

Queering the Family Sagas: Embodiment and Empowerment through Gender

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in the
undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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April 2022

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The popular imagining of Vikings paints them as virulent and violent men, the pinnacle of a powerful pagan masculinity. Women were unimportant, except as Valkyries or victims.¹ But what did they think about themselves? More importantly, what did they say about themselves? In saga literature, so called because it was the Old Norse word for “story,” related to our modern word “say,” there is a much more nuanced picture of gender. At the surface, men appear masculine and women appear feminine, but the concepts of masculinity and femininity are temporally locked; they are defined by contemporary culture, so to apply them unquestioningly to the past is an endeavor fraught with false assumptions.

The sagas are a body of literature native to Scandinavia, which were written in Old Norse, a North Germanic language that was shared between Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark². There are a number of genres, including saints’ and kings’ sagas, legendary, chivalric, and contemporary sagas, and finally, the family sagas, which are the focus of this thesis. The family sagas have been the most common object of saga study, although attention to the other genres has certainly been growing, improving not only the study of Old Norse linguistics, but also the contextualization of the family sagas, which were surely read alongside the kings’ and legendary sagas without our modern genrefication.

The family sagas as a genre focus on the social, legal, and cultural conditions of the settlers of Iceland up until their conversion to Christianity in the year 1000. They were written between the 13th and 15th centuries, and their place in time hovers tenuously between these two

¹ For examples we can look to internet subcultures, which Merrill Kaplan explores in “The State of Vinland,” (2019) or recent history, as with the Charlottesville rally or the January 6th insurrection at the American Capitol, or things as innocuous as football team mascots being bearded, athletic Vikings.

² Robert Kellogg, introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xv.

This introduction serves as a very good explanation of the history that produced the sagas, as well as general saga themes and motifs. It is where the rest of this brief summary of saga literature and its history comes from, unless otherwise marked.

eras. There is a distinct nostalgia for the good-old-days of a different past right alongside a critique of the violence of the men of yore. As generational texts, they exist in a sort of familial present, with sagas often ending with lists of descendents up until the contemporary period, linking their history with the time of their writing. As such, it is difficult to say whether the gender structures within these sagas are imagined and historicized through the dual lens of nostalgia and critique, if they are reflections of contemporary structures, or none, or all of the above.

These are the stories of the Scandinavians, who only sometimes went out a-viking, written by their descendents. Those descendents were writing from a land on the edge of continental Europe. They were influenced by their contemporary events; Iceland converted to Christianity in the year 1000 after putting it to vote, not long after a diffuse system of local leaders (called *goðar*) started to be consolidated under single men, taking land and power away from many in the process. These single powerful men were courted by or refused by the Norwegian monarchy, which reclaimed Iceland as under its crown 400 years after settlers fled the establishment of that very same monarchy. This is where the nostalgia comes from, reminiscing about independence, both of the identity of the island and of the individual.

At the same time, more and more continental literature and learning was making its way to Scandinavia in general, and to Iceland in particular, which undoubtedly affected the writing of the sagas. Christian and chivalric ideals were integrated into the plots, focusing on feud, specifically blood-feud, when entangling alliances and kinship bonds led headlong into a back-and-forth of killings and legal redress. Their violence can be gratuitous, and even funny, but that violence was also criticized and satirized based on the changing standards of society that came with changing historical contexts.

The historicity of the family sagas is the subject of furious debate, but their significance to the self-identification of Scandinavians then and now is not.³ Their main characters are men, their main structure is the social and familial relationships of those men. Women are vital in these relationships, and saga women have often been portrayed as some of the most independent female figures of medieval literature. Gender is of vital importance to these figures, and it often plays a central role in the stories. It is not, however, gender as we understand it now.

Reading for Queerness

In order to delve into the massive question of how gender worked in the sagas, I begin with Kim Hall, whose talk with Noémie Ndiaye as part of “Race in Dialogue” inspired me to embark on this work. When asked what she wants future generations of scholarship to look like, she says that she wants scholars to read intuitively, and to not be deterred when they see something in a text, like race or gender, that has been invisible because of different experiences.⁴ Taking this, something in the sagas struck me as queer while I was reading them, and this sense of queerness has been the impetus for the investigation of how gender as an overarching structure works in saga. Are saga characters queer in the modern oppositional use of the word, or do they look queer because they challenge our current widespread views of gender? Based on intuition and, in the pages following, an investigation of diverse gender performances in the sagas, it is undeniable that there is some queerness within the family sagas, although to say that so simply implies that queerness requires something essential. It is perhaps better to say that

³ For a thorough treatment on the sagas’ role in Icelandic nationalism, medieval and modern, see Jesse Byock’s essay, “History and the sagas: the effect of nationalism,” in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (1992).

⁴ Kim Hall, “Race in Dialogue,” interview by Noémie Ndiaye. Hosted by Newberry Center for Renaissance Studies, YouTube live stream recording, 39:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys2VBTgpyNs>.

there is something unique and challenging about the way the sagas present gender, and that this uniqueness and challenge need to be investigated in order to diversify our own understanding of gender history and our modern concepts of gender.

Theoretical and Saga Sources

To do queer history is not necessarily to go hunting for queer people, but— taking Hall’s call to read intuitively— it is to look for instances where the standard is challenged, even if that standard is a moving target of cultural laws, allowances, and prohibitions. Carolyn Dinshaw says of this that queer history is not a singular thing, nor is queerness some clearly defined essence that we can search for. Queerness is rather a relation to a norm, and the norm and the queerness can change in different contexts⁵. Although she later links queerness with sexuality and sex, a thing I intend to resist in the following pages, Dinshaw’s base method for *doing* queer history is sound: look for how the cultural mores are resisted, inverted, or otherwise challenged in order to find queerness.

Dinshaw’s method of doing queer history, which necessarily involves an emotive or relational touching through time, provides a clear entry point into a queer analysis of the sagas because of how they interact with their own history. This touch is such that we cannot easily divide ourselves from the past because we are affected by it, including on an individual level.⁶ The family sagas are predisposed to this touching, because they engage in it themselves. As said before, saga cannot be easily periodized; they “encapsulate a peculiar slice of medieval Icelanders’ cognitive and cultural realities, not comfortably datable to either the 900s or the

⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, “Introduction: Touching on the Past,” in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 39.

⁶ Dinshaw, 21.

1200s (and beyond).⁷ This mix of time need not be read as conflation or as the imposition of the contemporary on the past, but as a way that saga authors and audiences used saga to connect their time with that of the past, touching that past in profound ways.

To begin reaching into the past to engage with this, I focus on three sagas in particular, which are some of the most widely translated and researched: *Njals saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*.⁸ I have been quite intentional choosing these sagas as the most widely studied ones; if I intend to reevaluate how saga literature is read in relation to queer methodologies, then it is fitting to start with the ones which are said to define saga literature. And yet, this is still only the beginning and woefully short of the extraordinary diversity of the sagas in general. In this cursory intervention, I am leaving out much of the literary context in which these three sagas were likely read. This being said, a rigorous queer reading of the sagas must start somewhere, and I believe this starting point to be the most accessible for those who may be unfamiliar with the sagas, and the most logical for those who are invested in critical rereadings of the sagas.

In saga, the primary protagonists are of a certain class, the *bondi* landowner class, and they are differently gendered than the slaves and freedmen that appear. As the protagonists, these are the genders which I will be analyzing, but the contrast between social classes results in a contrast in gender construction which is visible in the sagas. As essentially Icelandic too, the men in the sagas structure their gendered identity in contrast to the gendered identity of Norwegian kings, so that nationality has a bearing on gender construction in the sagas as well. A

⁷ Oren Falk, “Boyhood, Saga-Style: from *Mannsefni* to *Maðr*,” in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 23.

