

“EK SKAL HÉR RÁÐA”: THEMES OF FEMALE HONOR IN THE ICELANDIC  
SAGAS

A Thesis  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

### “EK SKAL HÉR RÁÐA”: THEMES OF FEMALE HONOR IN THE ICELANDIC SAGAS. (May 2011)

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There was a separate and unique code of honor and ethics for women living in Iceland during the Viking Age. What was female honor? Were Icelandic women expected to abide by a code of honor just like men? What were some main themes in this female code of honor? The aim of this thesis is to uncover the answers to these questions and present a new and informative contribution to the fields of medieval history, the history of Scandinavian women, and Icelandic literary history. The appropriate way to answer these questions and prove the hypothesis is to execute a proper form of methodology.

This thesis limits the subjects of study to women within *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, *Njal's Saga*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, *Eirik's Saga*, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. These Icelandic sagas in the English translations and in the original Old Norse and the laws of early Iceland *Grágás I* and *Grágás II* will be the major primary evidence in this research. Secondary sources derive from a range of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian studies on women and Icelandic society.

A major goal of this thesis is to not only interpret the representations of women from these sagas, but also to place these representations in the context of the time and the writers. Icelanders wrote these sagas a couple centuries after the Viking age ended and are based nearly entirely on oral tradition. *Grágás* contain the laws of the time of the composition of these sagas. *Grágás* represent twelfth- and thirteenth-century law which developed from earlier unwritten traditions. Whenever necessary, this thesis assesses what effect the writers' legal and political climate had on the descriptions in these sagas.

The female code of honor is different from the male code of honor in these sagas. Men did not have the same responsibilities as women in medieval Iceland, so it is appropriate that these sagas depict male and female honorable actions within different realms. Men gain honor in these sagas mostly by physical fighting, traveling abroad, and leading successful political and legal careers. The sagas rarely describe women as fighting or traveling, and they are never directly involved in political life. Kinship, marriage, and the supernatural are all realms that medieval Icelandic men took part in, but the sagas describe women as the main actors within these areas. Since women were the main focus in the areas of kinship, marriage, and the supernatural, they stood to gain more honor or dishonor from their actions within these realms than men.

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Icelandic men and women during the Viking Age were clever craftsmen and navigators with strong religious, family, and character values. Among these values, honor was of the greatest importance. Personal and familial honor were particular concerns of Icelanders. Medieval Iceland had no king, and although it was not an egalitarian society, the Althing provided the closest semblance to a democratic society in Viking Age Europe. In Iceland, loss of honor meant that an individual could not protect oneself, one's family, or one's property and could prove to be a deadly predicament. Unlike most other medieval literature, the Icelandic sagas depict honor as maintaining life, property, status, and exacting revenge rather than sacrifice for a higher lord or chieftain.

Previous scholarly focus on brutal warfare and invasion often overshadows the legacy of honor in the Viking Age. This particularly affects the scholarship of Iceland because Icelanders were not invaders but settlers who constructed a new type of society. Even when scholarship recognizes systems of Icelandic honor, the research is overwhelmingly oriented on the male inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is a considerable void in the research of medieval Iceland concerning female codes of honor.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular see: Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Richard Hall, *The World of the Vikings* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2007); John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1995); Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation Circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

In the past, scholars researched women and honor in the Viking Age to some degree as separate topics but rarely as correlating topics.<sup>2</sup> There are some snippets of historiography that combine the two topics, but there is still much to explore.<sup>3</sup> Honor in Icelandic society is important to understand in all of its aspects. Family honor, wartime honor, financial honor, chivalrous honor, and honor in death are only a few of the varieties waiting for further exploration. Concepts of honor in Viking Age Iceland are imperative to understand and uncover the many facets of Icelandic identity. The relationship of female to male honor and female honor as a separate whole are both important to understand the inner workings of Iceland's social, economic, religious, and political structures.

There is a considerable amount written in the Icelandic sagas and other accounts of Viking Age society about male honor. In order to understand the place of female honor in the Icelandic sagas, it is important to first discuss what scholars consider male honor in the sagas. Walther Gehl discusses the strong role of male honor in the Icelandic saga. Gehl argues that the morality of the sagas is not based on good and evil, but on honor and dishonor.<sup>4</sup> Vilhelm Grønbech describes male honor in the Icelandic sagas as a sense of personal integrity. Whenever events in a saga compromise a man's honor, he must restore his integrity. Grønbech argues that this was why blood vengeance was vital

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<sup>2</sup> Jesse Byock especially does this in his work, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* and *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001).

<sup>3</sup> In particular see: Loren Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla Saga*," *Saga-Book XXV* (1998-2001): 30-52; Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 443 (1999): 6-39; Roberta Frank, "Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1973): 473-484; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Walther Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen: Studien zum Lebensgefühl der isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt 1937), 7, quoted in Theodore M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (1970): 575-593.

to protecting the integrity of the man and therefore his family. This violent revenge was an automatic response which did not come from a sense of justice, but from a man's feeling of responsibility to his honor, which was imperative for survival in Icelandic society.<sup>5</sup>

In more recent scholarship, Richard Bauman stresses the performance aspect of honor and argues that male honor rested on the public display and acknowledgement of valued behaviors through speech and actions that were in the pursuit of heightening honor and reputation in medieval Icelandic society. Bauman's description of male honor lies strictly within the public political and legal realms of medieval Iceland.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars also take the traditional viewpoints of Gehl and Grønbech and revise them to better suit their interpretations of the Icelandic sagas regarding honor and morality. Theodore M. Andersson argues against the traditional viewpoints of Gehl and Grønbech. Andersson argues that the Icelandic sagas expose the fine line between male pride and male honor, and that the Icelandic sagas are actually against excess such as excessive self-seeking, excessive passion, excessive ambition, and excessive arbitrariness. Andersson believes that the Icelandic sagas such as *Njal's Saga* are critiques of a feud society in which honor lay not in violence but in upholding the social order. However, heroic sagas such as *The Saga of the Volsungs* are vastly different in their interpretation of male honor. In heroic literature it is not the life of the community but the stature of the individual which is important.<sup>7</sup> Andersson's argument is solid in that he assesses the two very different types of male honor found in Icelandic literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Vilhelm Grønbech, *Vor folkeæt I oldtiden* (Copenhagen, 1955), 57-107, quoted in Andersson, 575.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauman, "Performance and Honor in 13<sup>th</sup>-Century Iceland," *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986): 131-150.

<sup>7</sup> Andersson, 585-588, 593.

The heroic stories and poetry glorify the individual warrior prowess of a man, and the Icelandic sagas are ultimately against social disruption and praise the man who strives to maintain order and peace.

Carol J. Clover acknowledges the difference between the man's world and the woman's world in the Icelandic sagas. The sagas depict men involved in the world of fishing, agriculture, herding, travel, trade, politics, and law. In contrast, the sagas depict women involved in the more private world of the home and the farm. Clover argues that despite this separation of worlds, male honor was an ideal that both men and women strove for in medieval Iceland. For example, the sagas always describe the government as a male dominated realm and matter, but the sagas also depict women insinuating their agendas at almost every level of legal and political processes. Clover claims that there was just one gender, one standard that judged Icelanders as adequate or inadequate, and it was masculine. The greatest fear of Icelandic men in the sagas is not being womanly but being powerless which is typically associated with being female.<sup>8</sup>

Clover goes further in her explanation of male honor by describing the greatest ways to offend a man in medieval Iceland. This includes calling his appearance poor, reminding him of heroic failure, accusing him of cowardice or irresponsible behavior, accusing him of failings of honor, declaring him a breaker of alimentary taboos, and charging him with sexual irregularity.<sup>9</sup> These various ways of insulting a man in medieval Iceland exposes the overall code of male honor. According to Clover, an honorable Icelandic man was well-dressed, victorious in battle, brave, responsible, loyal to his kinsmen, and innocent of breaking alimentary and sexual taboos.

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<sup>8</sup> Carol J. Clover "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 363-387.

<sup>9</sup> Clover, 373.

Lotte Motz also describes the separation of male and female worlds in relation to Icelandic male honor. Motz argues that the absence of a central spiritual and political authority and emphasis on the individual were strong features of the Old Icelandic heroic ideal. The medieval Icelandic world was one of constant battle with the elements of nature and the hostility of neighbors all in the absence of a rigid system of political and religious values. In this chaotic world, the one thing an individual could rely on was the good name acquired by birth and later actions. The sagas often describe men growing in honor after a successful raiding or trading voyage and after the defeat of an opponent by cunning or strength. In contrast, Motz notes that even though women shared in the nobility and wealth with the men of their family, the other areas of making a name for oneself were closed to them as they could not participate in battle, voyages, or in law meetings.<sup>10</sup>

Vilhjálmur Árnason attempts to explain the concept of male honor in the Icelandic sagas by reconciling two contrasting points of view on the subject, the romantic point of view and the humanist point of view. The romantics claim that it is important to understand that the heroic situation in Icelandic literature is tragic because the hero will lose his life as he will never give up his honor. The humanist point of view claims that the sagas are Christian lessons about the well-deserved defeat of those who show excessive pride and arrogance. According to humanists, Icelanders did not write the sagas in order to glorify the so-called pagan heroes but rather to preach peace and moderation in the spirit of medieval Christianity. Árnason believes that it is possible to reconcile the two viewpoints by realizing that they interpret different ideas. While the romantics focus on the deeds of the characters, the humanists focus on the ethical

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<sup>10</sup> Lotte Motz, "Female Characters of the *Laxdæla Saga*," *Monatshefte* 55, no. 4, (1963): 162-166.

intention of the author. Árnason reconciles the opposition between the romantics and the humanists by acknowledging that both heathen and Christian codes of morality exist in the sagas.

