impulses therefore drive him to seek – and worse, create – challenges.'[94] This is clearly the case and, as will now be seen, those he challenges are of inferior masculinity, or at least are those who fail to immediately acknowledge their position of subordinated masculinity to Grettir. A few examples should suffice to demonstrate his generally anti-homosocial disposition.

In chapter 21 we are introduced to one of Grettir's many antagonists: Bjǫrn. Bjǫrn, like Grettir, is wintering at Þorkell's home in Sálpti, and we are told immediately that '[f]átt kom á með þeim Gretti' (a coldness grew between him and Grettir), and likewise that 'kom til þverúðar með þeim' (discord grew between them).[95] This animosity seems to come about as a result of Bjǫrn's assessment of Grettir as inferior to himself; indeed, we read that 'þótti Birni hann lítils verðr hjá sér, en Grettir var ótillátssamr' (Bjǫrn thought him to be insignificant beside himself, but Grettir was unyielding).[96] The saga author breaks his or her typically objective style, subtly showing bias in favour of Grettir

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[93] O'Donoghue has likewise alluded to 'Grettir's habitual unsociability in male company' (*Skaldic Verse*, 202), while Poole has noted 'Grettir's reluctance to form homosocial associations' ('Myth, Psychology and Society', 12).
[94] Hume, 'Thematic Design', 472.
[95] *Grettis saga*, 74.
[96] *Grettis saga*, 74.

by telling us that 'Bjǫrn var hávaðamaðr mikill ok gerði um sik mikit; fylgðu honum at því margir ungir menn, ok hǫfðu þeir opt á kveldum slentr mikit úti' (Bjǫrn was a very loud man, and made much of himself; as a result, many young men followed him, and they often took to lounging about out-of-doors in the evenings).[97] From this we can infer that the saga author shares in Grettir's ideological position that formally hierarchized and homosocially-dependent masculinities are something of which to be wary. And indeed, it is the noise caused by Bjǫrn and his followers' homosocial revelries which leads to this chapter's narrative crisis, the attacks of a bear living nearby. We are told that 'ætluðu menn, at hann myndi vaknat hafa af háreysti því, er Bjǫrn hafði gǫrt með kumpánum sínum' (men believed that it [the bear] had been awoken by that clamour, which Bjǫrn had made with his companions).[98] The saga again displays a wariness toward homosocial associations and the dangers caused by them. This is reinforced by the word used for the individual members of Bjǫrn's homosocial band, 'kumpánn', which can also be used to refer euphemistically to the male organ.[99] Following the discovery of the location of the bear's den, Bjǫrn plans to kill the bear by lying in wait for him nearby.[100] While waiting for the bear, Bjǫrn becomes tired and falls asleep; he is awoken by the bear and, startled, runs back home in fear. Bjǫrn is mocked by his companions for his failure.[101] Homosocial masculinity here functions collaboratively to shame Bjǫrn

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[97] *Grettis saga*, 74.
[98] *Grettis saga*, 74.
[99] Fritzner, s.v. 'kumpánn'; Zoëga, s.v. 'kumpánn'.
For an example of its use as a euphemism, see the *Flateyarbók* version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* (*Flateyarbók* I, 218). In other MSS of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, 'félagi' is used as an alternative to 'kumpánn', retaining the euphemistic meaning – see Ólafur Halldórsson (ed.), *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Reykjavík, 1969), 197.
[100] *Grettis saga*, 75.
[101] *Grettis saga*, 75.

who has failed to live up to the expectations of heroic masculinity. But after Bjǫrn's failure, Þorkell journeys to the bear's cave himself, with both Grettir and Bjǫrn present in the party. The saga author makes sure to note that despite Bjǫrn's grand talk he is viewed as cowardly, telling us that 'Bjǫrn eggjaði þá mjǫk til átsóknar, en þó gekk hann eigi svá nær, at honum væri við nǫkkuru hætt' (Bjǫrn urged them into the onslaught, but nevertheless he did not go so close that he might have been in any danger).[102] In spite of Bjǫrn's boasting, Þorkell, as the authority in this scene, declares to Grettir's advantage that 'eigi munu þit jafnir hreystimenn vera' (you two shall not be equally valiant men).[103] Grettir soon proves this to be the case by easily vanquishing the bear. But he does so only when no one else is present. Indeed, the saga explicitly notes that he only does this 'var þá ekki at metask við aðra um atgǫngu' (when his value was not to be compared against the others in the attack); it is clear that proving his prowess is here a personal undertaking.[104] He proves his masculinity in his defeat of the bear, but, after Þorkell's judgement of his superiority over Bjǫrn, does not at this point need to do so publicly. His own desire to be socially dominant thus temporarily sated, he is free to avoid the homosocial posturing which he seems to reject. But while Grettir has obviously already proved his superior masculinity in this chapter, it soon becomes apparent – in the next chapter – that his domination of Bjǫrn has only temporarily satisfied his urge to prove his superiority over the man, and that he wishes to further subordinate Bjǫrn. Indeed, when Grettir once again comes into contact with Bjǫrn, Grettir challenges him as he wishes to establish 'hvárr okkarr meira má' (which of us

[102] *Grettis saga*, 75.
[103] *Grettis saga*, 76.
[104] *Grettis saga*, 76.

two may be greater).[105] Grettir refuses Bjǫrn's offer of monetary compensation and, before killing him, threatens to lay a charge of cowardice upon him: 'legg ek nú bleyðiorð á bak þér, ef þú þorir eigi at berjask' (I now lay a charge of cowardice upon your back, if you do not dare to fight me).[106] Thus, Grettir makes sure to verbally subordinate Bjǫrn in addition to physically overcoming him, doubly proving his masculine superiority.

Likewise, in chapter 59 we are introduced to Gísli Þorsteinsson, a man 'gerði um sik mikit ok nǫkkut sjálfhœlinn' (who thought highly of himself and was prone to self-praise).[107] In particular he boasts that if he were to encounter Grettir he would be able to prevail over him, and he elects to fight Grettir on behalf of Þórðr Kolbeinsson.[108] As with Bjǫrn above, the saga author shows Gísli to be more cowardly than his self-presentation would have us believe. Indeed, we read that 'Grettir sá nú, at hann var eigi slíkr fullhugi, sem hann lézk, því at hann stóð jafnan á baki mǫnnum sínum' (Grettir now saw, that he [Gísli] was not such a fearless man as he claimed to be, since he always stood behind the backs of his men).[109] Gísli runs from his fight with Grettir, but Grettir pursues him and establishes his dominance. Indeed when Gísli is trying to make his escape we are told that 'Grettir snaraði þá eptir honum ok greip hann, ok kenndi þá aflsumnar. Rak Grettir hann þá niðr undir sik' (Grettir then rushed after him and grabbed him, and knew then the difference in their strength. Grettir then pushed him down underneath himself).[110] There is clearly a sexual undertone in Grettir's

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[105] *Grettis saga*, 79.
[106] *Grettis saga*, 79.
[107] *Grettis saga*, 188.
[108] *Grettis saga*, 189.
[109] *Grettis saga*, 192.
[110] *Grettis saga*, 192.

very physical dominance over Gísli, which serves to underscore Gísli's subordination. Grettir physically places himself 'on top', reflecting his metaphorical position in the masculine hierarchy. To reinforce his superior masculine position, Grettir further subjugates Gísli; we read that Grettir

> rekr síðan skyrtuna fram yfir hǫfuð honum ok lætr ganga límann um bak honum ok báðar síðurnar; en Gísla fýsti jafnan at snúa sér undan; afhýðir Grettir hann með ǫllu ok lét hann síðan lausan […] vann hann ok aldri optar til slíkrar húðstroku.[111]
>
> then pulls the shirt over his [Gísli's] head and lets loose with the rod upon his back and on both sides; and Gísli was always eager to free himself from under Grettir; Grettir whips him thoroughly and then let him go […] he endeavoured to never again have such a flogging.