⁸ I am working with these sagas in translation in order to limit the scope of this analysis to a literary one, and thus I will be using anglicized names. I do want to acknowledge that scrutiny of the language used by men and women about men and women in the sagas is surely an important line of critique. Carol J. Clover discusses the word *ergi* in particular, as well as *hvati* and *blauðr*, and Ármann Jakobsson, among many others, has done important work on the role of words and nicknames in gendering saga characters.

queer and trans theoretical framework can elucidate the ways that the tension between class and national identity work to construct gender within the sagas.

A cornerstone of this endeavor is that gender is constructed, performative, and always policed. Judith Butler was the one to revolutionize this way of thinking, and I look to her as my methodological starting place. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler elucidates how gender is created; it is something that does not precede our own understandings of ourselves nor (and especially) language.⁹ Gender is, rather, something that is constantly produced and reasserted throughout our lifetimes. To be a gender is to do that gender, hence the performativity. And yet, crucial to the construction and performance of gender is the policing of it. To be legible as human is to have a legible gender, and thus any illegibility or deviance is very tightly controlled and policed.¹⁰ This policing and regulation comes not just through gender and sexuality, but also through race, class, and a myriad of intersections of identity that racialize, exotify, and differentiate gender. The regulation is not something that comes down from some abstract entity, or necessarily from other individuals, but it is the fear of punishment, of dehumanization, and of sociocultural illegibility.¹¹ Thus, we effectively regulate ourselves as we are conditioned within our social and cultural contexts. The constructed nature of gender and its performativity means that there are ways in which normative gendering can be changed (if something new is begun to be iterated, then the gender changes) and resisted (refusing to take part in normative gendering, while still reifying it through a relational identification of it, is still a way to resist). This possibility of different normativity and resistance is the basis upon which I will investigate characters, their actions, and their relationships in the sagas.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 70.

¹⁰ Butler, 1-2.

¹¹ Butler, 168.

Even so, Butler's theory of gender performativity and construction is not enough to investigate the masculinities and femininities that are present in saga, and how they might relate to our own. For this, I turn to Salamon, whose work elaborates upon and departs from Butler, in that she centers trans¹² modes of experience, particularly the "felt sense"¹³ that trans people use to describe their identification, in order to dissect the workings of gender. Although Butler hints at this, Salamon asserts that gender is tied not to anatomy, but to the gesture which a material body allows, a gesture which always seeks to replicate an immaterial ideal.¹⁴ She could only come to this gesture by looking at how trans people identify and express themselves, using performativity to create their own identification even though Butler finds performativity restrictive of agency. In this way, we can see cross-gender identification not just as resistance or reassertion, but as a way to make one's own way and create power for oneself, and in saga, gender is the most essential tool for accessing power.

Gender and the Sagas

Gender in the sagas is a branch of saga scholarship that has only relatively recently started to grow, thanks primarily to the influence of feminist scholars and the foregrounding of women in the sagas. Two scholars who made trailblazing steps into investigating women and gender in the sagas are Carol J. Clover and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. Clover is often

¹² Trans is a shorthand that I will use throughout this paper, its meaning free to float from identities that are defined as a disidentification with assigned gender and/or an identification with a different gender than is given, a way of experiencing that involves a disconnect with what is perceived or expected, especially as it relates to gender, and a budding philosophical methodology that involves scrutinizing the enshrined status of the sex/gender debate and reframing it to build off of the previous two meanings. It is at once limiting and expansive, and I want to acknowledge the work that is being done to define this word and others as it applies to people, but this is not work I will engage with here.

¹³ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁴ Salamon, 48.

credited as the first one to bring the question of gender in the sagas up at all, and although her work is often criticized for being too surface level, or for focusing too much on the family sagas, her essay “Regardless of Sex” has been the foundation for thinking of saga gender as something different from our own.¹⁵ Friðriksdóttir, on the other hand, has focused much of her work on the integration of saga genres outside of the typical family sagas and has thus contributed significantly to the diversification of women’s roles in the sagas. In her introduction, Friðriksdóttir critiques previous models of saga femininity, which focus more on the historiographical sagas in order to find women’s social history. Such a focus may be causing gaps in our understanding and reconstruction of what female tropes meant to audiences reading the sagas.¹⁶ A critique that has been leveled in general has been that, by investigating saga gender primarily through women, scholars may be implying that only women have gender in the sagas.

Thus, there has been much work done on the issue of gender in general and masculinity in particular in the sagas, in order to better our understanding of the whole gender system operating in this literary space. *Kyngervi* is a new journal that focuses on issues of gender in the Scandinavian sagas and other aspects of medieval Scandinavian culture, from folk belief to mythology to religion. This work is important because, like Friðriksdóttir, it moves away from the centering of the family sagas when it comes to investigations of gender in medieval Scandinavia and it also expands upon her work on women. Additionally, the editors of *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature* have endeavored to draw masculinity under the critical lens in order to better understand gender and also not reduplicate the assumed normativity of

¹⁵ Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hanncock, introduction to *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hanncock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 5.

¹⁶ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7.

masculinity.¹⁷ Even so, they admit that more work needs to be done, and I am attempting to continue this work.

Looking at the work upon which I'm building, I recognize that I might be attempting too much, since scholars have tended to focus either on men or on women in their critique of gender, but I hope to build off of both ends of this binary to come to something like a queer understanding of gender, which necessitates looking at the whole system of gender, not just one end of two perceived poles.

What Queer Theory Can Do for the Sagas

This intervention that I am attempting requires a distinctly queer lens. Feminist work in the sagas is a crucial foundation upon which I am building, but application of queer theory specifically can lead to insights into the structure of the sagas and on the representation of the social systems within them. Queering the construction of gender can also provide a better understanding of literary tropes in the saga. Similar to how Friðriksdóttir's diversification of the roles of women in a number of saga genres was the product of feminist inquiry, so too can a queer inquiry further complicate the roles that both men and women play in the sagas. Applications of queer theory to the sagas also widens the scope of feminist theory; Butler has indeed been put to use in the sagas to evaluate gender, but often only with regard to women. I think that, with the addition of a trans understanding of Butler provided by Salamon, Butler's theory can be more widely applied to gender in the sagas overall.

Additionally, one of the many purposes of queer theory is to point out that we cannot easily map gender to history, which induces us to become more aware of our own lens through

¹⁷ Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hanncock, introduction to *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hanncock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 5.

which we read history. We assume that we can recognize masculinity and femininity when we see it, but current Indigenous scholars, black scholars, and queer scholars are pointing out more and more that gender and sexuality are contingent on culture, and that recognition does not mean identification. Applying this thinking to the sagas can help us to read the sagas with a more critical eye, one that is sensitive to the discrepancy between what we think we see and what is there. This intervention also begins to rework the use of the sagas for white nationalism and white supremacy; if we challenge the recognition of masculinity in the sagas, then we challenge the use of that masculinity to harmful ends.

What the Sagas Can Do for Queer Theory

Saga scholarship, conversely, also has a lot to offer queer theory, especially as an example of gender diversity that comes from within the European-centric methodologies and thinking that has been founded by primarily Euro-American scholars. There has been a great deal of productive scholarship and activism that has resisted to Christian and Eurocentric definitions of gender, sexuality, and queerness which has come from Indigenous and black scholars. This work is absolutely necessary for the advancement of queer and gender theory, but I can not quell the concern that, when contextualized within Eurocentric queer theory, this work is instrumentalized in a way that Franz Fanon may call the “insurance for humanity.”¹⁸ While learning more about queer scholarship and personal stories, I have noticed a trend to point to Indigenous and non-white communities as the only places where resistance to Eurocentric gender definitions can take place. As something to stand alongside this work on deconstructing white gender constructions, saga offers a departure from this, because it is still white and Eurocentric.