Árnason claims that the romantic viewpoint is accurate in its own right because it notes that honor and courage are the most important characteristics because they are matters of life and death in the sagas. The humanist viewpoint is also correct that some writers implied Christian criticism of this heroism in the sagas. However, the humanists often confuse Christian influence with the social values of conciliation and moderation which are premises for peace and prosperity in the family sagas. Overall, Árnason notes that the romantic code of honor is central to the moral structure of the sagas, but without the balance of humanist concepts of authorial intent, this traditional analysis of saga morality is inadequate.<sup>11</sup>

The ideals and constructs of male honor exposed the separate realm of female honor in medieval Iceland. There was a separate and unique code of honor and ethics for women living in medieval Iceland. What was female honor? Were Icelandic women expected to abide by a code of honor just like men? What were some main themes in this female code of honor? The aim of this thesis is to uncover the answers to these questions and present a new and informative contribution to the fields of medieval history, the history of Scandinavian women, and Icelandic literary history.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses the first and possibly largest theme in the medieval Icelandic female honor system, familial honor. Examples from each of the five sagas and information from secondary sources make up this chapter. Chapter two builds

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<sup>11</sup> Vilhjálmur Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90, no. 2 (1991): 157-174

on chapter one and examines how women protect their personal honor within the Old Icelandic marriage system. This chapter only uses information from *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Njal's Saga* since there is little about protecting personal honor in marriage in *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga*. Chapter three concludes with the third major theme of female honor, female participation in the supernatural realm. This final chapter examines representations of women acting within the realms of mythology, prophecy, and sorcery from all five sagas. Occasionally this chapter compares female and male representations within the supernatural realm in the same sagas. Finally, the conclusion answers the questions set up in the introduction and addresses the overall aim of the thesis by proving that there was a separate code of honor for Icelandic women that defined them as separate from the men of this area during the medieval time period.

This thesis limits the subjects of study to women in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, *Eirik's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Njal's Saga*. These Icelandic sagas in the English translations and in the original Old Norse and the laws of early Iceland *Grágás I* and *Grágás II* are the primary evidence in this research. Whenever necessary this thesis presents excerpts of the original Old Norse with the exact English translation to minimize interpretive errors and discover the truest representations of women within these sagas. Secondary sources derive from a range of medieval Scandinavian studies on women, because there are no sources that focus solely on Icelandic women. Also, secondary sources include scholarship that focuses exclusively on medieval Iceland describing the world in which these women lived.

A major goal of this thesis is to not only interpret the representations of women from these sagas, but also to place these representations in the context of the time and the writers. Icelanders wrote these sagas a couple centuries after the Viking Age ended and based the events nearly entirely on oral tradition. *Grágás I* and *II* hold the laws of the time Icelanders wrote these sagas. *Grágás I* and *II* represent twelfth- and thirteenth-century law which developed from earlier unwritten traditions. Whenever necessary, this thesis assesses what effect the writers' legal and political climate had on the descriptions in these sagas.

This thesis focuses on these five sagas, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, *Eirik's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Njal's Saga*, because of their vast differences that create a well-rounded account of female honor in the Icelandic sagas. All of the sagas take place in the tenth and eleventh centuries except for *The Saga of the Volsungs* which takes place in the fourth and fifth centuries. Icelanders wrote all of these sagas in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, much later than their periods of action. *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* focuses on several strong female characters and has such deep insight into the female station that a woman possibly wrote it. *Njal's Saga* is one of the longest and most popular of the Icelandic sagas and focuses on social order and strong male and female characters in critical situations. *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga* mostly take place in Greenland and Vinland but Icelanders wrote these sagas. The change of location adds more range to the examples in this thesis. The original manuscript of *Grænlandinga Saga* dates back to the twelfth century, about a century earlier than the other four sagas. This saga has the closest pagan representations of women, whereas *Eirik's Saga* is a revision of the same story with

much more Christian influence. *The Saga of the Volsungs* takes place much earlier and on the main continent of Europe. Compared to the other four sagas, *The Saga of the Volsungs* possesses the most supernatural elements and the most diverse depictions of women.

There are many possible problems that may arise when using the Icelandic sagas as history instead of literature, but there is still much of historical value in the sagas. Many of the characters who play the leading roles in the sagas actually existed as they are well-authenticated historical figures. The Icelandic sagas are the transference of oral tradition into literary form. Icelanders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were able to remember oral accounts of the Viking Age with remarkable clarity, without having to create new stories. An individual's honor depended greatly on the achievements of immediate ancestors, and Icelanders were certain to remember the great feats and accomplishments of their families. While the Icelandic sagas continue to be a blend of fact and fantasy, they also open a portal into medieval Icelandic realities for modern readers.

## CHAPTER ONE: FEMALE HONOR IN PROTECTING FAMILIAL HONOR

Jesse Byock notes that men gained honor from lucrative legal and political careers in medieval Iceland. The well-developed system of political alliances in Iceland provided most men with alliances outside of the family. Aside from politics and law, men could also resort to roles in the church after Iceland's conversion to Christianity around the year 1000. Virtually nowhere in medieval Europe, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, did laymen exercise as much control over the church as they did in Iceland.<sup>12</sup>

Women, however, could not participate in legal procedures or take positions in the church and men protected them from armed political life. It was shameful to harm women physically because they could not take part in legal processes that dealt directly with retribution. Men sheltered women from violence, and law prohibited women from carrying weapons. Weapons were strictly for male use, and only for the completion of advocacy duties resulting from a prosecution. Women could not legally be advocates because they could not lead prosecutions, act as legal witnesses, or serve as members of a *kviðr* (jury). This lack of legal and political power meant that even when a woman was acting as head of a household, she had less formal rights than a hired workman.<sup>13</sup> In the

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<sup>12</sup> Jesse L. Byock, "Governmental Order in Early Medieval Iceland," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17 (1986): 9-34.

<sup>13</sup> Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 226, 316-317, 319.

sources, there is no evidence that women could even speak aloud at a Thing, and the sagas often describe women only as onlookers at assemblies.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the fact that they could not participate as advocates, Icelandic law punished women the same as men for murder and other serious crimes with the penalties of lesser outlawry and full outlawry. The penalty of lesser outlawry included fines and banishment from Iceland for three years, and the penalty for full outlawry cast the offender out of Icelandic society, deprived of rights and property, and eligible to be killed by anyone with impunity. Women required the same representation as a man when accused of such crimes.<sup>15</sup>

Women also relied on the advocacy system for their property, marriage, and inheritance rights. Women could inherit chieftain status but could not act as a *goði* (chieftain) and had to turn over the actions to a male advocate. Despite these limitations, women were not powerless in the advocacy system. Although they could not legally participate or intervene in public cases, women did play an influential role in the workings of advocacy. Women contributed to private decisions that determined relations between families and the outcome of feuds. Even though women had some influence they still could not hold substantial roles in open political life and did not enjoy legal equality with men.<sup>16</sup>

While men depended heavily on leading political and legal careers to gain and protect their honor, women depended on familial honor. Protecting the honor of her family was the biggest responsibility of an Icelandic woman. In medieval Iceland's

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<sup>14</sup> Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 134-135.

<sup>15</sup>“A woman is under the same penalty as a man if she kills man or woman or injures them, and so it is prescribed for all departures from the law.” Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1980, reprinted in 2006), 220.

<sup>16</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 134.

violent atmosphere, this meant that revenge often became the foremost concern for women.<sup>17</sup> Even though law limited a woman's ways of gaining and maintaining honor in medieval Iceland, women were as sensitive if not more so than men to the violation of honor. Women in the Icelandic sagas are even more ready than the men to risk and give whatever necessary, sometimes even their own lives, in order to protect honor.<sup>18</sup>

Even though Icelandic law barred women from taking part in physical killing for vengeance, women protected their familial honor through goading, shaming, and inciting their husbands and male kinsmen into action. These women often achieved their goals of retribution.<sup>19</sup> Women could not participate in legal actions bringing violence to an end, but they carried great power in inciting the hatred that drove violence.<sup>20</sup>

Within the realms of honor and vengeance, the Icelandic sagas often portray men and women as possessing different goals. Icelandic women lived in a society that included feud and called for moderation, bloodshed, vengeance, honor, shame, and restraint. The conflicting kinship ties and contrasting spheres of authority were what distinguished the different honor systems for men and women when it came to vengeance. Women tended to focus more on the honor of her household and kinsmen, and men tended to look at the overall situation and the potential risks of vengeful actions to their legal and political honor. In the Icelandic sagas, men usually put their faith in the political culture often accepting material compensation over blood vengeance to maintain

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<sup>17</sup> Sawyer and Sawyer, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Motz, 166.