Grettir thus further subordinates Gísli, using a method which clearly has sexual implications, and which this time is further inflected with sadistic impulses. It is only when he has beaten Gísli extensively, so much so that he is bedridden for the following week, that he is allowed to go free.[112] Grettir's masculine dominance has been clearly established and Gísli is reluctant to cross him again in future.[113]

In a similarly anti-homosocial encounter, Grettir meets the foster-brothers Þorgeirr and Þormóðr (also of *Fóstbrœðra saga*) in chapter 50.[114] While no trouble is immediately apparent with the less masculine Þormóðr, it is suggested that '[e]kki fell blítt á með þeim Þorgeiri ok Gretti' (there was no friendliness between Þorgeirr and Grettir).[115] In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, masculine competition and the comparison of men is the reason for the dissolution of the

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[111] *Grettis saga*, 193.
[112] *Grettis saga*, 193.
[113] *Grettis saga*, 193.
[114] *Grettis saga*, 159-63.
[115] *Grettis saga*, 159.

bond between Þorgeirr and Þormóðr: Þorgeirr's insistence of his masculine superiority is untenable in a homosocial relationship.[116] It is unsurprising, therefore, that Grettir and Þorgeirr, two characters for whom masculine dominance is of great importance, are unable to form or maintain amicable relations with one another. While Þorgils, their host, is able to prevent the simmering hostility from bubbling over, Grettir's immediate reaction to Þorgeirr is yet another example of his tendency to form negative relationships with other male characters, particularly those who may pose a threat to his dominant masculine position.

As a final example of the many hostile relations Grettir forms with other men in this saga, we may consider his altercation, in chapter 31, with Barði Guðmundarson. Barði fails to call on Grettir for assistance in a raid which he undertakes on Borgarfjǫrðr, after previously accepting Grettir's offer of help.[117] Grettir is greatly angered by this and, when he next encounters Barði, challenges him to a test of prowess to see 'hvárr hér má meira' (which of us two here may be the greater).[118] Barði refuses to fight Grettir 'fyrir sakleysi' (without a cause), highlighting the arbitrary and baseless nature of Grettir's challenges of masculinity.[119] These challenges appear to be motivated simply by his desire to prove himself and his manliness. Indeed, as a result of Barði's refusal to fight, Grettir instantly suggests that it seems to him that Barði '[b]leyðask' (becomes

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[116] For discussion of this scene, see chapter 2, 69-73.
[117] *Grettis saga*, 98. It should be noted that at this time Grettir notes his own self-directed and self-willed nature, hinting at the violence to come if he is crossed: 'á ek ekki [...] ferðir mínar undir ǫðrum mǫnnum, en illa mér þykkja, ef þú gerir mik liðrækan' (I do not make my journeys under other men's direction, and I will take it very badly if you reject me from this host).
[118] *Grettis saga*, 106.
[119] *Grettis saga*, 106.

soft).[120] To 'become soft', as Grettir suggests Barði will for not agreeing to fight, has clear gendered implications.[121] Grettir's speech-act feminizes his opponent, using his reluctance to engage in physical combat as evidence for Barði's masculine failure. By failing to fight with Grettir, Barði denies Grettir the opportunity to prove his own masculinity. As a result (and in retaliation) Grettir subordinates his opponent's masculinity linguistically: by feminizing Barði through the imputation of cowardice, he asserts and strengthens his own claim to the dominant masculine position. At the end of this chapter, we are told of Grettir's reaction to this encounter: 'Þá þótti Gretti mikit mein, er hann mátti hvergi reyna afl sitt, ok fréttisk fyrir, ef nǫkkut væri þat, er hann mætti við fásk' (Then Grettir felt greatly hindered, that he could in no way test his strength, and he considered whether there might be something which he could take on).[122] Grettir is here clearly displeased with the outcome of his encounter with Barði and desires a more physical test (and ultimately proof) of his masculinity. It is telling that this statement appears – rather ominously – immediately prior to the chapter in which we are introduced to the revenant, Glámr. Indeed, it may be suggested that Grettir's tendency to enter into negative relations with other men and his need to continually validate his claim to a dominant masculine subject position may combine to account for his seemingly inevitable conflict with Glámr. (Grettir's relations with supernatural characters, including Glámr, will be discussed in more detail below.)

A resistance to the formation of positive homosocial bonds, therefore, characterizes Grettir's typical approach to relations with other male characters

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[120] *Grettis saga*, 106.
[121] See discussion of the *hvatr-blauðr* binary in chapter 1, pages 16-20.
[122] *Grettis saga*, 107.

in the saga. Indeed, Grettir shows a tendency to form antagonistic links and to have negative experiences with other male characters. These negative relationships allow both the demonstration of his generally anti-homosocial nature and also the exploration of his pathological need to offer proof of his superior masculine status.

Not all of Grettir's homosocial relationships in the saga are characterized by negativity, however. While he clearly displays a general tendency to the anti-homosocial, there are exceptions to this general rule. Upon rare occasion he will form positive relationships and have positive encounters with other male characters. It is these positive homosocial relations which will now be discussed.

POSITIVE HOMOSOCIAL RELATIONS

Vermundr *inn mjóvi* is clearly correct when, in chapter 52, he tells Grettir, 'ertu ok ekki auðkvæðr til fylgðar við flesta menn' (you are not easily moved to follow most men).[123] Indeed, as seen above, Grettir generally resists homosocial links and, in particular, any situation which would threaten to cast him in a position of subordinated masculinity to another. Rather, he usually seeks to dominate and subjugate other men so that he may offer proof of his superior masculinity. In a few, atypical, cases however, Grettir forms positive, if often short-lived, relations with other masculine characters. This section will look at these relations, evaluating what is different about these relationships that makes them agreeable to Grettir's hypermasculine sensibilities. It will focus in particular on the two most significant of these relationships.

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[123] *Grettis saga*, 172.

Hafliði is one such male character with whom Grettir is able to form a positive relationship. We encounter Hafliði in chapter 17, after Grettir has been sentenced to lesser outlawry and Ásmundr arranges for Hafliði to take his son abroad to Norway.[124] Aboard Hafliði's ship, Grettir is characteristically lazy and refuses to undertake his fair share of the work. Unsurprisingly, tensions grow between Grettir and the rest of the ship's crew. In a bid to prevent the verbal hostilities between Grettir and the crew from making the all-too-easy transition to the physical, Hafliði asks that Grettir publicly compose a verse about him that will seem defamatory to the rest of the crew.[125] While Heather O'Donoghue has suggested that '[i]t is not clear why Grettir is happy to accept Hafliði's quasi-paternal authority' – and it is certainly true that Grettir's reaction to Hafliði's suggestion at first seems surprisingly positive – if we consider the gendered implications of Hafliði's suggestion then we may begin to appreciate Grettir's psychology in this encounter.[126] By suggesting that Grettir compose an insulting verse about him, Hafliði thereby instantly places himself into a subordinate position to Grettir. By foregrounding his own apparent inferiority Hafliði pre-empts, and thereby neutralizes, Grettir's usual need to prove his masculine superiority over other male characters: Grettir's position in the hierarchy has already been established by his would-be opponent. Indeed, the verse is spoken publicly, in front of the crew, so not only does he allow Grettir to subordinate him by producing a seemingly slanderous verse, but also he allows Grettir to perform, for others, the act of subjugating him. If he is publicly thought to be subordinate to Grettir then, to all intents and purposes, he now inhabits an