¹⁸ Franz Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), 108.

I acknowledge that this may risk recentering white perspectives, but I think that it is important to have multiple ways through which we can critique the current gender system.

Additionally, the sagas offer a unique European perspective on gender that comes along with being some of the last places, and thus literatures, to be Christianized. Despite its resistance to largely Christian norms, the majority of Western queer theory is still fundamentally Christian. In chapter 3 of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler describes how resistance to a law is also reinscribing it, because it is still a relationship to be had with this law that does not change its structure.¹⁹ She uses this to describe embodied positions, but this theorization also applies to the relationship of European queer theory with Christianity. In its response to and critique of sexual repression, stringent gender roles, and heterosexism, queer scholarship has firmly established itself as from a Christian perspective. The sagas were written by Christian people and from a Christian perspective, but there are many places in which the pagan forefathers of the writers are presented neutrally and even positively in this Christian context. The ideals that are preserved in the sagas hover between Christian and non-Christian, and there is a visible tension between a lauding for the past and a preservation of Christian morals. As such, the sagas offer a European context in which Christianity is not always the most powerful driver of gender construction and relationality.

Another intervention that the sagas provide for queer methodologies is the foundation of many of these on desire. Salamon cites Merleau-Ponty and says that the only way that we relate to the world is through desire, and that desire is the basis upon which both gender and sexuality are founded.²⁰ Even though there has been a departure from defining gender and sex within the physical, this fixation on desire still puts gender in the material realm, as something developed

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 105.

²⁰ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 24.

through desire of self-acknowledgement and the physical desire towards other people, sexual or not. Saga introduces a challenge to this formulation, in that there is little overt sexuality at all, and yet men and women are still presented as having clearly defined genders. While there is desire, it is very rarely directed towards other people; when such desire occurs it is anomalous, whereas in continental chivalric literature, most everything is in some way about sex or sexuality.²¹

Additionally, to echo Salamon's sentiments in chapter four of *Assuming a Body*, trans and genderqueer studies have yet to find a stable place in academia.²² Feminist discourse still struggles to fully account for the diversity of gender embodiment, including within the sagas. By using queer and specifically trans methodologies to investigate the sagas, I hope that this application might serve to further legitimize trans studies within academia, because it will be shown to be a unique and valid method of inquiry with which we can learn new things that struggle to come to light without inclusion of trans modes of thought.

Women in the Sagas

When daughters, wives, or mothers are heard from in the family sagas, it is often because they are exceptional, and part of this exceptionalism often comes from women's performances of masculinity. Gareth Lloyd Evans focuses on such performances in his essay, "Female Masculinity and the Sagas of the Icelanders." Importantly, he distinguishes his concept of female masculine performance from that of Clover, in that he holds that the assigned gender of

²¹ There are the chivalric sagas that do provide important context for the gender roles which were expressed in the family sagas, and they employ the same chivalric themes as on the continent. What I'm focusing on here, though, is how gender (and to some extent sexuality) is mediated in the family sagas. There are issues of genre at play, as well as the risk of dealing with these sagas in isolation as so many have done before, but my work is only the beginning and does not intend to be comprehensive.

²² Salamon, 96.

the women performing masculinity is crucial to the type of masculinity they perform, and how it interacts with masculinity performed by men. To see masculinity as something everyone can take hold of, as Clover does, ignores the nuance of what it means for different sorts of people to seize masculine performance.²³ By looking at women who perform masculinity in the sagas too, we are not just looking at women in isolation, but investigating what it means in the sagas to be a man and what it takes to perform masculinity. This is especially important since, for saga men, masculinity is most on display through insults and in their relationships with one another.

Evans's discussion of female masculinity can be elaborated upon with a queer analysis, by investigating how the embodiment of different types of gender influences the characters' access to power. Salamon's discussion of gender difference as a surface and a boundary which can be traversed and yet are inseparable is crucial for understanding how female masculinity works not just here in the sagas, but also in other instances of the diversity of gender expression.²⁴ The idea of gender being tangential surfaces is indeed helpful, but it must be elaborated in order to explain the saga conception of men and women taking up wholly different places *utan stocks* (outside the home) and *innan stocks* (inside the home). If Salamon imagines the difference between masculine and feminine not as separate spheres but as tangential, being on either side of a single surface that encompasses an inner shape that is masculinity or femininity, then it is helpful to imagine such a concept as bubbles touching one another, with a single surface dividing them from each other and also from the outside world. If that inner dividing surface were to disappear the bubble would pop, and yet this space allows for other bubbles, other genders, to exist inside and alongside the outer bubbles of overarching

²³ Gareth Lloyd Evans, "Female Masculinity and the Sagas of the Icelanders," in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), 61.

²⁴ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 140-141.

masculinity and femininity. Thus, female masculinity in the sagas might be imagined as pushing on the surface between masculine and feminine from the feminine side, so that the woman enters the masculine space without crossing the boundary entirely. Such an understanding provides a theoretical basis for how female masculinity is different from male masculinity in the sagas, while still allowing it the potential to be transgressive.

Aud: A Woman Wearing the Pants

No single character embodies this move from the feminine space into the masculine space without crossing the boundary better than Aud in *Laxdæla saga*. Called Breeches-Aud by Gudrun, she is divorced by her husband Thord after Gudrun accuses her of wearing men's breeches. As revenge for her divorce, she attacks Thord not just in his home, but in his bedchamber, dealing a great blow to him through his arm and across his nipples. The sword sticks in the bed from her strike, and she rides off to her brothers after the attack. In this scene, the saga wryly tells us that she arrives, "dressed in breeches, to be sure," indicating that the accusation that Gudrun leveled against her is doubtful, since it was unclear if she was actually wearing breeches before.²⁵

In this sequence of events, Aud recreates and critiques the insult that is constituted by the accusation that she is somehow gender-transgressive, thus performing something that looks like queerness because of its parody and its oppositional nature. In his breakdown of her character, Evans emphasizes three things: Aud's naming as somehow deviant, the implicit sexuality in her attack on Thord and her femaleness as it relates to her masculinity in this scene. Until Gudrun

²⁵ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Robert Cook, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 333-335.

I use the common diminutive name *Laxdæla saga* throughout the text rather than the longer name given as the title of my reference translation.

accuses her and Thord publicly divorces her, Aud does not appear in the saga to act like a man-woman, as Thord calls her in his divorce suit, it is only after her divorce that she is seen in the saga to don men's breeches and act masculinely.²⁶ This means, effectively, that she was named as gender deviant before she was seen to act as such, so that the naming is what produces her gender deviancy, not her actions in the chronology of the saga. In the process of her naming, Gudrun says that a woman who wears men's breeches should face the same consequences as a man who wears a shirt so low that his nipples could be seen. This is a direct reference to the means by which she divorced her own husband, at the prompting of Thord. Gender is here thus not being policed necessarily, but is being used as a means to gain power or deprive someone else of it. Transgressing gender means divorce, and divorce means a loss of kin, which was a loss of power. Aud, by resisting and producing Gudrun's accusation is effectively resisting this system of power.