<sup>19</sup> "It is prescribed that a man on whom injury is inflicted has the right to avenge himself if he wants to up to the time of the General Assembly at which he is required to bring a case for the injuries; and the same applies to everyone who has the right to avenge a killing. Those who have the right to avenge a killing are the principals in a killing case. The man who inflicted the injury falls with forfeit immunity at the hands of a principal and at the hands of any of his company, though it is also lawful for vengeance to be taken by other men within twenty-four hours." Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 197.

peace. In contrast, women in the Icelandic sagas almost always desire blood vengeance over compensation, even though they often have to work hard to incite their male kinsmen into violent acts of retribution.<sup>21</sup> Women encouraged the old custom of blood vengeance because they had little economic incentive to seek compensation compared to the incentive they had for protecting their familial honor. Men, in contrast, stood to gain honor in public life by settling a case amicably and peaceably.<sup>22</sup>

According to Zoe Borovsky, women as well as men gained and bestowed honor by performing verbally in medieval Iceland. Male performances took place in the official and public realm, at the Althing, in politics and legal cases, and in the church. There were not places for women to perform within the public realm of the state and the church. Instead, women promoted and defended the honor of the household in the domestic, private realm. Within the privacy of their households, women spoke their minds openly and eloquently in the pursuit of honor. Despite not being able to perform publicly, female performances at home were consequential and powerful for their families. These performances included shaming and goading the male members of their household into blood vengeance. Women were powerful in the realm of the household, and therefore they were chiefly responsible for maintaining the honor of the household to which they belonged.<sup>23</sup>

Joel T. Rosenthal claims that even in medieval Iceland's climate of law and politics, blood remained a more reliable social bond than voluntary fealty or legal ties of marriage. A feud between the woman's kin and her in-laws did not necessarily mean the end of the marriage. It did mean that the woman would revert to her original kinship ties

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<sup>21</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 3, 197, 198, 200, 202.

<sup>22</sup> Sawyer and Sawyer, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Borovsky, 6, 27, 32.

and become the avenger of her family. Marriages made to create a new alliance or to forestall a possible future quarrel often had the opposite effect. Rosenthal further argues that during the time Icelanders wrote the sagas, Iceland was in the transition from a primitive society that based vengeance on violence to a more sophisticated society that honored peaceful settlements. However, the women in the sagas usually demand more drama and more heroism in the resolution of feuds. The persistence of violent vengeance in these sagas means that individual families were more of a disciplinary force than the actual Icelandic government. Icelandic families were very reluctant to turn this task over to an extra-familial government for fear of losing control over the situation and the method of vengeance.<sup>24</sup>

Due to their strong and unwavering determination to protect their honor and the honor of their kinsmen, the sagas often depict women as escalating and prolonging feuds and refusing compensation for insult or injury.<sup>25</sup> The preventing of feuds by women in the sagas only occurs when her family's honor or the honor of her kinsmen would be jeopardized by the feud.<sup>26</sup> Women play various roles within the realms of vengeance and honor in the Icelandic sagas, particularly in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, *Njal's Saga*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, and *Eirik the Red's Saga*. Also, these sagas take place before and during the time of conversion while written after Iceland's established conversion to Christianity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. *Grágás I* and *Grágás II* were in effect for most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and represent the legal and political atmosphere surrounding the writers. Whenever

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<sup>24</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, "Marriage and the Blood Feud in 'heroic' Europe," *The British Journal of Sociology* 17, no. 2 (1966): 133-144

<sup>25</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 196.

necessary, the effect that Icelandic Christian laws had on the descriptions of women powerfully influencing the supposed male dominated realm of revenge is assessed.

*The Saga of the Volsungs*

In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, there are three particular women who are completely loyal to their kinsmen even over the kinsmen of their husbands. These women are Signy, Borghild, and Gudrun Gjukisdottir. The kinship ties in this saga include women showing more loyalty to their brothers than their husbands. Jenny Jochens argues that these fifth-century heroines in *The Saga of the Volsungs* privilege kinship over marriage. Even in thirteenth-century Iceland, society did not allow a woman to replace the old kinship ties to a brother with allegiance to her spouse.<sup>27</sup> These three women in *The Saga of the Volsungs* exhibit true devotion to protecting the honor of their kinsmen, even from their own husbands. According to Joel T. Rosenthal, marriage did not sever woman's ties with her own kindred. Unlike the ceremonies of republican Rome, marriage among the people of heroic Europe did not take a woman completely out of the world of her own kinsmen and put her solely into the world of her in-laws. An Icelandic woman continued to communicate with her kinsmen and remained loyal to their welfare. An Icelandic woman did not forget the obligations of blood-loyalty which she had known from birth, simply because she entered into a marriage.<sup>28</sup>

Volsung's daughter and Sigmund's twin sister, Signy, is the first female in *The Saga of the Volsungs* who puts the honor of her family above the honor of her husband. Signy calls a meeting with her brothers and father to warn them of her husband King Siggeir's treachery. She begs that they go home to gather and bring forces and fight King

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<sup>27</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Rosenthal, 138-139.

Siggeir before he has a chance to carry out his devious plans to betray them. King Volsung refuses to heed Signy's warning due to his personal pride. The battle between the Volsungs and King Siggeir ensues and ends with King Volsung dead and his ten sons captured. Signy quickly plots to free her brothers, but she only succeeds in saving Sigmund from the she-wolf.<sup>29</sup> Signy then hides her brother Sigmund in an underground dwelling, a *jarðhus*, until they can carry out revenge for their slain brothers and father.<sup>30</sup>

Signy sends her two sons by King Siggeir to help Sigmund seek out revenge. The first son has just turned ten years old and the second son is even younger. Signy tests her sons before sending them to Sigmund by sewing their skin into a shirt and ripping the shirt away.<sup>31</sup> Even though her two sons withstand this ordeal poorly, Signy sends them to Sigmund anyway. When Sigmund tells Signy that he does not believe her sons are strong enough to help him with his vengeance, Signy orders Sigmund to kill her sons.<sup>32</sup> Signy then decides to switch places with a sorceress so that she can sleep with her brother in disguise and conceive a child worthy of helping Sigmund with vengeance. This new son, Sinfjotli, does not flinch when Signy sews the shirt into his skin, and he is not frightened by the serpent in the flour trick administered by Sigmund. Sinfjotli's strength comes

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<sup>29</sup> See page 65 for a full account of the she-wolf and the sons of Volsung.

<sup>30</sup> Jesse L. Byock, trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (Berkeley: the Regents of the University of California, 1990), 40-42.

<sup>31</sup> The original text reads "hon hafði þá raun gört við ina fyrri sonu sína, áðr hon sendi þa til Sigmundar, at hon saumaði at höndum þeim með holdi ok skinni; þeir þöldu illa ok kriktu um. Ok svá gørði hon Singjötla; hann brásk ekki við. Hon fló hann þa af kyrtlinum, svá at skinnit fylgði ermunum." This literally means "she had then an ordeal made against her first sons before she sent them to Sigmund, that she sewed to their hands with flesh and skin; they suffered badly and complained. And thus she made Sinfjotli; he did not pull against. She flayed him then out of the shirt so that skin followed sleeve." Heimskringla, "Völsunga saga," [http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/V%C3%B6lsunga\\_saga](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/V%C3%B6lsunga_saga). Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> The original text reads "Signý mœlti, 'tak þú hann þá ok drep hann. Eigi þarf hann þá lengr at lifa!' Ok svá gørði hann." This literally means "Signy spoke, 'take thou him then and kill him. Not needs he then longer to live!' And so did he." Heimskringla, "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 42.

from the fact that he is of full Volsung blood as his mother and father are the twin children of King Volsung.<sup>33</sup>

When Sinfjotli is of age, Sigmund and Sinfjotli infiltrate King Siggeir's estate and hide themselves in ale-casks. Signy goes to meet with them and they decide that at dark they will take revenge for King Volsung and his sons. Signy and King Siggeir's two very young sons are playing with a toy when one of them discovers Sigmund and Sinfjotli in their hiding spot. One of the boys tells their father what he had seen, and King Siggeir becomes suspicious at once. Signy overhears the exchange and grabs her two sons and brings them to Sigmund and Sinfjotli. Signy tells Sigmund and Sinfjotli that her sons betrayed them, and she incites Sigmund and Sinfjotli to kill her young sons for their betrayal. Sigmund refuses to kill Signy's children, but Sinfjotli kills the two young boys and then throws their bodies into the hall for King Siggeir to see. Guards then capture and fether Sigmund and Sinfjotli. The two escape and kill King Siggeir and his men through the aid of Signy, who drops a sword hidden in ham covered in straw next to their stocks. After Signy sees that Sigmund and Sinfjotli completed the vengeance for her father and brothers, she willingly dies in King Siggeir's burning hall saying: "I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live. Willingly I shall now die with King Siggeir, although I married him reluctantly."<sup>34</sup>

Even though she is a heroine set in the fourth and fifth centuries, Signy's example exemplifies to the extreme what protecting familial honor meant for a woman in thirteenth-century Iceland. Signy remains loyal to her brother even over her own children. Joel T. Rosenthal claims that medieval Icelandic society considered a woman's

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<sup>33</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 42-43.

<sup>34</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 45-47.

children her husband's kindred, while she herself was not.<sup>35</sup> Signy's nonchalance at killing her own sons is due to her extreme hatred for their father, King Siggeir. She says herself that she lived only for vengeance against King Siggeir and would stop at nothing to achieve it. This vengeance was for the betrayal of her family and the deaths of her father and brothers. King Siggeir damaged Signy's familial honor and she, even more so than her brother Sigmund, saw it as her duty to rebuild and protect the honor of the Volsungs.