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[124] *Grettis saga*, 48.
[125] *Grettis saga*, 52.
[126] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 194.

inferior position to him. Now that his dominance has thus been established, Grettir offers to help the rest of crew with their work.[127] Grettir outperforms all other men in bailing out the ship, demonstrating his prodigious strength. Following this we read that '[þ]aðan af skiptisk mjǫk um orðalag kaupmanna við Gretti, því at þeir sá, hvat hann átti undir sér fyrir afls sakar; var hann ok þaðan frá inn frœknasti til liðs, hvers sem við þurfti' (from then on the crew's manner of speaking toward Grettir greatly changed, because they saw what strength he possessed; from there on he was the most active among the crew, doing whatever was needed.)[128] Similar to the above interaction with Hafliði, here the demonstration of his masculine superiority and the acceptance of this dominance by the rest of crew appeases Grettir. Now he no longer needs to prove his superiority he becomes amicable, his typical resistance to homosociality turning at least to acquiescence.

In chapter 47, we are introduced to the character of Sveinn, a poet who composes humorous verses and who lives at Bakki.[129] Grettir steals a horse from Sveinn, and is pursued by him as a result. This encounter occasions the celebrated 'saddle-back' verses, and after the exchange of verses we are told that 'skilðusk þeir Grettir vel' (he and Grettir parted amicably.)[130] This turn of events is surprising and makes little sense for Sveinn. Indeed, as O'Donoghue notes, 'there is no good reason why the farmer Sveinn should be disposed to take the theft of a fine horse with such good humour.'[131] However, the farmer's deference to Grettir is what allows them to part amicably. Sveinn freely admits Grettir's

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[127] *Grettis saga*, 55.
[128] *Grettis saga*, 55.
[129] *Grettis saga*, 148.
[130] *Grettis saga*, 152.
[131] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 199.

linguistic superiority upon hearing one of his verses, noting that '[e]igi er ólíkligt, at þessi maðr sé eigi mín leika' (it is not unlikely that this man is not to be my plaything), and in doing so he perhaps suggests that this difference in status is true more generally.[132] Indeed, it is only after the saga makes it clear that the farmer will not try to retrieve the horse from Grettir that we are told that they 'skilðusk […] vel'. Until this point the reader may well be uneasy: given Grettir's usual treatment of those who would resist his will, we could expect that he would react negatively if Sveinn were to try to block his appropriation of the steed. But Sveinn's acceptance of the theft allows Grettir to unproblematically retain a sense of superiority. While O'Donoghue rightly suggests that this light-hearted episode functions as 'an episode of emotional respite' to momentarily pause Grettir's tragic decline,[133] it also clearly demonstrates the means by which a man may form a positive relation with Grettir: through non-resistance and the foregrounding of one's inferiority, one may appease Grettir's need to prove his sense of masculinity. By not appearing as a challenge to Grettir's masculinity, Sveinn is here able to form a brief bond of friendship with him.

These are the two main instances of positive homosocial relationships to be found in *Grettis saga*.[134] And in both cases, the formation of a positive homosocial bond is contingent upon Grettir's position of masculinity remaining

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[132] *Grettis saga*, 151.
For an in-depth and insightful reading of this saga which suggests that Grettir forms an amicable relationship with Sveinn – and with Hallmundr/Loptr – as a result of their shared poetic prowess, see O'Donoghue's '*Grettis saga* and the Fictionalization of Biography', in her *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 180-227. This is a particularly interesting view given the link between masculinity and linguistic virtuosity that I suggested above (page 228, n. 57). Combining O'Donoghue's view of Grettir's positive relations with men with my own reading of these relationships would once again suggest an intimate link between masculinity and linguistic prowess in this saga.
[133] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 201.
[134] This, of course, does not include his relationship with Hallmundr, which will be discussed below.

unthreatened, and the other character in the relation drawing attention to their own self-subordination to Grettir's superior masculinity. There are exceptions to this – Grettir forms a brief positive relationship with Auðunn of Vindheimr apparently without foregrounded subordination being necessary, for example – but such relationships are rare, short-lived, and do not feature prominently in the narrative.[135] They are also dwarfed in number by the homo(anti)social links he forms, as discussed above. Grettir in general then must be viewed as opposed to homosocial links as, without specific sets of conditions as with Hafliði and Sveinn being in place, they threaten to disrupt his own sense of masculine superiority.[136]

INTERACTIONS WITH SUPERNATURAL CHARACTERS

Apart from the homosocial (and heterosocial) relationships that Grettir forms with human characters, we must also consider his relationships with supernatural male characters. These interactions appear to function to reinforce the general patterns of his sociality which can be elucidated from his relations with purely human characters. But beyond this, his supernatural relations seem to possess a further effect, allowing the reader to probe deeper into the construction and function of Grettir's masculinity. Grettir's two main

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[135] *Grettis saga*, 57.

[136] It is unsurprising then that a large number of Grettir's positive relationships are *hetero*social in nature. As Heather O'Donoghue has noted, 'the positive relationships which Grettir enjoys with women reflect both a psychological and sociological reality; that is, first the loving relationship with his mother, as opposed to the breakdown of relations with his father, and secondly, that as an outlaw, on the margins of society, Grettir is most likely to come into contact with women' (*Skaldic* Verse, 207). But beyond this, women – whose physical sex denies them the ability to fully inhabit a hegemonically masculine subject position – have, by virtue of not being male, their masculine inferiority to Grettir already foregrounded. As women are subsequently not a threat to Grettir's own position of dominant masculinity, he can form positive relationships with them.

relationships with supernatural characters are with Glámr and with Hallmundr, and it is these that will be focused upon here.

It is frequently noted that Grettir, while being a monster-slayer, is by no means devoid of monstrosity himself.[137] And in both of his main supernatural relationships, there are striking parallels to be drawn between Grettir and his explicitly supernatural counterpart.

We are introduced to Glámr in chapter 32. At this point the future-revenant is still very much alive, and there are clear, and purposeful, links made between Glámr and Grettir. We are told by Skapti that Glámr is 'mikill ok sterkr ok ekki mjǫk við alþýðuskap' (big and strong, but not much caring for friendship).[138] Like Grettir then he is physically imposing, and also exhibits a resistance to forming homosocial bonds. Likewise, he also resists subordination to others. For example, he warns his new employer, Þórhallr, that '[s]vá mun þér hentust mín vist, at ek fara sjálfráðr, því at ek em skapstyggr, ef mér líkar eigi vel' (my stay here will only be convenient to you if I may be independent, as I will be