In her resistance and reproduction of Gudrun's accusation, Aud does not give up her femininity in order to perform masculinity. The two are thus not binarily opposed, but can be present at once in the same figure, and in a way that challenges the naturalization of masculinity belonging to men and femininity belonging to women. She does not put on a disguise, nor does she take on a different name to assault her ex-husband. Instead, the only masculine clothes that the saga tells us she is wearing are the men's breeches and the only masculine thing she does is carry a sword and attack her husband in an eroticized way with her as the dominant figure. The fact that she attacks him in the bedchamber would be intimate enough, but she stabs him across the chest, slicing his nipples, which is a body part that had already been emphasized in Gudrun's divorce of her husband. Additionally, the sword sticks upright in the bed, which could be

²⁶ Gareth Lloyd Evans, "Female Masculinity and the Sagas of the Icelanders," in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), 64.

indicative of both the penis and the seized phallus. The phallicism of her attack, her donning of masculine attire, and Thord's mistaking her for a man when she enters his bedchamber mean, effectively, that her masculinity has conquered his. According to Evans, "That she is able to perform masculinity better than him [her husband] inevitably calls into question the masculine performance of her ex-husband, but also the naturalized (and thus, usually invisible) link between masculinity and maleness."²⁷ This conquering of male masculinity in the sagas can be a dangerous thing, because it has the potential to deprive the men of their power through their gender.

Gudrun's accusation and Thord's reiteration of Aud's masculinity attempts to deprive her of her power by implying that her gender is deviant, but Aud retakes her power by assuming the role that has been placed upon her. To be a woman in men's pants is said to be dangerous, and Aud takes action to make sure that it is. In doing so, she denaturalizes the association between good, powerful performances of masculinity and the male body. Her femininity is what allows this scene to be transgressive, and it is what makes Aud's actions resistant to the power of insult that often is leveled at a character's gender. This may be the closest we get to our modern sense of oppositional queerness in the sagas; Aud reevaluates her gender performance as a form of protest and resistance to a system that would disenfranchise her based on an accusation of the exact deviance she replicates.

Not all "female masculinities" are, however, this transgressive. Evans goes on to evaluate two more scenes of exceptional women in their performance of masculinity, but he admits himself that he has chosen spectacular deeds to emphasize his point and that there are more subtle performances to be found.²⁸ I intend to find these subtler performances, and in doing

²⁷ Evans, 67

²⁸ Evans, 74.

so, challenge even the naturalized association between masculinity and power, and masculinity and violence in the sagas. Additionally, female performances of masculinity are not always, nor even often, queer in our modern sense of the word. Instead, they look non-normative to us because there is an expectation of naturalized sex-gender alignment when encountering historical texts. To look for where this is not the case challenges our simplistic view of gender in the past and also asks us to reevaluate how we define gender in the present.

Unn the Deep-Minded: Exceptional Woman, Potential Patriarch

Unn the Deep-Minded is an exceptional woman by saga standards, in part because she performs all of the duties of exceptional men. She does this without compromising her position as a mother, grandmother, and head of the domestic sphere, and she does not necessarily do anything queer in this regard. Yet it is still useful to regard her figure with a queer lens so that we can better understand her, her position in the saga, and our relation to her character today. Doing so, it is clear that Unn wields power because of her performance of typically masculine responsibilities, and this power is different than women are often seen to yield in sagas, which Friðriksdóttir points out is often limited to the realm of words and whetting²⁹.

We are made aware of Unn's exceptionalism and position as a settler early on, with her father leaving Norway to escape the monarchy of Harald Fair-Hair, only joined by Unn and her brothers, not her two sisters. She is married to Olaf the White, who is mentioned along with her introduction, but otherwise her husband and marriage is not acknowledged. Their marriage produces a son, but her son is hardly a figure in the saga either, dying at the hands of the Scots seemingly soon after the family lands in Scotland. We are told that her father is dead soon after,

²⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15.

and that the deaths of her father and son are her motivator for going to Iceland, where her brothers are. We hear nothing more of her husband, and it is unclear if he is dead or just absent. Either way, the treatment of Olaf the White in this saga mirrors that of a number of women in the sagas: their names are saved as important linkages in ancestry and kin, but they otherwise do nothing of note. Unn's exceptionalism is able to outshine the bias towards retelling men's stories and using male kin as the marker of support, but her independence begins in earnest when there are no more male kin around her.

We first hear the saga call her exceptional when she is leaving Scotland, and this characterization is emphasized and re-emphasized throughout her story. According to the saga, "people say it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers. It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was."³⁰ Her exceptionalism is in no small part because of her retinue, her ability to fund her own voyage, and her ability to call upon great men who were not necessarily kinsmen to join her. It is striking to note that her sisters share no such characterization despite being from good families and remembered as ancestors, so that despite the genre's overall emphasis on inheritability of honor and respect, Unn is able to become more than her sisters through her performance of masculinity. But this performance is not necessarily queer, it is only different because of how well she takes on these roles. In this way, Unn is an important example of how gender and performance can be redefined without needing transgression.

Unn shows us that gender embodiment need not be limiting. She is a mother and a wife and, increasingly important as her story moves forward, a grandmother. As the head of the family, she is arranging marriages, distributing dowries, giving land to loyal followers, freeing

³⁰ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Robert Cook, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 278.

slaves, and hosting feasts, all of which are almost always done by men. When she arrives in Iceland, she rejects the hospitality of her first brother because he offers her lodging along with others. Her second brother, on the other hand, receives her with a large retinue and hosts her and her following at his farm with great ceremony. This shows that not only is the saga valuing Unn for her position as a family head, but that Unn is valuing herself similarly. And when she finds her high-seat pillars, which had been thrown overboard, she decides to settle where they fell, a standard of saga narratives that establish the position of the character as a settler and thus in a place of particular high regard. That Unn is included in this tradition means that she is undoubtedly seen as a settler in the saga, which comes with it the implications of political and social leadership, and a resistance to the system of monarchy that was redefining gender on the continent.

Unn's death is also crucial in the characterization of her as an exceptional woman, because it shows how even in death, she is indomitable. When she is hosting the wedding feast of her favorite grandson, bearing herself well and with great dignity despite the fact that she dies that same night. In this scene, there is emphasis on her age; it is mentioned that she is angry when people ask about her health and she has been sleeping much more leading up to the feast. But, unlike when Egil Skallagrimson is seen to age near the end of his saga, Unn remains dignified and a source of wisdom. The saga tells us that people are not allowed to seek advice from her when she is in bed, which is admittedly the majority of the day, but this means that people are still seeking her for advice. Egil, on the other hand, is blind and must be assisted by servants. He has to be discouraged from causing chaos at the Althing by his son, and he mopes about his lost virility. For such a cutting figure of a saga man, old age is not graceful. And yet for Unn, she is a host, head of household, and head of family up until her death. When she dies,

her grandson finds her body not laying down as if she died in her sleep, but sitting upright. This lingering after death is another common saga trope, one that indicates the strength of a person's personality. With regard to Unn, her excess of dignity, her *exceptionalism* is visible in her dead body, which stays upright even after death.

In every regard, Unn is portrayed as a strong woman who is acting within the confines of the saga world. And yet, she does not appear confined. She is independent and active in her life and the lives of her descendents. In this regard, she can be seen as an example of what is available to women, and her figure sets up the continuing prominence of women in *Laxdaela saga*.³¹ On the other hand, Unn could be read, as Helga Kress has argued, that Unn is an example of what women cannot obtain *unless* they are exceptional. In his essay, "Men and Women in *Laxdaela saga*," Robert Cook agrees with the first sentiment, arguing that Unn sets up the potential for women's power that is evident time and time again throughout the saga. Taking up Salamon's definition of gender difference again, both perspectives can be true at the same time. Unn is not positioned as a figure for all women to be able to obtain, rather she is a figure who carved out her own space through kin, land, and self-valuation. She is emblematic of the diversity of saga women within the family sagas. She is but one type of woman, one who accesses power through the performance of masculine duties, among many who have many other avenues, including feminine ones, of accessing such power.