The next woman in *The Saga of the Volsungs* who chooses personal kinship ties over marriage ties is Sigmund's wife, Borghild. Sinfjotli and Borghild's brother both desire the hand of the same beautiful woman. Their competition leads Sinfjotli to kill Borghild's brother. When Borghild finds out from her husband that Sinfjotli killed her brother, she wants Sinfjotli banished. Sigmund refuses to outlaw Sinfjotli but offers to compensate Borghild with gold and great wealth even though he had never paid compensation for a man before. Borghild realizes that she will not get her way from King Sigmund and takes matters into her own hands.<sup>36</sup>

At her brother's funeral feast Borghild tries to serve Sinfjotli a poisoned drink, but Sinfjotli suspects the drink is poisoned and refuses to drink it. Sigmund, who is impervious to poison, drinks the ale instead. Borghild tries to get Sinfjotli to drink another horn of ale by shaming him saying: "Why should other men drink for you?"<sup>37</sup> Sinfjotli refuses a second time claiming again that the drink is poisoned. Finally, the third time she presents Sinfjotli with the drink Borghild is successful in her attempt to goad him into drinking even though he believes it is poisoned. Borghild bids Sinfjotli to

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<sup>35</sup> Rosenthal, 140.

<sup>36</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 51.

drink the horn of ale if he has the heart of a Volsung, upon which Sinfjotli does and dies. The death of Sinfjotli is so hard on Sigmund that it almost kills him. Sigmund drives Borghild out of his realm and she dies soon after.<sup>38</sup>

Borghild dies with the vengeance for her brother accomplished at the expense of her husband. Borghild puts the honor of her family and her brother above the honor of her husband and his son. She is not content with the gold and great wealth that Sigmund offers to pay her for her brother. Borghild wants the life of Sinfjotli for the life of her brother. She achieves this through goading and deceiving her stepson into drinking poisoned ale knowing that his death would result in her own. Borghild is willing to sacrifice her life to uphold and protect the honor of her brother and her family.

Gudrun Gjukisdottir is one of the most famous female characters in Icelandic literature, and her quest for vengeance against her husband King Atli is equally legendary. Even though her brothers are responsible for the death of her first husband, Sigurd, Gudrun eventually forgives them after some meddling from her sorceress mother.<sup>39</sup> Later in the saga, Gudrun tries to warn her brothers Gunnar and Hogni of her husband King Atli's treachery by cutting runes and taking a gold ring and tying a wolf's hair onto it. King Atli wishes to lure Gudrun's brothers to his kingdom so that he can kill them and take Sigurd's treasure from Gudrun and her family. Gudrun sends the runes and ring to her brothers as a warning, but Vinig, the leader of King Atli's messengers, recognizes it for what it is and tampers with the runes making them an invitation rather than a warning. When the actual fighting with King Atli breaks out, Gudrun runs to the

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<sup>38</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Grimhild makes her sons offer compensation to Gudrun for killing Sigurd. Gudrun feels betrayed and does not trust any of them. Grimhild resorts to sorcery to patch things up. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 94.

aid of her brothers. Gudrun dons a mail coat and takes up her sword and fought beside her brothers, advancing like the most valiant of men.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately for Gudrun and her family, her valiant efforts are not enough to save her brothers. Although both Gunnar and Hogni die honorably, Gudrun still suffers the loss of her brothers to her blood-thirsty husband.<sup>41</sup> Gudrun threatens her husband saying: “You will never pay for my brothers to my satisfaction. Yet we women are often forced to bow to your strength. My kinsmen are now all dead and you alone have control over me.”<sup>42</sup> This is an ambiguous statement because Gudrun proves soon after that King Atli has no control over her vengeful actions. Gudrun gets even with Atli by killing their two sons and serving him their blood mixed with wine. Gudrun serves the grisly drink in the skulls of their sons and feeds Atli their hearts roasted on a spit. Gudrun then tells Atli of her deed and says, “it is my desire to bring grievous shame on you. No punishment can ever be cruel enough for such a king.”<sup>43</sup> Atli says that Gudrun deserves a stoning or a burning on a pyre for her “monstrous deed.”<sup>44</sup>

Gudrun does not wait around for King Atli to put her to death. She and her nephew Niflung, Hogni’s son, stab Atli in his sleep. Atli tells her it was not honorable to

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<sup>40</sup> The original text reads “nú sér hún, at sárt er leikit við bræðr hennar; hyggr nú á harðræði, fór í brynju ok tók sér sverð ok barðist með bræðrum sínum ok gekk svá fram sem inn hraustasti karlmaðr.” This literally means “now sees she that sorely they played against her brothers; though now on hardiness, went in coat of mail and took her sword and fought with her brothers and went so forward as the bravest man.” Heimskringla, “Völsunga saga.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> When Atli cuts out Hogni’s heart, Hogni laughs at him and his heart does not stir. When Gunnar is bound and dropped in the snake pit, he succeeds at keeping the snakes at bay through playing a harp Gudrun gives him with his toes. All of the snakes fall asleep except for one that eats out Gunnar’s heart. The saga claims that “with much valor, Gunnar lost his life.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 102-103.

<sup>42</sup> The original text reads “muntu ok aldri bæta bræðr mína svá, at mér hugni, en opt verðu vér konurnar ríki bornar af yðru valdi.” This literally means “you shall never compensate my brothers so that pleases me, but often happens we women may bear power from you wield.” Heimskringla, “Völsunga saga.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 104.

<sup>44</sup> The original text concerning Gudrun’s monstrous deed says “verra hefir þú gert en menn viti dæmi til.” This literally means “worse deeds have you done than men have to judge.” Heimskringla, “Völsunga saga.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 104.

do so even if there was cause for it.<sup>45</sup> Gudrun does not care what Atli considers honorable. To Gudrun, family honor is of the greatest importance. King Atli's greed and mistreatment of Gudrun creates her hatred for him, but she does not retaliate until the lives of her brothers are in jeopardy. Gudrun suffers insults to her personal honor from her husband, but she does not allow King Atli to tarnish the honor of her brothers.

These three women in *The Saga of the Volsungs* are all dedicated to protecting the honor of their kinsmen over the honor of their marital families. Signy, Borghild, and Gudrun all value the lives of their brothers over the lives of their children and husbands. They do not care for the safety of their husbands and in-laws as they do for their original kinsmen. These women uphold the code of honor for Icelandic women by protecting their familial honor above everything else. These women are all in unsatisfactory and forced marriages to domineering men. These men pose a threat to the woman's kinship ties and familial honor, and therefore these women must cut off all ties to the marriage, including their offspring from these unions.

#### *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*

*The Saga of the People of Laxardal* depicts strong female characters that use all the resources at their disposals to uphold their familial honor and their personal honor. These women not only incite their male kinsmen into action, but also take action themselves in the defense of their familial honor. Unlike *The Saga of the Volsungs*, in which the kinship theme is to protect siblings, the kinship theme in this saga is the protection of children. Thorgerd Egilsdottir provides an example of the proud and grieving mother who only lives to avenge her son. Thorgerd's daughter, Thurid, provides the example of the dishonorable mother more concerned with her personal honor than the

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<sup>45</sup>Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 105.

welfare of her child. When the honor of their children did not directly interfere with the honor of their original kinsmen, medieval Icelandic society expected women to protect their children's honor over the honor of their husbands. A woman's children were not believed as close of kin as her brothers and parents, but they were still closer kin than her husband.<sup>46</sup> The priority of the women in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* is to protect their closest kin from dishonor above all else.

One of the most notorious vengeful women in the Icelandic sagas is Thorgerd Egilsdottir, wife of Olaf the Peacock. The saga describes Thorgerd as a woman of strong character. She is tenacious and she always has to have things go her way.<sup>47</sup> Thorgerd and her husband Olaf the Peacock disagree about how to avenge their son Kjartan's murder at the hands of Olaf's kinsman, Bolli. The differences in the goals of Thorgerd and Olaf are a result of conflicting kinship ties and contrasting spheres of authority. Thorgerd is angry and wants Bolli's blood for her son's death. Bolli is Olaf's kinsman so he is more careful and restrained in exacting revenge.<sup>48</sup> In retribution for Kjartan's murder, Olaf sends his sons after Thorhalla Chatterbox's sons who had a part in the killing, but he forbids them to harm Bolli. Olaf then outlaws the Osvifssons who also had a part in Kjartan's murder, but he refuses to outlaw Bolli like he does the Osvifssons. Instead, Olaf requires Bolli to pay a fine as compensation for his part in Kjartan's murder, which angers his sons and wife, Thorgerd. Olaf spares Bolli because of his close

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<sup>46</sup> Rosenthal, 140.