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[137] Nora K. Chadwick, 'Norse Ghosts (a Study in the Draugr and the Haugbuí)', *Folklore* 57.2 (1946), 50-65 (51); Nora K. Chadwick, 'The Monsters and Beowulf', in Peter Clemoes (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of their History and Culture* (London, 1959), 171-203 (193); Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Toronto, 2003), 142-71; Richard N. Coffin, '*Beowulf* and its Relationship to Norse and Finno-Ugric Beliefs and Narratives' (PhD thesis, Boston University, 1962), 73, as cited in Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 142; Richard L. Harris, 'The Deaths of Grettir and Grendel: A New Parallel', *Scripta Islandica* 24 (1973), 25-53 (38).
It is common for characters with extreme attributes to be seen as occupying a position at the very edge of the human and shading into the monstrous or the animal. Thus, *berserkir*, which are both hypermasculine and socially disruptive, much like Grettir himself, are seen to be monstrous and bestial. Grettir kills a number of these *berserkir* to prevent the rape of Þorfinnr's wife in chapter 19 of the saga (and concurrently establishes his superior masculinity and humanity in relation to their inferior forms thereof). *Berserkir* are hypermasculine inasmuch as they are physically imposing, have extreme strength, and can perform seemingly fantastic feats (they can often walk through fire and, with unsubtle phallic symbolism, blunt the swords of their enemies). But they are rarely more than stock characters – apparent paragons of extreme masculinity – which are usually quickly dispatched by a saga's hero, thereby proving the hero's own masculine standing. For further examples of saga heroes overcoming *berserkir*, see: *Víga-Glúms saga*, chapter 4; *Gunnlaugs saga,* chapter 7; *Vatnsdœla saga*, chapter 46; *Svarfdæla saga*, chapters 7, 8, and 9; *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 28; and *Flóamanna saga*, chapter 16.
[138] *Grettis saga*, 109.

irritable if things are not to my liking).[139] He also himself enters the narrative as a monster-slayer, fulfilling the role for which Grettir is perhaps most famous.[140] Glámr is thus clearly set up as a counterpart to Grettir. Soon after being introduced into the saga, however, Glámr is killed by an unnamed supernatural force, and returns to haunt the area as a revenant. Grettir elects to test himself by trying to defeat Glámr, despite his uncle's advice to the contrary.[141] At Þórhallsstaðir, Grettir's presence seems to initially quiet Glámr's hauntings, but the two soon come head to head. Before proving his unparalleled strength and prowess by killing the revenant, Grettir is cursed by Glámr who tells him that

> þú hefir nú fengit helming afls þess ok þroska, er þér var ætlaðr, ef þú hefðir mik ekki fundit; nú fæ ek þat afl eigi af þér tekit, er þú hefir áðr hreppt, en því má ek ráða, at þú verðr aldri sterkari en nú ertu[.][142]
>
> you have now gained half the strength and vigour which you would have had if you had not met me; I may not take from you that strength which you have already obtained but I may decree it, that you will never be stronger than you are now.

In the light, firstly, of this curse which clearly limits Grettir's masculine development, and secondly, of the fact that its speaker – Glámr – may be viewed as a 'manifestation of Grettir's own character', we may wonder whether the saga is making a comment upon the nature of masculinity itself here.[143] Or at least on the modality of masculinity which Grettir himself exhibits. If we accept that Glámr is to be viewed as a manifestation or projection of Grettir's hypermasculine character, then we may suggest that masculinity in this saga is

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[139] *Grettis saga*, 110.
[140] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 153.
[141] *Grettis saga*, 117.
[142] *Grettis saga*, 121.
[143] Fox and Hermann Pálsson, *Grettir's saga*, xii.

seen as self-limiting, or perhaps even self-destructive. This would accord particularly well with the view of Grettir's masculinity which we get elsewhere in the saga: while ostensibly the model of masculinity, he is still seen as a problematic character as a result of his anti-homosociality, which itself is a function of his extreme adherence to the hegemonic masculine ideal. This incident with Glámr may be viewed as an extension of his anti-homosocial tendencies as it is driven by his need to prove himself both to and over other men. It is particularly fitting then that this episode – which may be seen as the narrative heart of the saga – functions to reflect the wider theme of Grettir's troubled masculinity.

While Grettir forms a wholly negative relationship with Glámr, he forms a positive relationship with the saga's other main supernatural character, Hallmundr. We are introduced to Hallmundr – in the guise of Loptr – in chapter 54. When Grettir encounters Loptr he takes a fancy to both his horse and his possessions. As is his custom, Grettir attempts to take what he wants without payment. Grettir seizes the reins of the horse, pulling them from Loptr's hands. In return, Loptr pulls them back out of Grettir's clutches with great force. This clearly startles Grettir, and we are told that 'Grettir leit eptir í lófana ok sá, at þessi maðr myndi hafa afl í krummum heldr en eigi, ok leit eptir honum ok mælti: "Hvert ætlar þú nú at fara?"' (Grettir looked at his palms, and saw that this man had rather a lot of power in his paws. He stared after the man and spoke: 'Where are you going to go now?').[144] We are similarly also told that '[s]ér Grettir þá, at hann hefir ekki afl við þessum manni' (then Grettir sees that he does not have the

[144] *Grettis saga*, 176.

strength to contend with this man).[145] This is the first time in the saga that Grettir's strength – as an adult – has been bested. Moreover, Grettir clearly recognizes and accepts this fact. Encountering the only masculinity in the saga that is superior to his – and unshakeably so – Grettir quickly falls into and accepts a subordinated position. It is also clear that in his great strength and stature, Hallmundr, as O'Donoghue notes, is presented as 'a match for Grettir'.[146] Indeed, in the later scene in chapter 57 in which Þórir and his men attack Grettir, Hallmundr is secretly defending him from attack from behind. As O'Donoghue notes, at this point in the saga, Hallmundr functions as Grettir's '*alter ego*',[147] much as I argue is the case for Glámr above. While Glámr manifests the base qualities in Grettir's masculinity, Hallmundr could be seen to manifest his nobler side. The loyal Hallmundr, living extra-socially with his family, perhaps represents that which Grettir *could* have been were it not for Glámr's curse of (possibly self-limiting) imperfect masculinity. Indeed, of the fight with Þórir and his men, we are told 'at Grettir dræpi sex menn á fundinum, en Hallmundr tólf' (that Grettir killed six men in the fight, and Hallmundr twelve).[148] Considering that Glámr's curse is to stunt Grettir's masculine development at half of what it would otherwise have been, it is clearly significant that Hallmundr's masculine prowess is shown to be twice that which is possessed by Grettir.

The two main supernatural characters with whom Grettir interacts in this saga, therefore, function in a way that goes beyond his dealings with non-supernatural male characters. Glámr, as an external manifestation of the

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[145] *Grettis saga*, 177.
[146] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse,* 210.
[147] O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse,* 211.
[148] *Grettis saga*, 185.

problematic facets of Grettir's own masculine identity, suggests that Grettir's masculinity is self-limiting, while the character of Hallmundr works in parallel, suggesting what Grettir could be if it were not for the constraints which society (and his need for social contact) place upon his masculinity. The saga author here uses the fantastic as a means of conveying to us psychological and sociological truths about the construction, function, and inevitable problematization of Grettir's masculinity.

HOMOSOCIALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF ILL-LUCK

So far it has been demonstrated that Grettir's masculinity, while clearly fulfilling the criteria of idealized saga society masculinity, is nevertheless inherently problematic. It has been suggested above that the problematic aspect of Grettir's (hyper)masculinity is its tendency to impel him toward anti-homosocial behaviour. This is of course framed in the language of contemporary academic discourse. However, I would suggest that the saga itself also articulates a problematic – yet inevitable – association between hypermasculinity and homo(anti)sociality. In chapter 34, Jǫkull, after Grettir ignores his advice not to become involved with Glámr, states that 'satt er þat, sem mælt er, at sitt er hvárt, gæfa eða gørvigleikr' (it is true, as is said, that luck is one thing, and ability another).[149] And this is clearly an accurate assessment of Grettir: his abilities are essentially unparalleled, but he is nevertheless seen as unlucky. Lars Lönnroth, Vésteinn Oláson and Anders Piltz go so far as to suggest that the theme of the

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[149] *Grettis saga*, 117.

saga is in fact 'that physical excellence does not bring luck.'[150] And indeed, it is often said of Grettir that it is his 'ódæll' (troublesome) nature, or the fact that he is said to be an 'ógæfumaðr' (unlucky man), that is responsible for his troublingly violent actions and eventual downfall.[151] While it is true that there are numerous allusions to his status as both unlucky and troublesome in the saga, it is my contention that more focus must be placed on the context in which these terms are found to more fully understand their function within the text.