Bergthora and Hallgerd: Bodies and Feud

Unn performed typically masculine duties and was praised unambiguously both by the saga and its characters. Bergthora and Hallgerd, however, take on the mantles and the bodies of men in order to avenge the insults dealt to their perceived masculinities. When introduced,

³¹ Robert Cook, "Women and Men in Laxdæla Saga," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 39.

Bergthora is called “a woman with a mind of her own and a fine person, but a bit harsh-tempered.”³² She is the wife of Njal, after whom the saga is named, a beardless man who does not partake in violence, but does sometimes instigate it. When contesting the seating at a feast in Bergthora’s home, which Bergthora presides over, Hallgerd, wife of Njal’s close friend, insults both Bergthora and her husband, saying: “There’s not much to choose between you and Njal – you have gnarled nails on every finger, and he’s beardless.”³³ This insult can either be read as a class marker, with Bergthora being accused of doing manual labor unfitting for the woman of the house, or accusing her of sexual deviancy, with the gnarled nails potentially being perceived as a marker for nymphomania.³⁴ Bergthora retorts that she does not deny her and her husband’s potential sexual and gendered markers, but that she had never had her husband killed over smaller slights, which Hallgerd had. Thus, in this exchange of insults, Bergthora and Hallgerd are both accusing each other of improper gendered and sexual behavior, but not all is what it seems.

In *Njals saga*, there is a distinct disconnect between what sagas characters say, and what the saga itself says, especially when it comes to men’s performance of masculinity. In his essay, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njals saga*,” Ármann Jakobsson elucidates how masculinity in the saga is constructed through three layers: 13th century conceptions of masculinity, the ideology of masculinity that the saga creates through the characters’ spoken word, and the ideology of the saga itself.³⁵ Through these layers, the masculinity that is insulted by the characters is at times exalted by the saga, as is the case with Njal himself. This conception of masculinity can also be applied to how women perform masculinity in this saga, and the relationship this performance

³² *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 36.

³³ *Njal’s Saga*, 57.

³⁴ Robert Cook, in endnotes of *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 316-317.

³⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njals saga*,” *Viator* 38 (2007): 195.

has to their femininity. Bergthora is repeatedly praised for her actions, even though she is “a bit harsh-tempered,” and plays the role of head of house, mother, and wife well. Her performance of these roles indicates that what Hallgerd has said has no bearing on who Bergthora is, whereas Bergthora’s insult against Hallgerd taps into what the saga has already said about Hallgerd, that her husbands were murdered through her own actions or lack thereof. Thus, Bergthora is shown by the saga to be normative, including her faults, while Hallgerd is the one out of place.

Moreover, Hallgerd’s and Bergthora’s relationship does not end after these insults, and neither does their expression of masculinity. In a scene after the exchange over seating, Bergthora stakes her claim as the master of the house again when an outlaw comes to her door and asks if she has any control in hiring, asking to speak to Njal. Bergthora confidently states that “I’m Njal’s wife . . . and I have no less authority in hiring than he does.”³⁶ This statement is the saga telling us that, if Bergthora’s gender can be questioned because of her husband, then she attains personal power through that same relationship. Again, we are seeing that gender is never far from access to power, but this access to power does not diminish Bergthora’s femininity—especially her status as a wife and mother—at all. The fact that the outlaw must ask if she has power in hiring tells us that Bergthora’s position was not always the case, but that she can define her own power through her husband and through her status as a wife.

Hallgerd, on the other hand, is afforded no such power in her relationship with Gunnar. She acts against his wishes and so he refuses to support her against the insult given by Bergthora. This is further evidence that these women’s power, along with their gender, is being navigated through their husbands, but that does not require that they be subject to them. Indeed, against their husband’s wishes, Bergthora and Hallgerd proceed to carry out a feud, but they must do so through men’s bodies. Bergthora is the first to act, sending the outlaw she hired to kill one of

³⁶ *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 60.

Hallgerd's servants. Hallgerd repays this killing by sending one of her kinsmen to kill the man who killed her servant. This exchange escalates so that this kinsman is killed, and eventually the foster father of Bergthora's and Njal's sons is killed. The whole time, Njal and Gunnar are settling each killing with a payment, as is standard for the killings of servants and freed workers. These women are using men's bodies in order to feud with each other.

In their feuding, the men who are killed are increasingly close socially to the women carrying out the feud, and this increase in proximity is indicative of a growing involvement of Bergthora and Hallgerd in a social system that they typically have no access to. As they grow more involved in the killings, their gender may be at stake, but there is never any point where the women themselves are killed, so that although they instrumentalize men's bodies and use them to enact their own wills, the women do not lose access to femininity and their roles as wives while their proximity to masculinity increases. With this in mind, it is constructive to think about what it means to embody gender.

The material body is something to which we do not have unlimited access, according to Salamon, and our relationship with our material selves is always mediated and limited by our psychic selves, but what does this mean about the access we have to others' bodies? Salamon states that our knowledge of our own bodies is disjointed, and that we are constantly putting ourselves together in order to form an identity that does not fully encapsulate our whole being.³⁷ Our sense of our bodies is constructed over time, so that this conceptualization can contain things that are not our bodies.³⁸ Salamon thinks about clothes and prosthetics, but the feud between Bergthora and Hallgerd seems to stretch this conceptualization to include whole other bodies. Later in her book, Salamon states that we can only achieve embodiment with relation to others,

³⁷ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 24.

³⁸ Salamon, 28.

and that this relation is mediated by desire.³⁹ This relationality is at work here, instead there is an extension of the conceptual body to include the bodies of men in the formation of the self. I want to emphasize that I do not claim to know how Bergthora and Hallgerd are conceptualizing themselves, their bodies, and what place these men might have within these conceptualization, but the question of how we come to know what our body is is being asked here, especially with the framing of these women's feud.

Bergthora and Hallgerd are undoubtedly engaged in feud with each other. The men participating in the feud do not have any stake in the outcome except for that they are employed by either Bergthora or Hallgerd, so that the women are feuding through the men's bodies, and counting wins and losses through those deaths. In this context, the women are integrating the men into themselves as they feud, and the fact that the men only get increasingly closer related to each woman strengthens this; as the feud goes on, the men are less instrumental and more integrated into the women themselves. Butler's analysis of Tommy from *My Antonia* is also instructive here, since through her analysis, she develops the idea that in order for a woman to have a relationship with another woman, she must do so through the body of a man.⁴⁰ Although Butler discusses lesbian desire as the thing that requires masculine mediation, it is instructive here to think of how women's feud is something that also requires such mediation, so that the women simultaneously displace themselves onto the men, and integrate the men, and their deaths and compensation, into themselves. This queer understanding of Bergthora and Hallgerd's feud is important because it gestures towards how women took actions independent of their husbands in order to mediate relationships with each other. It is not often that we see women who are not

³⁹ Salamon, 46.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 161.

kin interacting with each other, and it is elucidating that those non-kin relationships must be mediated through men, specifically working men's bodies.