<sup>47</sup>The original text reads "skörungr mikill," which means "a very outstanding person" and "þat varð fram at koma er Þorgerðr vildi, til hvers sem hon hlutaðisk," which means "with whatever she put her hand to, what Þorgerðr wanted had to come about." *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 66 quoted in Auerbach, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 198.

family ties. However, Bolli is not a kinsman of Thorgerd and she hates Bolli because he dishonored her family after she raised him as a foster-son.<sup>49</sup>

After Olaf's peaceful and natural death several years later, Thorgerd is determined to have blood vengeance against Bolli to avenge her son Kjartan. Thorgerd's loyalty to her son's honor only increases after Kjartan's death. In Thorgerd's mind, her son would never be properly revenged until Bolli paid with his life.<sup>50</sup> Thorgerd goads her sons incessantly about killing Bolli in retribution for Kjartan. Thorgerd shames her son Halldor by saying: "Not a shred of resemblance do you bear to your great ancestors since you won't avenge a brother the likes of Kjartan," and "it grieves me to have such spineless sons," and that they would have made their father "better daughters, to be married off, than sons."<sup>51</sup> Thorgerd's words cause Halldor's hatred for Bolli to swell, and soon after that all of Thorgerd's sons tire of her merciless taunts. Halldor and his brothers then seek vengeance against Bolli. Thorgerd insists on going with her sons to ensure Bolli's death even though they protest that it is no errand for a woman and as a woman she is forbidden to take up arms against him.<sup>52</sup> Thorgerd replies that she is going

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<sup>49</sup> Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in Örnólfur Thorsson, ed., *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing Ltd., 1997), 373, 375.

<sup>50</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 376, 379.

<sup>51</sup> The original text reads: "Ok er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu; ok víst ætla ek yðr til þess betr fellda, at þér værið dætr föður yðvars ok værið giptar." This literally means "and is unpleasing that I have courage-less sons; and certainly I think you all better killed, that you would be daughters of your father and would be given in marriage." The term "dáðlausa" is a compound word, "dáð" means "courage," "valor," and "energy," and "lausa" derives from "lauss" which means "less." Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla Saga* (Reykjavik: Íslenzk Fornrit, 1971), 162.

<sup>52</sup> The original text reads: "Þorgerðr rézk ok til ferðar með þeim; heldr löttu þeir þess ok kváðu slíkt ekki kvenna ferð; hon kvazk at vísu fara skyldu – því at ek veit gørst um yðr sonu mía, at þurfi þér brýningina." This literally means "Thorgerd plotted to journey with them; rather they she stay behind and said such was not a woman's journey; she said that certainly she shall go – 'because of this that I see to have happened of you sons of mine, that you need incitement.'" The word "ferð" can mean "journey" or "dealings" in this case. Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 164.

to urge her sons on and ensure Bolli is killed. Thorgerd follows her sons into Bolli's home and demands they finish him off.<sup>53</sup>

Thorgerd represents the vengeful mother who stops at nothing to protect her son's honor, even long after his death. Thorgerd has no regard for her husband's kinsmen, and only takes it upon herself to protect the honor of those related to her by blood. Thorgerd gets her way by goading, shaming, and inciting her sons into action. Thorgerd not only relies on her taunts to ensure Bolli's death, she also uses her very presence to intimidate her sons into completing the grisly deed. Thorgerd has great success in convincing her sons to put aside their kinship ties to Bolli and properly avenge their brother and uphold the family honor.

Thorgerd not only possesses unwavering loyalty for her son in this saga, but she also invests in the honor of her daughter, Thurid. Geirmund Thunder, a powerful Viking, approaches Thorgerd about a marriage to her daughter Thurid after Olaf refuses him. Thorgerd accepts a large sum of money to intercede on Geirmund's behalf and secure his marriage to Thurid despite Olaf's displeasure with the match.<sup>54</sup>

The marriage proves to be a bad one, and Geirmund declares his intentions to go abroad and leave behind Thurid and their one year old daughter, Groa, without any means of support. Thorgerd tries to incite Olaf into action against Geirmund for the dishonor. Instead of taking action against Geirmund, Olaf outfits him with a ship and sends him on his way. When her father refuses to help her, Thurid takes matters into her own hands. She takes eight servants and her daughter and launches one of Olaf's ferries and rows out to Geirmund's ship. Thurid sneaks on board and switches her daughter for Geirmund's

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<sup>53</sup>Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 377-381.

<sup>54</sup>Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 323-324.

beloved sword “leg-biter.” As Thurid rows back to shore with her crew, Geirmund wakes up at Groa’s crying and yells at Thurid to give him back his sword. Thurid refuses to give the sword back because Geirmund treated her so dishonorably.<sup>55</sup> Thurid then gives “leg biter” to her foster-brother Bolli.<sup>56</sup>

Whereas Thorgerd’s intentions in the matter are to protect her daughter’s honor and uphold the family’s overall honor, Thurid’s motives are purely selfish. She feels wronged by her husband and her father and takes it upon herself to exact revenge. However, Thurid sacrifices her baby daughter for her personal honor. Although the saga does not mention what exactly happens to baby Groa, Thurid does not protect her kinsmen as Groa is her daughter and closest kin other than her parents and brothers. Unlike *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the killing of one’s child in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* is greatly dishonorable. The saga echoes the dishonor in Thurid’s choice when Thurid gives “leg biter” to Bolli, and he uses the weapon to kill Thurid’s brother Kjartan. On her quest for her own personal honor, Thurid does not protect her family. Thurid’s daughter, Groa, and her brother, Kjartan, suffer the consequences of her dishonorable actions.

### *Njal’s Saga*

*Njal’s Saga* is an Icelandic saga set in the tenth and eleventh centuries and written in the thirteenth century. This saga is particularly important to understanding the connection of female honor to familial honor. In this saga, men are usually killed for calling other men cowards or recklessly goading. However, the women in this saga

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<sup>55</sup> The original text reads “Hon mælti: ‘þá skaltu adri fá þat; hefir þér mart ódregili ga farit til vár; mun nú skilja með okkr.’” This literally means “she spoke: ‘then shall I first get; vengeance for you behaving meanly to us; shall now separate with us.’” Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 324-325.

almost always get their way by calling men cowards and recklessly goading.<sup>57</sup> *Njal's Saga* differs from *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* in the theme of female duty to kinship. Instead of focusing directly on siblings or children, the major source of honor for a woman in *Njal's Saga* is in the protection of her household. The two powerful female figures in *Njal's Saga* whose honor centers on this theme are Hallgerd Hoskuldsdottir and Bergthora, the wife of Njal. There are many women in the Icelandic sagas that protect their household and kinsmen from what they perceive to be dishonor, and in *Njal's Saga* Bergthora allows nothing to stop her from shielding the honor of her household. Hallgerd, however, sacrifices her own kinsmen, household servants, and husbands to protect her personal honor over her household's honor.

In *Njal's Saga*, Hallgerd is renowned for her beauty and her stubbornness. She is considered even by her own father as hard to get along with, but Hallgerd claims she simply inherited the great pride of her family. Hallgerd is lavish and harsh-tempered and always surrounds herself with those who are the most likely to do her bidding.<sup>58</sup> Hallgerd is a powerful inciter and has great success at goading her kinsmen into violence. The first incident of Hallgerd's compromised honor concerns her first husband, Thorvald. When Thorvald disapproves of Hallgerd using all of their stored dried fish and flour, she makes a rude remark about Thorvald and his father resorting to starvation to get rich. In return, Thorvald hits her in the face so hard that she bleeds. For revenge, Hallgerd turns to her evil foster-father, Thjostolf, who is well known as a bully and only shows respect for Hallgerd. Hallgerd goads Thjostolf by telling him that if he cared for her he would

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<sup>57</sup> This shaming and goading is the type of performance that Zoe Borovsky claims is so effective for women within the household. Borovsky, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga* (Leifur Eiriksson Publishing Ltd., 1997, Robert Cook 2001), 21.

not have been so far away when Thorvald struck her. Thjostolf is so blood-thirsty that he needs little incentive and he promises to avenge Hallgerd, and he kills Thorvald. Even though Thjostolf physically does the killing, it is obvious to everyone that Hallgerd is really the one behind the murder. Hallgerd's own uncle, Hrut, holds Hallgerd directly responsible for Thorvald's death and tells Hoskuld that they must pay compensation for Thorvald to restore Hallgerd's standing.<sup>59</sup>

Despite her reputation for having her first husband killed, Hallgerd has little trouble finding another husband due to her renowned beauty and her family's reputation. Hallgerd's next husband, Glum, falls into the same pattern of misfortune. Glum's brother, Thorarin, tries to warn him not to seek Hallgerd's hand saying: "She had a husband and she had him killed."<sup>60</sup> Glum ignores his brother's warning and marries the notoriously beautiful but dangerous Hallgerd. It does not take long for Hallgerd to stir up trouble with her new husband because of her loyalty to her own kinsmen. Hallgerd asks Glum to let Thjostolf stay even though he is disgraced.<sup>61</sup> Glum grants her request but he and Thjostolf quickly begin arguing. Hallgerd takes up for Thjostolf when Glum wants to send Thjostolf away.<sup>62</sup> Like Thorvald, Glum is enticed into violence against Hallgerd, and he strikes her for her impudence. Hallgerd slyly tells Thjostolf that he is not to take

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<sup>59</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 18-20-22, 25.

<sup>60</sup> The original text reads: "Ok var hon gipt manni, ok réð hon þeim bana." This literally means "And she was given in marriage to a husband, and she planned to kill them." Einar Ól Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (Reykjavik: Íslensk Fonrit, 1971), 42.

<sup>61</sup> The original text reads: "Síðan gekk hon til máls við Glúm ok lagði hendr upp um háls honum ok mælti: 'skalt þú veita mér bæn þá, ere k mun biðja þik?' 'Veita mun ek þér, ef þér er sœmð í,' segir hann, 'eða hvers vill þú biðja?'" This literally means "Afterward she went to talk with Glum and put arms up around neck of his and spoke: 'shall you grant to me request then, that I shall beg thee?' 'Grant shall I to you, if of you honor is within,' said he, 'but what do you beg?'" Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 47.