But before focusing more closely on the text at hand, it is worth briefly discussing the concept of luck in Old Norse literature. Luck, as noted by Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer, was not conceptualized in the same way in Old Norse literature as it is today: rather than being about the arbitrary machinations of fate, luck should rather be seen as 'a quality inherent in the man and his lineage, a part of his personality similar to his strength, intelligence, or skill with weapons, at once both the cause and expression of the success, wealth, and power of a family.'[152] Vilhelm Grønbech had earlier equated unluckiness in Norse society with 'the act and state of the niding',[153] but Sommer systematically dismantles this position, arguing that this equivalence only holds true for certain

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[150] Lars Lönnroth, Vésteinn Ólason, and Anders Piltz, 'Literature', in Knut Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520* (Cambridge, 2003), 487-520 (507).
[151] For example, see Hume, 'Thematic Design', 474; Motz, 'Withdrawal and Return', 91; Janice Hawes, 'The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider', *Scandinavian Studies* 80.1 (2008), 19-50 (46); and Cook, 'Grettis saga', 242.
[152] Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer, 'The Norse Concept of Luck', *Scandinavian Studies* 79.3 (2007), 275-94 (275).
K. T. Kanerva has suggested that luck in medieval Icelandic literature functions as an emotion. While this is to go too far as it clearly does not manifest as a subjective experience for characters, she is correct in her assertion that luck is 'also a concept that communicates something about the character of the person in question, about his mental and emotional state and about how he reacted to certain kinds of conflict' – see Kanerva, 'Ógæfa as an Emotion in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 84.1 (2012), 1-26 (23).
[153] Vilhelm Peter Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, trans. William Worster, 3 vols. (London and Copenhagen, 1931), I. 152.

examples.[154] It is clearly not true for Grettir, of course, who while being described as a luckless man still possesses 'many of the qualities that define a hero'.[155] Indeed, Grettir is anything but a *níðingr*. In her article, Sommer does not explicitly define what exactly the quality that defines a lucky man is, but rather suggests it may perhaps vary on a case-by-case basis. I here suggest that in the case of *Grettis saga* the state of luckiness may be associated – if not equated – with being a strongly homosocial character.

In chapter 38, shortly before being declared a full outlaw, Grettir is responsible for the deaths – by burning – of several men, which he accidentally causes while trying to retrieve some fire. He does this by swimming across a wide river in order to prove his masculine prowess.[156] Here, his need to prove his masculinity is shown to be central to his downfall, as his involvement in the fire is the reason given for his eventual outlawry. Although the result of Grettir's bungled action, the arson is certainly accidental, and the narrative makes it clear that it was not Grettir's intention to kill the men. The other characters who hear of these deaths are not of the same opinion, however, and spread the word that Grettir has murdered innocent people.[157] Grettir is displeased with this course of events and visits King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway in the hopes of proving his prowess to the ruler, which would thereby validate his masculinity. The King has already heard of the men's deaths and suggests that Grettir must prove himself innocent by means of an ordeal.[158] All is going well and Grettir looks set to pass the ordeal and win the king's favour, until a small boy – identified by the text as

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[154] Sommer, 'The Norse Concept of Luck', 278.
[155] Sommer, 'The Norse Concept of Luck', 284.
[156] *Grettis saga*, 129-30.
[157] *Grettis saga*, 131.
[158] *Grettis saga*, 132.

possibly being an evil spirit – jumps out of the assembled crowd and insults Grettir. Grettir instantly reacts with extreme violence, and knocks the boy down dead.[159] The king, upon seeing this, approaches Grettir and speaks to him thus: '[m]ikill ógæfumaðr ertu, Grettir [...] er nú skyldi eigi skírslan fram fara, svá sem nú var allt til búit, ok mun eigi hœgt at gera við ógæfu þinni' (you are a man of extremely bad luck, Grettir. The ordeal must not go ahead, despite everything having been made ready, since it is too difficult to work against your ill luck).[160] Considering, as discussed above, that Grettir does not here seem to be the victim of ill luck in the sense of the arbitrary workings of fate, we may ask what it means here to be an *ógæfumaðr*, or to be in possession of *ógæfa*. It seems to me telling that Grettir is described as being a man of ill luck immediately after he has acted negatively, and where this negative action can be ascribed to his hypermasculinity. In the same scene as above, the king then continues: '[s]é ek þat [...] at fáir menn eru nú slíkir fyrir afls sakar ok hreysti, sem þú ert, en miklu ertu meiri ógæfumaðr en þú megir fyrir þat með oss vera' (I can see this, that there are now few men such as you, on account of your strength and prowess, but you are too great a man of ill luck than may be with us).[161] Here Grettir's masculine characteristics – his extreme strength and courage – which may be seen as metonymic for his ability to unproblematically embody masculinity, are seen as existing in parallel with his inability to enter the king's retinue, an

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[159] *Grettis saga*, 133.
Heather O'Donoghue has suggested that this boy personifies Grettir's ill luck (*The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford, 1991), 68). If we take Grettir's ill luck to be a function of his hypermasculinity, however, we can reconceptualize the boy as a catalyst for a demonstration of Grettir's hypermasculine and anti-homosocial violence – which, in other words, is a demonstration of his 'ill luck'.
[160] *Grettis saga*, 133-4.
[161] *Grettis saga*, 134.

overtly homosocial group. The reason for this social exclusion is his *ógæfa*, which should be regarded as being a function of his hypermasculinity and anti-homosociality.

Grettir's brother, Þorsteinn *drómundr*, makes a similar juxtaposition in chapter 41 of the saga. Þorsteinn is physically unimpressive, and, unlike Grettir, socially successful. In a touchingly intimate and candid scene between the two brothers, Þorsteinn wonders aloud about Grettir's problems. Observing Grettir's muscular arms, he notes: 'Sét hefi ek handleggi þína, frændi [...] ok þykki mér eigi undarligt, þó at mǫrgum verði þung hǫgg þín, því at einskis manns handleggi hefi ek slíka sét […] Betr þœtti mér […] þó at væri mjórri ok nǫkkuru gæfusamligri' (I have seen your arms, kinsman, and I do not think it extraordinary that your blows are taken hard by many men, because I have never seen a man's arms like these […] It would seem better to me if they were more slender, but had some more luck).[162] Once again, Grettir's ostensible bad luck is set alongside his hypermasculinity in a way which implies if not a cause and effect relationship, then at least a certain degree of interrelation. It is implied in Þorsteinn's speech that if Grettir were to be weaker – that is, if he were to be less masculine – then he may be luckier or, that is to say, more (homo)socially successful himself.

Grettis saga, then, yokes the concepts of lucklessness and anti-homosociality to one another (and, vice versa, luck and homosociality) in such a way as to suggest that the two concepts are related, if not mutually dependent. Indeed, it may perhaps even be suggested that the concept of luck in *Grettis saga* in fact correlates surprisingly well with our modern conception of homosociality.

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[162] *Grettis saga*, 137.