Saga women are often portrayed as exceptional, because that is what warrants recognition. We saw this with Aud, who resisted and became an exceptional example of what happens when a woman really does wear men's breeches. We saw this with Unn, who led her family and performed a man's role normatively, showing how gender could be redefined to access power rather than resisted. And we saw this with Bergthora and Hallgerd, whose spectacular feud necessitated that their exceptionalism subsumed men into their relationship with one another. Saga men are always the center, so their exceptionalism has much more room to be subversive, than does women's, whose exceptionalism was required to be remembered at all. This male exceptionalism was often in conversation with other men and their gender performances.

Men in the Sagas

Because men are typically more central to the actions of the saga, their relationships are much more visible in ways that allow for the queering of interpersonal bonds and the definitions of gender through those bonds. Women in the sagas, on the other hand, rarely have their relationships with men or with other women emphasized, except when it comes to their blood relations. Thus, women's gender in the literature is mediated less through their relationships and more through their individual character. Men, meanwhile, have their relationships more on display, which means that their gender is mediated much more through these relationships.

The most obvious example of queer masculinity might then be the fact that the most emotionally and socially invested relationships saga men engage in are with other men.

Blood-brotherhood, as Vohra terms it, or fosterage as it shows up in the sagas, is of crucial importance to the plot of the sagas and to the characterization of their protagonists and villains. Blood-brotherhood is a ritually contracted relationship characterized by a reciprocity of obligations and sanctions.⁴¹ It is friendship institutionalized, and it gave saga men another route to access power. Since kinship bonds were crucial to everything from gaining access to land, to legal suits, and even blood-feud, homosocial relationships allowed men to expand their kinsmen in order to expand their power. It is important as well, that blood-brotherhood was imagined as the ideal relationship between equals and was a better relationship to have than marriage, because blood-brothers could provide support to each other in ways that wives could not support their husbands.⁴²

Interestingly, although blood-brotherhood was seen across time and space in multitudes of cultures, blood-brotherhood in the sagas functions in opposition to kingship, in a way that can be understood as queer. It was an important exertion of Icelandic individualism, since it enshrined personal ties as the organizing ground of society, rather than fealty to a king. Says Vohra: “the preservation of a decentralized system of power based on interpersonal relationships and family hierarchies, was an attempt to preserve the ‘old’ ways in response to an oppressive ‘new’ centralized system of governance being established in the original homelands of the settlers.”⁴³ Because the Icelandic sagas often start by fleeing kingship in order to preserve their ways, and then they encounter kingship later on and either resist or reject it, the system of blood-brotherhood in Iceland effectively stands in opposition to the standard system of power in

⁴¹ Pragya Vohra, “Creating Kin, Extending Authority: Blood-Brotherhood and Power in Medieval Iceland,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, ed. Christopher Fletcher et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 105.

⁴² Vohra, 124.

⁴³ Vohra, 112

medieval Europe, which was monarchy. Reading blood-brotherhood as queer in this context, we can complicate and investigate the relationship between personal bonds and political power.

It is clear that to be blood-brothers is to be invested emotionally, politically, and socially with another man, which has caused many scholars to fret over whether or not blood-brotherhood might constitute or lay the grounds for homosexuality. This is a difficult question to answer, in part because it is the wrong one to ask. Sagas, though rife with sexual innuendo, were not particularly concerned with sexuality, but rather gender status.⁴⁴ The relationship between homosexuality and homosociality, though a useful tool, cannot apply to sagas because there was no concept of homosexuality.⁴⁵ Homosexuality, as a social identity that concerns one's sexuality, is a modern concept. Much more useful to think about is the difference between medieval normative homosociality and homoeroticism and "sodomitic discourse."⁴⁶ In this distinction, the former represents what was standard, even if we as modern readers read the homosociality as gay or queer, while the latter was a discourse on political and religious standing, with sodomy being a legal category of criminal acts. Where this dichotomy comes up in saga, it is still undoubtedly more about gender than the sexual acts themselves (or the accusation of such acts), because the position in sexual relations was indicative of one's gendered position, which had the ability to empower, as with Aud, or disempower, as with Thord.

Despite its normativity in the time of the sagas, blood-brotherhood can still be a place to come into contact with queerness, one must just be careful not to assume that homosociality necessitates homosexuality. To find queerness only where there is desire is to ignore the complex ways that modern queer people interact with want, desire, their senses of self, and their

⁴⁴ Vohra, 108-109.

⁴⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*," *Viator* 38 (2007): 206

⁴⁶ Ármann, 207.

relationships with others. To look for homosexuality in homosociality runs the risk of missing the nuanced queerness that might erupt from the context of homosocial relationships.

Egil and Arinbjorn: Resisting Kingship through Kinship

I start with Egil and Arinbjorn, whose deeply committed relationship to one another might be a tempting example of the sliding scale between homosociality and homosexuality, but whose queerness comes from a rather different place, one conditioned by the saga itself and the literary trends that contributed to its writing. Their relationship almost perfectly fulfills Vohra's definition of blood-brotherhood as the ideal relationship between two equal men. They are invested in each other almost to the exclusion of women, they reciprocate favors, gifts, and respect, and they support each other socially and politically. Such an invested relationship between two men has, in modern media, often been construed as potentially gay.⁴⁷ This perspective is dangerous for modern men, since it limits emotional expression between men, but it is also reductive, especially when applied to historical homosocial relationships, since it can hide ways that the relationship might be resisting an imposed norm in ways separated from desire and sexuality.

Before beginning on the queerness of Egil's and Arinbjorn's kinship in relation to kingship, I want to outline the ways that they exemplify what blood-brotherhood is. The first and most visible expression of ideal brotherhood is the emphasis on their relationship over relationships with women. Arinbjorn is never said to be married, and although Egil does show extreme desire for his eventual wife, Asgerd, after his marriage to her, she scarcely shows up in the saga again. It is notable that, in marrying Asgerd, Egil is solidifying his kinship to Arinbjorn

⁴⁷ One of the most stunning examples as of 2022 has been *Supernatural*, where the leads were ostensibly heterosexual with multiply sexual encounters with women, but whose only emotional investment was with each other. Much of the community surrounding the show thought/wanted the two leads to be gay.

because Asgerd is Arinbjorn's cousin, thus the friendship between the two men is solidified as kinship. Secondly, they are seen sharing material gifts often, with weapons and gifts from kings being transferred between the two, along with Arinbjorn often hosting Egil when he is in Norway. One of the most notable gifts exchanged is a poem that Egil composes for Arinbjorn after being separated from him for a long time. The poem for Arinbjorn is the last of three long poems in *Egils saga*, the first two being "Head Ransom," in whose composition Arinbjorn had a hand and which is given in exchange for Egil's own life and is ostensibly praise for the Norwegian king, and "The Loss of My Sons," which is an outpouring of emotion. As the final poem in this trio, the poem for Arinbjorn combines all of the previous motivations for composition. "Head Ransom," despite being a praise poem for a king, is composed with insincerity, whereas Arinbjorn's poem is one of genuine praise. Egil also mourns the lack of true friends, with the exception of Arinbjorn, which mirrors the elegiac tone of "The Loss of My Sons." This poem can be read as a return for the support that Arinbjorn gave to Egil, which largely resisted the king of Norway.

The primary driver of the plot in *Egils saga* is the contrast between good kingship and bad kingship, and how an Icelandic identity is formulated in contrast to kingship overall. Egil, along with his father and grandfather before him, feuds with the Norwegian kings. Much of Egil's part of the saga is him feuding with first King Eirik Blood-Axe, and then Earl Hakon, and he is aided by Arinbjorn. Arinbjorn is, however, one of the king's men, and in many sagas, this is a position of great honor and one that shows the value of the character. In *Egils saga*, being a king's man is shown to be dangerous, since both Egil's uncle and his brother are killed because of the fickleness of kings and the trust that was put into figures so changeable. Because Arinbjorn is rejecting this honor in favor of helping his kinsman, he is helping to fuel the saga's

resistance to and critique of kingship. He is implicitly saying, by favoring Egil, that kinship is more important than kingship.