<sup>62</sup> The original text reads: "Hallgerðr mælti þá eptir Þjóstólfi, ok varð þeim þá mjök á orðum. Glúmr drap til hennar hendi sinni ok mælti: 'Ekki deili ek við þik lengr' – ok gekk á braut." This literally means "Hallgerd spoke then after Thjostolf, and then they happened to have much of to say. Glum struck her with hand of his and spoke: 'Nothing of quarrel will I with thee longer' – and went away." Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 48.

revenge for Glum's violence against her. Thjostolf then finds Glum and kills him. Hallgerd appears amused and laughing when she finds out saying: "You didn't sit this game out."<sup>63</sup> Hallgerd's mirth shows that she is anything but sorry about Glum's murder. It seems that Hallgerd uses reverse psychology on Thjostolf to goad him into action. Hallgerd says she does not want Thjostolf to avenge her dishonor, but she still makes a point to let Thjostolf know of the incident. Thjostolf's previous murder of Thorvald leaves Hallgerd with little doubt that Thjostolf would murder Glum for her as well.

Hallgerd's foster-father Thjostolf is the first weapon Hallgerd uses to defend her honor. Thjostolf appears always eager to avenge his foster-daughter, and so this is a mild example of Hallgerd's goading. Hrut kills Thjostolf soon after for his impudence in slaying Glum, but this does not end Hallgerd's resources. She marries Gunnar of Hlidarendi because of his great reputation as a fighter and adventurer, and Gunnar is equally enchanted by Hallgerd's beauty and bold nature. After her marriage to Gunnar, Hallgerd enters into a more dangerous quest to protect her honor. This time Hallgerd embarks on a series of vengeance killings against another woman, Bergthora.

Again, it does not take long for Hallgerd to create trouble because of her immense pride. At Njal's winter feast, Njal's wife, Bergthora, tells Hallgerd that she must move aside for Thorhalla, Bergthora's daughter-in-law. Bergthora wants Thorhalla to sit at the cross-bench and not Hallgerd. Hallgerd claims that she will not "move aside for anyone, and I won't sit in the corner like a cast-off hag."<sup>64</sup> Bergthora becomes annoyed and reminds Hallgerd that "I decide things here."<sup>65</sup> The two women then trade grievous

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<sup>63</sup>Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 27, 30-32.

<sup>64</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 57.

<sup>65</sup> The original text reads: "þá gekk Bergþóra at pallinum ok Þórhalla með henna, ok mælti Bergþóra til Hallgerðar: 'þú skalt þoka fyrir konu þessi.' Hallgerðr mælti: 'hvergi mun ek þoka, því at engi hornkerling

insults. Hallgerd says that there is not much of a difference between Bergthora and Njal because Bergthora has gnarled nails on every finger, and Njal is beardless. Bergthora retorts that Hallgerd's first husband Thorvald was not beardless yet she had him killed.<sup>66</sup> At Bergthora's grave accusation, Hallgerd turns to her husband to protect her honor. Hallgerd tells Gunnar that there is no use being married to the manliest man in Iceland if he will not avenge Bergthora's accusation of Hallgerd murdering Thorvald. Unlike Hallgerd's kinsman Thjostolf, Hallgerd's husband is not as quick to come to the defense of her honor. Gunnar refuses to be Hallgerd's pawn. Although she is no doubt embarrassed by Gunnar's refusal, Hallgerd does not drop the issue. Instead, she threatens Bergthora and tells her she is not finished yet.<sup>67</sup>

Gunnar's refusal is indicative that Hallgerd's foster-father felt more of a sense of duty to protect her honor than her own husband. Gunnar actually appears more concerned with protecting the honor of his good friend Njal than the honor of his wife.<sup>68</sup> According to Theodore M. Andersson this is because *Njal's Saga* does not exemplify honor in the traditional sense of magnified personal reputation. It is not a story of prowess of heroism, but a story of frustrated good will. Gunnar and Njal continuously settle the dispute with courtesy and respect for one another despite hostility between their

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vile k vera.' 'Ek skal hér ráða,' sagði Bergþóra. Síðan an settisk Þórhalla niðr." This literally means "then went Bergthora to the bench and Thorhalla with her, and spoke Bergthora to Hallgerd: 'you shall move over for this woman.' Hallgerd spoke: 'nowhere shall I move, because of no one shall I be an old woman in a corner.' 'Here I shall advise,' said Bergthora. Afterward Thorhalla sat down." Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 91.

<sup>66</sup> Hallgerd's taunt is punishable by lesser outlawry. "If a man reproaches someone with taunts or asserts some disfigurement in him, even if he speaks the truth, then the penalty is lesser outlawry." Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 195.

<sup>67</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 53, 57.

<sup>68</sup> Gunnar tells Hallgerd not to show her bad temper to his friends and she responds "the trolls take your friends." Njal also warns Gunnar that he must not let Hallgerd have her way in everything. Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 58-59.

wives.<sup>69</sup> Gunnar and Njal protect their friendship and social order by settling the feud peacefully.

After Thjostolf's death and Gunnar's refusal to avenge her honor, Hallgerd takes matters into her own hands. Hallgerd uses all of the men at her disposal in her vengeance against Bergthora, starting with her overseer, Kol. The saga describes Kol as the worst sort of person. Hallgerd goads Kol into killing Svart, one of Bergthora and Njal's servants as her first act of retribution against Bergthora. Hallgerd catches Svart chopping wood on her land, and Hallgerd justifies killing Svart because she believes he is stealing from her. However, it is obvious that Hallgerd does not care about the wood and that she is merely following up on her threat to Bergthora.<sup>70</sup>

Hallgerd uses a different tactic with Kol than she does with the eager Thjostolf. Kol actually complains that he might lose his life, unlike Thjostolf who never mentions it. Hallgerd says that it would be bad of Kol not to kill Svart for her, because she spoke up for him many times when others spoke ill of him. She also says that she will find another man to do it if he does not dare. Her words make Kol very angry, and he kills Svart for her.<sup>71</sup> Hallgerd reveals her power over Kol in this situation. Her good opinion obviously means a great deal to Kol as her support helps him survive in an environment filled with enemies. Hallgerd uses the example of her loyalty to Kol's honor to guilt him into showing his loyalty for her honor in return. Even a man like Kol appears to possess some sense of duty. Hallgerd also insults Kol's integrity as a man by saying she will find another to do the deed if he is afraid.

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<sup>69</sup> Andersson, 585-586.

<sup>70</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 59.

Like honorable Icelandic men, Gunnar and Njal attempt to settle the matter of Svart's death through material compensation. However, this is not good enough for Bergthora. She bribes one of the workers on her farm, Atli, to kill Kol in vengeance for Svart.<sup>72</sup> Bergthora thanks Atli for killing Kol but warns him to be on his guard, because Hallgerd will not honor any money settlement for Kol. When Njal finds out about Kol's death he reproaches Bergthora but she says she will not give in to Hallgerd. Njal and Gunnar again reach a peaceful settlement for the killing of Kol. Hallgerd is very angry that Gunnar settled the slaying of Kol peacefully.<sup>73</sup> The fact that Hallgerd and Bergthora both do not honor material compensation for their losses shows the stark differences between Icelandic men and women and their goals in the realm of vengeance. In this saga, the men find it dishonorable not to pay compensation for the killed men, and the women find it dishonorable to accept this compensation.

Hallgerd and Bergthora continue their feud without acknowledging or honoring the settlements of material compensation that their husbands make every time. Both Njal and Gunnar know that their efforts at a settlement are futile, but their friendship is what keeps them from turning violently on one another.<sup>74</sup> Hallgerd often appears able to get her way with Gunnar in the saga, but she fails to goad him into vengeance or violence against Njal. Gunnar never rises to Hallgerd's bait, and she never receives his help in exacting her revenge. Gunnar continues to accept and pay out compensation for the killings between Bergthora and Hallgerd, without losing his temper, and Hallgerd

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<sup>72</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 60.

<sup>73</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 64, 65.

continues her private quest for blood vengeance without her husband's consent.<sup>75</sup>

Gunnar is powerless to stop Hallgerd because of her authority over the household.

According to Zoe Borovsky, it is in personal relations, not in the public realm, that saga women exert their authority.<sup>76</sup>

Throughout their feud, the saga depicts Hallgerd as selfish and merciless, and Bergthora as more respectable yet equally ruthless. This is mostly because Hallgerd's main concern is her own personal honor, and Bergthora's main concern is her familial honor. Bergthora does not try to incite her own family until Hallgerd stoops to name-calling to insult Bergthora and injure her and Njal's familial pride. While entertaining some itinerant women in her women's room, Hallgerd tells Sigmund Lambason to make up a scathing poem about Njal and his sons. When he does she tells him, "you're a treasure, the way you do just what I want."<sup>77</sup> The itinerant women with Hallgerd tell Bergthora about the insulting poem. This is an assault on her familial honor too great for Bergthora to ignore. She tells her sons that they are not real men unless repay Sigmund Lambason. Skarphedin says to his mother, "we're not made like women, that we become furious over everything."<sup>78</sup> Bergthora tells him that if he does not avenge this than he will never avenge any shame. Njal's sons go out that night armed, and kill Sigmund.<sup>79</sup> Like Hallgerd and her servants, it is Bergthora's ability to influence her sons privately

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<sup>75</sup> Gunnar tells his kinsmen that they should not spring into action at the prompting of Hallgerd because she undertakes many things that are far from his will. Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 68-69.