The common critical appeal to Grettir's ill luck, or *ógæfa*, as being the reason behind the tragic arc of his narrative could thus, in this reading, be reformulated to see his anti-homosociality (itself a function of his hypermasculinity) as the reason for his tragic downfall.

In wondering *why* luckiness and lucklessness function in this way in the saga, it is instructive to consider the historical meanings of 'lucky' and 'unlucky'. While the word 'unlucky', both now and throughout the period in which the sagas were first being translated and in which Old Norse-English dictionaries were first being compiled, functioned much like *(ó)gæfa* in that it referred to an innate or essential quality of a person, 'lucky' has not retained such a stable meaning.[163] Indeed, the semantic range of 'lucky' has narrowed over the course of the last several centuries, moving from a broad term that encompassed both the idea of innate successfulness and of having good fortune, to designating only the condition of being favoured by chance.[164] Thus, while translations that emphasize the luck – or lack thereof – of Grettir may be jarring today, they are (historically) correct. Luckiness and lucklessness in these contexts, however, should not be taken to refer to chance, but rather an innate quality of the character in question; in the case of Grettir, this innate quality is to be seen as his tendency to resist homosocial ties.

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[163] OED Online, s.v. unlucky, *adj.* (entry first published 1924; accessed 16 September 2015).
[164] OED Online, s.v. lucky, *adj.* (entry first published 1903; accessed 16 September 2015).

Concluding Remarks:
Social Failure and the Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity

Grettis saga is to be seen as a valuable text for the study of masculinity in Old Norse literature. While other *Íslendingasögur* give the impression that idealized masculinity is problematic because it is forever out of reach, this saga explores a very different, but complementary problematic facet of masculinity's cultural and textual dominance. Rather than focusing on the failures of characters to live up to the culturally exalted form of masculinity, *Grettis saga* explores the undesirable effects that are produced when the masculine inscription of the embodied subject is totalizing.

Indeed, *Grettis saga* gives us a protagonist who meets all of the criteria of saga society masculinity. Grettir is not effeminized in any way, nor are any critiques of his masculinity in the saga lasting or convincing. Indeed, in theory, he should be the perfect saga character. But this is clearly not the case. As a result of his hypermasculinity, Grettir is unable to function effectively in a homosocial society, and in fact violently rejects most homosocial bonds. Moreover, and as a result, he is rejected by the patriarchal society in which we would expect him to be seen as the ultimate male. Furthermore, through the use of fantastic, supernatural elements, the saga also suggests that masculinity is in fact self-limiting and inherently self-destructive. Indeed, it is Glámr – an external manifestation of Grettir's own hypermasculine and anti-homosocial character – that is seen to place constraints upon Grettir's masculine development. What *Grettis saga* shows us, then, is that masculinity is to be regarded as a burden not only to those who fail to live up to its dictates, but also to the rare characters who appear to manage to do so. Grettir, through his social failure, enacts a striking

critique of the cultural hegemony of masculinity, and also of the impossible – and perhaps even contradictory – demands which it places upon the masculine subject. This failure, repeated at almost every narrative juncture, consistently opens up new conceptual spaces from which the reader may start to recognize the social burden of masculinity and may begin to imagine how society – textualized or otherwise – would look if it were not subject to masculinity's tyranny.[165]

[165] For a discussion of the role of failure in opening up new narrative and conceptual spaces from which dominant social paradigms may be questioned and critiqued, see Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC, 2011).

EPILOGUE:
DESIRE AND DESTABILIZATION

This thesis has interrogated the construction and problematization of masculinities in the *Íslendingasögur*. It has suggested a new way of looking at masculinities in the sagas, drawing on theories of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities; produced an overview of how men and masculinities operate in the sagas; interrogated the intersectional construction of masculine characters; investigated the role of the body and somatic indices in undermining the dominant model of masculinity in saga narrative; and explored the representation of a character who embodies masculinity to an exceptional degree. In doing so, this thesis has focused largely on male characters and their relationship with masculinity. In this epilogue, however, I would like to briefly switch the focus. Rather than concentrating on the personal failings of individual male characters to live up to the demands of masculinity, I here wish to explore the ways in which female characters are able to subvert and undermine the concept of masculinity. Masculinity in medieval Icelandic literature – as today – does not exist in isolation, but must be viewed in relation to other forms of gendered praxis, particularly femininities and female-sexed bodies. Although the construction and function of femininities is beyond the scope of this thesis, I hope to here highlight how viewing masculinity as operating in dialogue with women and with femininity is another productive avenue of exploration. Before continuing, it is worth noting that this section will certainly not be comprehensive, but will rather touch briefly upon some ways in which female and feminine subjects undermine the masculine status of men.

It is not without reason that women in Old Norse literature are often thought of as being oppressed and subjugated by Norse men and the ever-present spectre of Norse masculinity.[1] If it is indeed true, as Jochens suggests, that the images of women found in Old Norse literature are representative of 'masculine fantasies about the female condition', then the sagas, in terms of gender portrayals, make for disturbing reading.[2] A reading, especially cursory, of these texts forms an impression of women who are disenfranchised and powerless, lacking direct access to political or social power, or even, for the most part, a poetic voice. Furthermore, Helga Kress has noted that the 'threat of physical violence hangs over women who do not do men's will.'[3] This is undoubtedly true, and the physical and sexual abuse of women in the sagas is ubiquitous.[4]

Another facet of the oppression of women – perhaps paradoxically – is their veneration and objectification. Such objectification of women is most clearly demonstrated by their treatment in the skaldic verse found in the sagas. The nature of skaldic verse is such that it both objectifies and immobilizes its object. As it is the man who almost invariably speaks, the female object is denied

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[1] See for example: Helga Kress, 'Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature', in Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Collection of Essays* (New York and London, 2002), 81-92.

[2] Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 3.

[3] Kress, 'Taming the Shrew', 90.

[4] For examples of physical violence against women, see: *Bárðar saga*, 130, in which a farmer strikes his wife, causing her to cry; *Heiðarvíga saga*, 325, in which Barði strikes his wife for disturbing his sleep; *Bjarnar saga*, 140, in which Þórðr slaps Oddný; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 36, in which Auðr's hand is cut off while trying to temper male violence; *Laxdœla saga*, 93, in which Guðrún is struck by Þorvaldr; and *Njáls saga*, in which Hallgerðr is slapped three times by three different men – Þorvaldr (33), Glúmr (48), and Gunnarr (124). Sexual violence is also common; see: *Bárðar saga*, 150-2, where Sólrún suggests that she expects to be the victim of sexual violence at the hands of her captor, Kolbjörn; *Grettis saga*, 241-2, in which a maidservant is seemingly raped by Grettir; *Kormáks saga*, 293, in which Kormákr clasps Steingerðr to himself against her will; and *Svarfdæla saga*, in which Yngvildr is subject to sustained sexual, physical, and mental abuse.

voice as well as agency. Appellations such as 'ljós […] lín-Gefn' (bright linen-goddess), '[v]æn […] vín-Gefn' (beautiful wine-goddess), and '[m]ær munnfögr' (mouth-fair – i.e. pretty – maiden) render their objects forever passive and static; women are converted into an image to be consumed, words to be savoured.[5] Skaldic verse thus serves to nullify female agency. It does, however, reveal another female role: that of the poetic muse, be she willing or unwilling.