If kingship is the norm of the continent, and blood-brotherhood is used in the sagas as a means to resist the institutionalization of personal bonds,⁴⁸ then Arinbjorn's and Egil's relationship can be read as queer. This queerness is essential to the saga, and is the one of the primary drivers of the plot in Egil's portion of the saga. It is defined by its resistance to the continental monarchal norm for masculinity and masculine relationships, and yet it has very little to do with sexuality. With their kinship bond as an example, queer history can be expanded outside the bounds of homosexuality and desire, and look at the interesting ways that relationships can be used to resist what is perceived to be an intrusive or stifling norm.

Bolli and Kjartan: Equality as Unattainable.

Egil and Arinbjorn epitomize as best as possible the perfect relationship of two equal men, supporting and helping one another in disputes, politics, and more. Their relationship can be queered not because of the near-perfect realization of an equal relationship between two men, but because their relationship is a means of resistance to another form of masculinity. Kjartan and Bolli in *Laxdaela saga*, on the other hand, represent a relationship that can be queered because of its failure to reproduce the ideal of blood-brotherhood. Egil and Arinbjorn are equals, Kjartan and Bolli are ostensibly so, but their actions point to a power differential that threatens the possibility of idealized masculine relationships. The brotherhood-turned-feud between Kjartan and Bolli is one of the main narratives of the saga, and the scene of Kjartan's death is the emotional highpoint. Kjartan, the son of Olaf Peacock, is described as the fairest and

⁴⁸ Pragya Vohra, "Creating Kin, Extending Authority: Blood-Brotherhood and Power in Medieval Iceland," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, ed. Christopher Fletcher et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 111-112.

handsomest man in Iceland, strong, skillful, and humble. Bolli is Kjartan's cousin and foster brother, and Olaf agreed to foster Bolli as a way to appease his own brother, with whom he had cold relations. Bolli is described as strong, beautiful, and skillful, and *second* only to Kjartan. Great love is said to be between them.⁴⁹ And yet, what is described of these men does not hold true throughout the saga. Robert Cook points out most notably that Kjartan is meant to be the best man in the saga, and yet he is crass and rude, and treats Bolli as inferior when the saga asserts that they are the best of brothers.⁵⁰ Cook says of Kjartan that he fails to live up to any of the positive traits that he is described as, "and in fact spends most of his life in undignified quarreling brought on by himself."⁵¹ This failure to live up to his own description is something that most of the men in this saga exhibit, and Cook argues that this is evidence that the saga is really about women, who meet the descriptions given to them.⁵² Masculinity in *Laxdaela saga* is thus an artifice, a performance that can never be complete, and this spreads into the relationship that Kjartan has with Bolli.

Despite his ill treatment of his foster-brother, Kjartan's only redeeming moment is when he is killed by Bolli and he says, "An evil deed this is, that you're about to do, kinsman, so much is certain. But I'd rather receive my death at your hands than cause yours."⁵³ This statement is ironic if we take Cook at his word that Kjartan has done nothing but cause his own suffering. Kjartan fails to marry the woman he wooed for the majority of his youth, leading to Bolli marrying her, which sparks a feud between Gudrun and Kjartan over the pettiness and tragedy of their lost love. This feud manifests as Bolli killing his foster brother/blood-brother, who had

⁴⁹ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Robert Cook, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 320-322.

⁵⁰ Robert Cook, "Women and Men in Laxdæla Saga," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 53

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cook, 57.

⁵³ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Robert Cook, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 115.

treated him secondarily even in death. By refusing to kill Bolli, Kjartan is positioning himself as the better brother, even though his death was his own doing. The fact that brother kills brother is not what makes this relationship non-normative and thus queer, although it plays a part. Instead, it is that this relationship is used to critique the emphasis on exceptionalism in men that renders their relationship as a critique of gender and its workings, and thus queer.

Njal, Gunnar, and Hallgerd: Erotic Triangles and Masculine Primacy

Kjartan's and Bolli's inequality, their failure of masculinity, is mediated through Gudrun in a way that mirrors Sedgwick's erotic triangle, which describes how homosocial relationships are always mediated through a woman. In Sedgwick's theorization, she states that women are only the objects of exchange in a patriarchal heterosexual system, so that relationships between men are mediated through women. In this way, the rivalry between two men over a single woman is less about the desire for the woman, but the men's desire for each other.⁵⁴ She does add, however, that:

among the things that have changed radically in Western culture over the centuries, and vary across cultures, about men's genital activity with men are its frequency, its exclusivity, its class associations, its relation to the dominant culture, its ethical status, the degree to which it is seen as defining nongenital aspects of the lives of those who practice it, and perhaps most radically, its association with femininity or masculinity in societies where gender is a profound determinant of power.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Chapter One: Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles," in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 30th Anniversary ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 25-26.

⁵⁵ Sedgwick, 26.

Sedgwick's long list of the ways in which the relationship between homosociality, as in blood-brotherhood, and homosexuality, sodomy, and gender can vary make it hard to say that the erotic triangle is inapplicable to saga relationships, which clearly already elevate men's relationships above women to the point of not requiring women. Instead, I propose that Kjartan's and Bolli's relationship with Gudrun, and Njal's and Gunnar's relationship to Hallgerd, present an elaboration on the erotic triangle outside of a system in which men's relationships with one another are not seen as immediately valid.

I have already discussed how Bergthora's and Hallgerd's genders are implicated in their feud, but with the framework of the erotic triangle, I now turn to Gunnar's and Njal's relationships with their wives and with each other. The relationship between Gunnar, Njal, and Hallgerd presents a permutation and elaboration upon Sedgwick's idea that women are the means through which men validate their relationships with one another. Like Kjartan and Bolli, Gunnar and Njal are friends before Hallgerd enters into their story. Above, I emphasized the queerness of Kjartan's and Bolli's relationship within the context of the saga itself, whereas now it is instructive to look at how the precedence of homosocial relationships over heterosexual ones can help us to reevaluate the erotic triangle.

When Gunnar first meets Hallgerd in chapter 33, we are predisposed to agree with Njal's assessment that a marriage between Gunnar and Hallgerd would be a bad match. We are introduced to Hallgerd as a child in chapter 1 of the saga, long before Gunnar enters the story, when a male relative predicts that her beauty will be the cause of much trouble.⁵⁶ When she grows up, she has two successive marriages, both of which end when her foster-father kills her husband. So, when we hear Gunnar discussing his betrothal to Hallgerd with Njal, we are primed to believe Njal when he says, "Every kind of evil will come from her when she moves

⁵⁶ *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 4.

east.”⁵⁷ And yet, instead of defending Hallgerd, Gunnar answers this prediction by saying, “She shall never spoil our friendship.”⁵⁸ He emphasizes the importance of his and Njal’s friendship, rather than placing Hallgerd at the center of this discussion. Although she is the agent in his statement, the focus is not on her. Njal, knowingly, answers him, “It will come close to that ... butu will always make amends for her.”⁵⁹ In so saying, Njal predicts exactly what will happen with the feud between his own wife and Hallgerd: after every killing, the men repay each other and remain friends, until kin are killed. In this way, Hallgerd is not the occasion for the men’s relationship, but it is poised as a test of the strength of that bond.