<sup>76</sup> Borovsky, 15.

<sup>77</sup> The original text reads: "Gersimi ert þú," sagði Hallgerðr, 'hversu þú ert mér eptir látr.'" This literally means "Of treasure are you," said Hallgerd, 'how you indulge me.'" Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> The original text reads: "Ekki höfu vér kvenna skap," segir Skarphedinn, 'at vér reiðimsk viðöllu.'" This literally means "Nothing do we have of women's disposition," said Skarphedin, 'that we become angry with everything.'" Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 114.

<sup>79</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 75-77.

that effectively undermines Njal's efforts to negotiate an end to the feud using official, public means.<sup>80</sup>

Bergthora successfully incites her sons to protect the family's honor, while Hallgerd flounders in her attempt to incite Gunnar to revenge. The events of Gunnar's death further display Hallgerd's selfishness. Hallgerd orders her slave, Melkolf, to go to Kirkbaer and steal food and butter and cheese. When Gunnar finds out about Hallgerd's theft he is angry, and he slaps her across the face. Hallgerd promises to remember the slap and pay it back. She gets her chance when Gunnar's home is under attack by Flosi and his men due to Gunnar violating his sentence of exile for the murder of Thorgeir Otkelsson. Gunnar's bowstring breaks and he asks Hallgerd for two locks of her hair to twist into a bowstring for him. Gunnar claims that as long as he can use his bow the attackers will never be able to get to him.<sup>81</sup> Hallgerd refuses recalling the slap Gunnar gave her, and she says she does not care if he dies.<sup>82</sup>

Gunnar's mother, Rannveig, recognizes Hallgerd's selfish behavior, saying to her: "You do evil, and your infamy will long be remembered."<sup>83</sup> Rannveig is so fierce towards Hallgerd that she is on the verge of killing her, and she says that Gunnar's death is Hallgerd's fault.<sup>84</sup> Hallgerd appears to have lost all, if she ever possessed any, concern for Gunnar's honor after he insults her own honor by slapping her across the face.

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<sup>80</sup> Borovsky, 15.

<sup>81</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 81, 82, 128.

<sup>82</sup> The original text reads "þá skal ek nú," segir hon, "muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri hvárt þú verr þik loengr eða skemmr." This literally means "Then shall I know," says she, 'remind you of the slap in the face, and care I never whether you defend yourself long or short.'" E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 91.

<sup>83</sup> The original text reads "Rannveig mælti, 'Illa ferr þér, ok mun þín skömm lengi uppi.'" This literally means "Rannveig spoke, 'Ill behaves you and must your shame long last.'" Gordon, 91.

<sup>84</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 128-131.

Rannveig believes that Hallgerd's placing of her own petty pride over her husband's life is dishonorable and evil.

In contrast, Bergthora never openly dishonors her husband, Njal, even up to his death. Unlike Hallgerd, Bergthora never puts her personal honor above the honor of her family. When Njal's house comes under attack and set on fire, Flosi allows the women, children, and servants to come out of Njal's home so they would not be burned. Flosi tells Njal and Bergthora they do not deserve to be burned and he wants them to come out. This is because Flosi only wants revenge on Njal's sons. Njal says he would rather die than live in shame because he is too old to avenge his sons. Bergthora says that she once promised Njal that one fate should await them both, and she remains with him in the burning house.<sup>85</sup> Bergthora does not choose to save herself from a fiery death, nor does she try to persuade Njal to accept the offer of escape. Bergthora, like Njal, knows that there is no way to redeem her family's honor and no way to exact blood revenge for all those killed in the attack. She chooses to die next to her husband honorably, rather than live with the dishonor that would descend on her family if they accepted Flosi's offer and lived with the shame of not being able to avenge the decimation of her household.

The example within *Njal's Saga* of Hallgerd and Bergthora's feud displays the honorable and dishonorable conduct of women when inciting for blood vengeance. Putting one's household honor above personal honor is considered honorable behavior for a woman in this saga. The author of the saga never calls Bergthora's actions or her character into question. However, the author of the saga describes Hallgerd more than once as stubborn, evil, and difficult. Hallgerd only uses her kinsmen to protect her personal honor and not to uphold any sense of familial or household honor. The whole

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<sup>85</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 220-221.

feud between her and Bergthora begins with an insult to Hallgerd's personal honor that she will stop at nothing to avenge. Hallgerd appears to think very little of the deaths of her kinsmen and servants and only uses their deaths to prolong the feud between her and Bergthora. The feud is nothing for Hallgerd except a quest to avenge her own personal honor at the expense of anyone's life that is necessary. Bergthora, in contrast, sees the feud as an attack on her family and its honor and only incites her sons and kinsmen into action when the insults become too severe to ignore.

### The Vinland Sagas

In *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga* there is one woman who displays outrageous behavior, inciting, and goading in order to get what she desires. This woman, Freydis, is Eirik the Red's daughter, and *Grænlandinga Saga* describes her as an "arrogant overbearing woman."<sup>86</sup> In this saga, Freydis is a dishonorable woman who, like Hallgerd from *Njal's Saga*, puts her personal honor over the honor of her kinsmen. However, the later, more Christian, *Eirik's Saga* represents Freydis in a different light. This saga is void of the dishonorable representations of Freydis abundant in *Grænlandinga Saga*. Instead, *Eirik's Saga* depicts Freydis as a fierce mother figure to her people. It is unclear why there is such a large difference in Freydis' portrayal between the two sagas. It is likely that in *Eirik's Saga*, Freydis takes on a more nurturing and matronly role to correlate with her new Christian values.

*Grænlandinga Saga* renders the first account of Freydis' deceitful nature with the example of her broken agreement with the brothers Helgi and Finnbogi. Instead of bringing the same amount of men as the brothers, Freydis brings five more men to

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<sup>86</sup> The original text reads "hon var svarri mikiill," which means "she was a great haughty woman." Icelandic Saga Database, "Grænlandinga saga," [http://www.sagadb.org/graenlendinga\\_saga.on](http://www.sagadb.org/graenlendinga_saga.on).

Vinland. Also when they arrive in Vinland she refuses to let the brothers stay in Leif Eiriksson's houses saying that her brother lent them to her and her only. Helgi responds to her saying: "we brothers could never be a match for you in wickedness."<sup>87</sup>

This illustration of Freydis' nature is a proper prelude to her horrible conduct in Vinland. Freydis lies to her husband Thorvard about what transpires between her and the brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi. Freydis claims that Helgi and Finnbogi struck her and handled her very roughly.<sup>88</sup> Freydis does not even give her husband time to respond. She immediately calls Thorvard a wretch and claims that he will never avenge her humiliation or his own, and she threatens him with divorce unless he avenges the alleged humiliation.<sup>89</sup>

Freydis' threats and taunts drive Thorvard to the point that he can bear them no longer, and he orders the seizure of Helgi, Finnbogi, and all of their men. Freydis has each man put to death, until only five women are left. Thorvard's men refuse to kill the women. In response, Freydis demands an axe and kills the women herself. The author of *Grœnlendinga Saga* calls Freydis' actions "a monstrous deed."<sup>90</sup> This is such a dishonorable act that Freydis threatens to kill anyone who tells of her evil deeds. Freydis loads her companions with money to try and keep her crimes secret, but the men suffer from the guilt of simply knowing about the heinous crime. Word eventually gets to Leif about his sister's crime, but Leif does not have the heart to kill or exile his sister Freydis as she deserves. Instead, he prophesies that her descendants will never prosper. The saga

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<sup>87</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America, Grœnlendinga Saga and Eirik's Saga* (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, 1965), 68.

<sup>88</sup> Freydis approaches Finnbogi and they discuss how they hate the ill-feeling that has arisen between them and Freydis asks to trade ships with him so that she can go away from Vinland. Finnbogi agrees if it will make Freydis happy. As this appears to be an amicable exchange, Freydis' motives for betraying Finnbogi and Helgi are uncertain. Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 69.

<sup>89</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 69.

<sup>90</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 69.

claims that this comes true and that afterward everyone thinks ill of Freydis and her family.<sup>91</sup>

The motives behind Freydis' evil behavior in *Grænlandinga Saga* are vague. One thing that is certain is that Freydis suffers grave dishonor from her actions, as does her entire family. Freydis does not uphold the code of honor for medieval Icelandic women in the realm of familial honor. Instead of protecting the integrity of her family, Freydis permanently damages the reputation of her current and future kinsmen. Her actions are selfish, monstrous, and dishonorable by Icelandic standards. When no amount of her goading makes Thorvard's men attack the women, Freydis takes matters into her own hands as it appears she is capable of doing all along.

*Eirik's Saga* also includes a description of Freydis in Vinland. However, in this later more Christianized account, Freydis' monstrous deed is absent. Instead, this saga represents Freydis as a fierce woman who only harbors hatred for the natives of Vinland. In this saga, the Norsemen engage in a dangerous and uneven battle with the natives. When the men retreat, Freydis scolds the men for running saying: "you should be able to slaughter them like cattle. If I had weapons, I am sure I could fight better than any of you."<sup>92</sup> The saga claims that the men pay no attention to what Freydis says, but they immediately re-enter the battle. Freydis tries to follow the men into battle but she cannot keep up because she is pregnant. However, Freydis does come across some natives when she falls behind. Freydis snatches the sword of a fallen Norseman and prepares to defend

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<sup>91</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 69-70.