However, the images which the skaldic art produces also harbour a countervailing current running beneath the surface. As Judy Quinn suggests, 'the wealth she [the female object of skaldic verse] bears signifies a silent power'.[6] Indeed, if we accept Roberta Frank's incisive claim that skalds address women in a bid to be noticed, for attention, and for validation, we can therefore conclude that the silent power which women's wealth signifies is the power of signification itself.[7] By continually rendering female characters a static and silent Other whose attention they must have, skalds force the women of the sagas to play another role: they must function to signify and affirm the masculinity of the male characters. In Lacanian terms, the woman, as always, becomes the phallus, so that she may signify the males' possession thereof; this is a position which is

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[5] *Kormáks saga*, 233; *Gunnlaugs saga*, 90; *Víglundar saga*, 98.
[6] Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', 520.
[7] Roberta Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women', in Teresa Pàroli (ed.), *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Atti del 12o Congresso Internazionale di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* (Spoleto, 1990), 67-83. As Frank suggests: 'when a skald addresses a woman, his "O lady" apostrophe is not so much a greeting as a kind of shorthand, a mnemonic of masculinity. When he says "O lady" he really means "Notice me. Admire me, advise me, advertise me. Look lady, how good I am at being a man"' (69). It should be noted that this is not to say that the act of versifying in itself is seen as an example of the poet 'being a man' (although see pages 49-50 of this thesis for the possible role played by verse in forming homosocial groupings), but rather that, as Frank suggests, the poet records in verse those deeds which would cause him to be thought of as manly, such as partaking in dangerous battles (69). It is the actions that are discussed in verse that he wants the woman to authenticate as masculine, not the act of producing verse in itself.

elevated in the skaldic verse in the sagas.[8] The verse, therefore, betrays a generally unacknowledged attribute of the feminine role. From within a masculine discourse which seeks to nullify the power of the feminine arises the power which enables the existence of the very masculine which seeks to constrain it. To recognize this fact is to recognize the contingency and fragility of masculinity, and its ultimate dependence on femininity.

While the power ascribed to women in skaldic verse is perhaps viewed best as occurring, in effect, independently of women themselves, there are several other points throughout the sagas at which women, while remaining within societally ascribed roles and discourse, look beyond them. The poignant image of Helga looking back across the river at Gunnlaugr in *Gunnlaugs saga* is an important example of this. While Alison Finlay sees this as yet another static female portrait among an abundance of others, her reading ignores the agency which Helga's gaze suggests.[9] Far from being 'the passive centre of the saga' as Diana Whaley claims, Helga utilizes her silent gaze to convey the force of her desire, thereby subtly inverting the balance of power between men and women

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[8] As Judith Butler notes: 'To "be" the Phallus is to be the "signifier" of the desire of the Other and to appear as this signifier. In other words, it is to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire. This is an Other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to "be" the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to 'embody' the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through "being" its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity. By claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who is the Phallus, Lacan clearly suggests that power is wielded by this feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who 'has' the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its "extended" sense.' (*Gender Trouble*, 44). See also Laura Mulvey's seminal essay in which she links such an understanding with vision in her concept of the gaze: 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.3 (1975), 6-18.

[9] Alison Finlay, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts', in Russell Poole (ed.), *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin and New York, 2001), 232-271 (237).

in this heavily scopophilic literature.[10] In this episode we read that 'stóð Helga ok starði á Gunnlaug lengi eptir' (Helga stood and stared at Gunnlaugr for a long time afterwards).[11] While Helga *stares*, Gunnlaugr can only *look back* at her; indeed, we are told that 'Gunnlaugr leit þá aptr yfir ána' (Gunnlaugr then looked back across the river).[12] The power here clearly lies with Helga. Contrary to Finlay's claim, it is not Helga who becomes the image, but rather, with her gaze, she renders Gunnlaugr a portrait to be observed and consumed. Her rejection of the male gaze – and indeed, overpowering of it – undermines masculine desire, while asserting her own. Her gaze recognizes that Gunnlaugr's look casts her as object, but from her objectified position, and using her bolder gaze, she hints at the possibilities for female desire and agency.[13] Similarly, Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga* also actively returns Kormákr's gaze; although Tósti's observation – '[s]tarsýn gerisk hon á þik' (she's starting to stare at you) – is perhaps humorous in terms of the prosimetrical disjunction between this piece of prose and Kormákr's grand verse to a similar effect which precedes it, it is unquestionably

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[10] Diana Whaley (ed. and notes), *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London, 2002), xxiii.
[11] *Gunnlaugs saga,* 97.
[12] *Gunnlaugs saga,* 97
[13] M. A. Jacobs has also noted the 'active nature of Helga's vision' ('Hon stóð ok starði: Vision, Love, and Gender in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies* 86.2 (2014), 148-68 (159)). In her article, however, Jacobs intentionally avoids modern theoretical conceptions of the gaze (153, n. 7) preferring instead to rely on understandings based on the Platonic model of extramissive vision and the Aristotelian theory of intromission. I am unconvinced that using these theories prohibits the use of modern conceptions of the gaze, however. Modern theories of the gaze rely on intersubjective power relations, not privileged knowledge to which the authors of the sagas may well not have had access. Just as I do not need to know about the corneal refraction of light onto the cones and rods of the retina to participate in the intersubjective dynamics of gazing and being gazed upon, neither do saga characters, or their authors, need an awareness of learned models in order to appreciate the power held in a gaze. It should also be noted that Jenny Jochens has questioned the presence of the gaze in Old Norse literature, basing her suggestion on the lack of detail devoted in saga narrative to describing the physical appearance of women ('Before the Male Gaze'). But Jochens overlooks the importance of interpersonal forms of the gaze: characters, like Helga and Gunnlaugr, clearly participate in a form of gazing. For an exemplary usage of modern theories of the gaze in Old Norse scholarship, see: Larrington, '"What Does Woman Want?"', especially 8-11.

significant in terms of the active role ascribed to Steingerðr.[14] Not only does she become consumer of Kormákr-as-image, and thus as object, but she also finds fault with what she sees: 'hárit er sveipt í enninu' (the hair is curled on the forehead).[15] Like Helga, her gaze betrays her potential for power, agency and feminine superiority. Women, then, can use the gaze in order to undermine the autonomy of men: by highlighting the desire of men, woman-as-object highlights the incompleteness of masculinity, while woman-as-gazer indicates the desire and sexual agency of women, independent of, and potentially stronger than, that of men.

Some characters' attempts to perform beyond their socially designated roles as passive females are considerably more energetic. A crucial example of this is Ólof's donning of male dress in *Víglundar saga*. In this episode, Einarr and Jökull visit Ólof, so that Einarr may force himself upon her, while her husband Þorgrímr is not at home. Ólof has her maid pretend to be her, and when Einarr sits next to the maid, we are told the following:

> Í þessu kom maðr í stofuna bláklæddr ok helt á brugðnu sverði. Maðrinn var ekki stórr vexti, en allreiðugligr var hann. Þeir spurðu hann at nafni, en hann nefndist Óttarr. Ekki þekktu þeir þenna mann, en þó stóð þeim nökkurr ótti af þessum manni.[16]
>
> At this moment a man dressed in black came into the room, and he was holding a drawn sword. The man was not big in stature, but he looked very angry. They asked him his name and he gave his name as Óttarr. They did not recognize this man, and yet they stood somewhat in fear of this man.