Hallgerd’s feuding with Njal’s wife, and her later thievery of another of Gunnar’s close kin, is evidence of how the system of blood-brotherhood can be threatened by a woman, so that the erotic triangle, when applied to saga, is much more about the reinforcement of homosociality to the exclusion of women. Thus, the erotic triangle serves a proving ground for Vohra’s statement that men’s relationships with one another were held above their relationships of women. While Sedgwick uses the triangle in order to assert that patriarchal heterosexuality is always about the exchange of women to *strengthen* the bonds of men, here we see that the woman is the figure that *threatens* the bond between men. Thus, the relationship between two men precedes and takes precedence over either of their relationships with their wives, cementing that blood-brotherhood was superior to marriage through a contrast with Sedgwick’s model. Gunnar’s and Njal’s relationship with each other and with Hallgerd, though not queer within the sagas, nonetheless provide an additional nuance to queer theory because they are an example for the way in which homosociality could exist without the “threat” of homosexuality and without women as the medium of exchange.

⁵⁷ *Njal’s Saga*, 54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Male Femininity, or Masculine Diversity?

While men's relationships can be an entry point into queerness, primarily because queer history has preferred investigations of homosexuality and queer desire over queer gender and embodiment, I want to investigate this latter type of queerness as well. I am taking Evans's concept of female masculinity to ask: is there a male femininity in the sagas? This is a difficult question to ask, because in saga, like in many other literatures and cultures, masculinity is the preferred performance, even for women. As we saw with Aud and Unn, claiming a performance of masculinity could empower these women, even if accusations of masculinity, with Aud and her breeches, and Bergthora and her nails, were intended to disempower. When asking about male femininity then, we must tread carefully, because disempowered men do not provide evidence for male femininity. Rather, I look for where men very knowingly and intentionally take on what are seen to be women's roles.

Njal's gender performance is the most visibly different from the saga men around him, including his own sons. Njal is characterized as a non-violent man, who does not partake in blood-feud, but is an invaluable legal advisor and ally. He is repeatedly insulted for his beardlessness, which is meant to signify his lack of traditionally masculine characteristics, and yet, despite these insults, he is the man least affected by such attacks at his masculinity. In *Njals saga*, most every man is criticized in some way for his performance of his gender, so that it is made very clear that no man is free from scrutiny.⁶⁰ In this way, masculinity is most visible through accusations of unmanliness, such that every man's masculinity can be clearly seen, but is also always threatened. In this volatile space, Njal is insulted similarly, and so his masculinity is also most on display through these insults, but whereas other men take offense to these insults,

⁶⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njals saga*," *Viator* 38 (2007): 210.

Njal is unbothered by them, and so he shows a different relationship to the masculinity that is on display in the other saga men.

This difference in masculinity is most assuredly there, but it is not one that constitutes a male femininity. It is instead his Christianity that sets him apart from the rest of the men in the saga and establishes a critique of gender that only works through the interaction of the saga with multiple times. The saga characters voice what masculinity was meant to be in the sagas, while Njal is an example of a new kind of masculinity that is more praiseworthy at the time of writing in the 1300s. It is a masculinity that values temperance, peace, and legal redress rather than violent revenge. It is a masculinity that is defined by Christianity, and so it is no consequence that “Old Beardless” is shown to be one of the first in Iceland to convert his household to Christianity. His lack of saga-style masculinity is thus not a performance of femininity, but a performance of Christianity, and a type of masculinity that is unique but praised within the saga. In this sense, Njal’s gender is queer in the imagined past, because it is resisting and reevaluating what it means to have masculinity, be insulted, and deal with those insults. At the same time, his gender is normative and even ideal at the time of writing the saga, so that he is both queer and not, itself a sort of queerness since he is in a liminal space, between the imagined past and the contemporary present, and between normativity and non-normativity.

Egil is another figure whose masculinity is different to that of his peers, and this is especially visible through his multiple outpourings of emotion. Egil is in many ways a caricature of a Viking; he is large, strong, and slightly monstrous, prone to violence and shown to be a heavy drinker many times.⁶¹ And yet, he is chastised for acting unmanly and has great brooding depressions: after his brother’s death, when he is desirous of lands he was meant to inherit in

⁶¹ Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, “Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,” in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), 147.

Norway, and when his sons die.⁶² This again though, is unmanliness and not necessarily femininity. Indeed, Egil's dramatic emotions and propensity for desire is another instance of continental ideals of masculinity entering the saga literature. The excessive emotion and desire, though strange in the saga, is an insistence on Egil's nobility in the context of growing chivalric influence.⁶³ In continental literature contemporary to the writing of this saga, noble men were seen as more susceptible to humoral afflictions of love-sickness, and the greater their sensitivity, the greater their nobility. So again, Egil's seeming anomalousness is the sign of a great diversity of masculinity in the sagas, a diversity that has not yet been fully investigated but I hope to have shone a small light on here.

Concluding Thoughts

In addition to the diversity of masculine performances, a queer lens has been used to understand gender performance and relationships that add nuance not just to the understanding of the sagas, but also to the theories that I have applied to them. It is ahistorical to say that saga authors, audiences, and characters saw themselves as "queer," because the word has only gained political and theoretical definitions within the last 60 years, but, as I have shown, there is nonetheless a conscious way that saga narratives use gender to make critiques of the past and as a conduit for the introduction of new ideals of chivalry and Christianity. Gender is used to resist the system of power, to reinforce it, and to redefine it, and all of these actions can be best understood through a queer reading of the sagas.

⁶² *Egil's Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 63, 131, 150.

⁶³ Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, "Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*," in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), 153.

But why does it matter that the sagas can be read as queer? To return to Dinshaw, it matters because history can have tangible effects on us. Histories and literatures are ever changing, and to read the sagas without engaging with them in new ways that can be defined by our cultural moment, our identities, and our new knowledge, then our understanding of them will stagnate. These texts were codified deep in the past, but their interaction with our current experiences is important to understanding both the sagas, and ourselves. In our current moment, the sagas and medieval Scandinavia in general have become a reference for groups, though small, that seek to do harm in order to establish white nationalism and white supremacy. My work is in direct opposition to this, using our contemporary political moment to bring sagas out as an example of how history and literature might be weaponized, but how it can also be instructive of the dynamism of historical literatures, and also of sexuality and gender.

In doing this work, I have attempted to deconstruct the basis for the masculinity perpetuated by white nationalists and white supremacists. Although not all white supremacy movements and groups found themselves in Germanic and Scandinavian roots, those that do often look to a popularly perceived rugged individualist in Viking society, which they base in the sagas and mythology. This figure is by no means the most prominent masculine role, nor the most praised. Rather, as has been shown, individualism like that exhibited by Egil is contrasted with his deep emotional reactions to the world around him, and individuals' masculinity is mediated through social relationships. By queering Egil, who is no doubt hyper-masculine by modern definitions, this can begin to deconstruct popular perceptions of what sorts of characters existed in the sagas and thus medieval Scandinavian society, thus deconstructing the basis for white supremacist masculinity. By analyzing *Njal*, saga masculinity is diversified, offering a replacement for a homogenous aggressively masculine figure. Both of these are important, as

well as the analysis of construction of feminine gender in the sagas, which points towards tensions between independence, agency, and power which can still be felt today. It is not enough to say that the medieval Scandinavian man was an aggressive, strong-willed individualist with an axe in hand, nor that the medieval Scandinavian woman was equally ferocious and violence-hungry. Rather, gender in the sagas was diverse in expression and acceptance, and this fact alone challenges the idea that gender was and always will be conservatively male and female.

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