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[14] *Kormáks saga*, 209.
[15] *Kormáks saga,* 210.
[16] *Víglundar saga, 78.*

After being informed by the man that Þorgrímr is approaching, the men jump up and quickly leave. The reader is then told that, in reality, 'inn bláklæddi maðr var Ólof sjálf' (the man dressed in black was Ólof herself).[17] In this episode, Ólof's performance of masculine gender is so believable that both the men and the reader are convinced by it, and assume that Ólof, as Óttarr, is indeed a man. The men fear Óttarr and flee from the threat (s)he poses. The narrative repeatedly refers to Óttarr as 'the man', and uses masculine personal pronouns for him/her. Furthermore, (s)he wields an unsheathed sword – an obvious phallic symbol – which is an unsubtle indicator of his/her masculinity. It also, in Lacanian terms, demonstrates that (s)he now possesses the phallus, and thus the social power afforded to the masculine subject. His/her adoption of the masculine role is thus total. Unlike the modern drag queen or king whose gender performance, whether masculine or feminine, is hyperbolic and thus draws attention to the fact that all gender is a performance of the signifiers *of* gender, Ólof's transformation is complete, perfectly signifying his/her newly adopted masculinity; the implication for the concept of gender, however, is similar.[18] Through Ólof's demonstration that (s)he is able to adopt a gender performance other than female, it is suggested that masculine and feminine roles are arbitrarily divided. By performing so perfectly a masculinity divorced from a biologically male body (s)he reveals the artificial and constructed nature of masculinity. Ólof's performance of masculinity – no matter how fleeting – destabilizes and subverts the primacy and impenetrability of the category of masculinity.

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[17] *Víglundar saga, 78.*
[18] cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

Auðr in *Laxdœla saga* is also said to adopt male dress. Prompted by Guðrún, Auðr's husband Þórðr divorces her on the grounds that she has – supposedly – worn men's trousers, although we cannot be sure whether this is an accurate report or a fabrication. In announcing the divorce he accuses her of wearing breeches 'sem karlkonur' (like masculine women).[19] Here, as the compound *karlkonur* indicates, Auðr clearly retains her female status, but is nevertheless aligned with the masculine. The precise signification of the term *karlkona* is unclear – we cannot know whether Auðr is seen as sexually deviant, as simply cross-dressing, or as having an identity akin to that of a transgender person today – but what is clear is that the term, by juxtaposing the words for man and woman, destabilizes binary gender identities. Following the divorce, Auðr takes revenge on her ex-husband. We read that she rides to Þórðr's home, and the saga narrative wryly tells us that 'var hon þá at vísu í brókum' (she was certainly wearing breeches at that point).[20] Once she arrives, she enters the bed-closet and stabs the sleeping Þórðr so hard in his arm with her short-sword that it sticks fast into bed. Stabbing Þórðr amounts to an act of phallic aggression, allowing Auðr to assert dominance over her ex-husband. Indeed, she has been accused of being masculine by Þórðr, and now she violently proves that not only is she more than capable of performing masculinity, but also of performing it better than he can.[21]

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[19] *Laxdœla saga*, 96.
It should be noted that Cleasby-Vigfússon (s.v. karl-kona) suggests that the word is a scribal error, and should be emended to read 'karlmenn'. But this emendation seems entirely unnecessary given the context in which the compound occurs.

[20] *Laxdœla saga*, 97.

[21] cf. Gísli's act of symbolic phallic aggression carried out against Þorgrímr in chapter 16 of *Gísla saga* – in which Gísli also stabs his victim while in bed – as discussed by David Clark in his 'Revisiting *Gísla saga*: Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106.4 (2007), 492-515 (504-07).

The most striking image of gender subversion, however, is provided by Freydís in *Eiríks saga rauða*. In one scene of this saga, a Norse encampment is attacked by the native *Skrælingar*. The men of the settlement, led by Karlsefni, all flee in terror, leaving behind the heavily pregnant Freydís to fend for herself. It is worth quoting Freydís' reaction – to both the fleeing men, and the attacking *Skrælingar* – in full:

> Freydís kom út ok sá, at þeir Karlsefni heldu undan, ok kallaði: 'Hví renni þér undan þessum auvirðis-mǫnnum, svá gildir menn sem þér eruð, er mér þœtti sem þér mættið drepa niðr svá sem búfé? Ok ef ek hefða vápn, þœtti mér sem ek skylda betr berjask en einnhverr yðvar.' Þeir gáfu engan gaum hennar orðum. Freydís vildi fylgja þeim ok varð seinni, því at hon var eigi heil; Hon fann fyrir sér mann dauðan; þar var Þorbrandr Snorrason, ok stóð hellusteinn í hǫfði honum. Sverðit lá bert í hjá honum; tók hon þat upp ok býsk at verja sik. Þá kómu Skrælingar at henni; hon dró þá út brjóstit undan klæðunum ok slettir á beru sverðinu. Við þetta óttask Skrælingar ok hljópu undan á skip sín ok reru í brott.[22]
>
> Freydís came out and saw that Karlsefni and the men were fleeing, and she called, 'Why are you running away from these wretched men, such worthy men as you are, who seem to me as if you might slaughter them like cattle? And if I had a weapon, I think I should fight better than any of you.' They paid no heed to her words. Freydís wished to follow them but did so slowly because she was pregnant; nevertheless she walked after them into the forest, but the *Skrælingar* pursued her. She discovered a dead man; it was Þorbrandr Snorrason, who had a flat stone lodged in his head. An unsheathed sword lay next to him; she took it up and got ready to defend herself. Then the *Skrælingar* advanced towards her; she pulled out one of her breasts from her clothing and slapped it on the bare sword. At this the *Skrælingar* were frightened and ran to their ships and rowed away.

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[22] *Eiríks saga*, 229.

Here, she not only questions the manliness of the men who flee, and the men attacking, but further demonstrates that her courage goes far beyond that of either. We are given a portrait of a woman who is able to do what men are not only unable to do, but are also afraid to attempt. Judy Quinn has suggested that 'the exposure of her breast only intensifies the force of her goading of Karlsefni and his men: it takes a woman, and it takes a woman to do so little to make the Skrælingar evaporate from the scene'.[23] This is clearly correct, but we may read further into the gender dynamics of this episode. We may suggest that in her violent opposition to the attacking *Skrælingar* Freydís demonstrates qualities that would be associated with a masculine subject position. But unlike Ólof's performance of a male masculinity in *Víglundar saga*, Freydís performs a masculinity completely divorced from maleness and, moreover, explicitly tethered to a female body. Both her pregnancy and her defiantly exposed breast foreground her biological sex, ensuring that it is not obscured by her seemingly masculine performance. Slapping the sword with her breast, Freydís powerfully suggests – through the symbolic meeting of cultural masculinity and biological femaleness – that masculinity is by no means the preserve of men. Consequently, she reveals the link between men and masculinity to be an artificial construct, and thus subverts masculinity's status as natural, normal, and unconstructed.[24]

Only a small selection of the subversive female characters in the *Íslendingasögur* has been discussed here, but these characters clearly indicate that women are able to destabilize the category of masculinity. Not only, then, is masculinity a facet of identity which is continually undermined, which places an

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[23] Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', 531-2.
[24] cf. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 235.

untenable and generally unrealizable burden on male characters, and which is socially problematic when performed too well, but it is also open to external subversion by characters who would not normally be thought masculine. The consequent conclusion that masculinity in the sagas is to seen as a fragile and contingent quality is all the more striking when considered in the light of Jenny Jochens' assertion that since Old Norse texts are '[u]ndoubtedly all composed by men', they 'offer the advantage of providing a genuine representation of a masculine outlook'.[25] Significantly, this masculine perspective does not simply glorify the category of masculinity, but also notes it damaging effects and highlights its inherent vulnerability.

[25] Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze', 3.

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