<sup>92</sup> The original text reads "hví rennið þér undan þessum auvirðismönnum, svá gildir men sem þér eruð er mér þætti sem þér mættið drepa niðr svá sem búfé? Ok ef ek hefða vápn, þætti mér sem ek skylda betr berjast en einhverr yðvar." This literally means "why run you away from these worthless wretches, so fine men as you are, when it seems to me as you meet them strike them down so as farm-cattle? And if I had weapon, it seems to me as I should better fight than any of you." Icelandic Saga Database, "Eiríks saga rauða," [http://www.sagadb.org/eiriks\\_saga\\_rauda.on](http://www.sagadb.org/eiriks_saga_rauda.on).

herself, pulling out one of her breasts and slapping it with the sword. Her brazen actions scare away the natives before any actual fighting transpires.<sup>93</sup>

The differing accounts of Freydis' conduct in *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga* display different results from one woman's relentless goading. *Grænlandinga Saga* portrays Freydis as a deceitful, monstrous, and possibly insane woman. In this saga Freydis appears to only have her personal agenda in mind. Her selfish actions and reckless goading lead to the disgrace of her entire family, making Freydis one of the most dishonorable women in Icelandic literature. *Eirik's Saga* portrays Freydis as a fierce woman whose main agenda is not her personal gain, but the victory of her people over the Vinland natives. Even though the writer of the saga claims the men pay her no attention, the men go back to battle with the natives after her incessant goading and shaming. No harsh descriptions or words accompany Freydis in this *Eirik's Saga* unlike *Grænlandinga Saga*. Instead, Freydis achieves a level of honor in the later account because of her fearlessness and her determination to protect the honor of not only her family, but her own people against the natives of Vinland.

### Conclusion

Protecting familial honor was a major part of the medieval Icelandic female code of honor. These women, with the exception of Hallgerd, Thurid, and Freydis in *Grænlandinga Saga*, are all devoted to protecting their own individual concepts of familial honor. Bergthora finds honor in protecting the dignity of her husband and sons, Freydis finds honor in inciting her kinsmen's courage against the natives, Signy, Borghild, and Gudrun Gjukisdottir all find honor in protecting their brothers and their

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<sup>93</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 100

original kinship ties, and Thorgerd finds honor in protecting the honorable memory of her son.

Hallgerd, Freydis, and Thurid are examples of the calamity that occurred when a woman put her own desires and personal honor before the honor of her kinsmen in medieval Iceland. Hallgerd is renowned as an evil woman, Freydis dishonors her family forever, and Thurid's actions jeopardize her infant daughter and bring about the violent death of her brother, Kjartan. All of these women suffer consequences for their selfish actions. It is clear that if a woman put herself before her family in medieval Iceland, it meant grave dishonor for her and misfortune for her kinsmen.

## CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN PROTECTING PERSONAL HONOR IN MARRIAGE

In the Icelandic sagas, one area where it is acceptable for women to protect their personal honor first is in marriage. Roberta Frank notes that in theory, medieval Iceland was a man's world. About the only legal rights possessed by a married woman were the doubtful privileges of paying tithes, undergoing ordeals, and being outlawed or executed. However, women did have some power in the realm of marriage. In the sagas, marriages made contrary to the stated will of the girl usually end in the death, dishonor, or divorce of the husband. The conclusion Frank draws is that while a woman's consent did not count for much, it was unwise to marry her off against her wishes. Frank also notes that women most likely had the advantage in divorce. Of the twelve divorces performed in the family sagas, nine are demanded by women and of the five threatened divorces, all are initiated by women.<sup>94</sup>

As previously discussed, women during pagan times and during the Christian twelfth and thirteenth centuries could not yet replace their old kinship ties with allegiance to their spouses. An Icelandic woman's marital family were her furthest kin. After Iceland's conversion to Christianity, Christians emphasized the doctrine of consent in the Icelandic marriage system. This echoed the pagan regulation of marriage that the two individuals were evenly matched, *jafnræði*, in both social standing and wealth. This was because the greatest purpose of a pagan marriage was to ensure the orderly passing of

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<sup>94</sup> Frank, 477-478, 483.

property from one generation to the next.<sup>95</sup> Even though the pair had to be evenly matched, a betrothal did not require a meeting between the couple prior to the marriage. In pagan times, fathers made deals with suitors based on reputation, bride price, and dowry agreements. However, accounts of Christianized betrothals usually do not mention relatives and place the decision in the woman's power. Only a woman's definitive "yes" could initiate the marriage.<sup>96</sup>

Several of the Icelandic sagas describe the conversion of Iceland, by writers living in thirteenth-century Iceland. However, marriage, divorces, and sexual conduct remained relatively untouched by Christianity in medieval Iceland.<sup>97</sup> The Icelandic sagas, specifically *Njal's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, exhibit the female power of marriage refusal only with particularly strong women. There are cases where some of these women marry more than once, and usually in the first betrothal they are not asked their opinion. However, the fact that the strongest women in these sagas could refuse a suitor's proposal shows that women were able to exercise the doctrine of consent and protect their personal honor.

There was great dishonor in unsanctioned marriages in pagan and Christian times, and there was also great dishonor in refusing a good match.<sup>98</sup> However, this dishonor usually transferred over to the father and not to the daughter. Therefore, when a woman in the sagas refuses a suitor's proposal for reasons of her own, she puts her father's honor at risk instead of her own. Women in the sagas who refuse suitors are sometimes allowed to do so by their fathers if it is an unequal match. A girl's family regarded her honor as a

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<sup>95</sup> Scandinavia was never a patrilineal clan society. There were always nuclear families and inheritance passed to and through both sexes. For more information see Sawyer and Sawyer, 167.

<sup>96</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 12, 17, 21, 24, 26-27, 45.

<sup>97</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 319, 322.

precious and sacred commodity, and most fathers did not want their daughters in an unsatisfying marriage.<sup>99</sup>

Another part of marriage that Icelandic women had a right to protect their personal honor in was divorce. Women had a right to divorce their husbands in medieval Iceland, but women had to bring valid charges against their husbands in order to leave them, and the process was much more detailed for women than for men.<sup>100</sup> However, women still had the right to leave their husbands for a variety of reasons. More often than not the husband was at fault and women were able to achieve a divorce without serious implications to their honor. Also, if women succeeded in their attempt to divorce, they could take their property, including their dowry and bride-price, and return to their kinsmen.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, women were able to retain their economic independence both in marriage and after, and they were not a financial burden on their kinsmen after a successful divorce. A woman's family was usually happy to receive her back and protected her until a new marriage candidate appeared. Unsatisfied wives could consider divorce as an honorable option both for herself and her family as long as she was financially secure and she could attract another husband.<sup>102</sup>

Medieval Icelandic women could protect their personal honor within the system of marriage in the Icelandic sagas through consent and divorce, particularly *Njal's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Since these sagas all take place in pagan times while written after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, *Grágás*

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<sup>99</sup> Frank, 476.

<sup>100</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 172.

<sup>101</sup> Haywood, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 59-60.

*I* and *Grágás II* provide a representation of the political and legal environment surrounding the writers.

### *Njal's Saga*

In *Njal's Saga*, there are examples of both the privilege of female consent and female incentive in divorce. The first example in this saga is of Unn who exercises her right to divorce her husband. Mord Gigja betroths his daughter Unn to Hrut without even considering her feelings or asking her opinion. Mord Gigja also changes the terms of the betrothal and betroths Unn to Hrut for three years so that Hrut can go abroad without ever consulting or acknowledging Unn. When Hrut returns, he marries Unn and places full authority in Unn's hands over everything inside the house. However the marriage is anything but a happy one due to the sexual curse laid upon Hrut by Queen Gunnhild after their affair in Norway.<sup>103</sup> The curse renders Hrut unable to consummate his marriage with Unn. Unn is so upset at the lack of intimacy between her and Hrut that she goes to her father crying at the Althing and says that she does not want to return to Hrut. When Mord confronts Hrut, Hrut appears prepared for any charges Unn wants to bring against him, obviously ready to be rid of the unhappy marriage as well. However, Mord appears convinced that the evidence favors Hrut over his daughter and does not initiate her right for divorce. Soon after, Unn begs her father again for a divorce from Hrut. This time she says it is because he cannot perform sexually in a way that pleases her even though they had tried everything to enjoy each other.<sup>104</sup>

After Mord discovers the reason for Unn desiring a divorce, he tells her exactly what to do to successfully divorce Hrut. Mord describes a three-fold process for a

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<sup>103</sup> For more information see: Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 13, for a full account of the curse and Unn's displeasure.

<sup>104</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 5-6, 14-15.

woman to divorce a man. She must declare herself divorced from him once at his bed, once at his door, and once at the law rock. After the three-fold process is complete, Unn's father declares Hrut and Unn legally divorced at the law rock at the Althing. This is because as a woman, Unn cannot speak at the law rock.<sup>105</sup> After the divorce, despite not being able to gain back her property from the stubborn and dishonorable actions of Hrut, Unn is still financially secure as she inherits all of her father's property when he dies.<sup>106</sup> She is also able to attract another husband, Valgard, and give birth to a son, Mord.

According to *Grágás II* a woman had certain rights when her husband neglected her bed.<sup>107</sup> In medieval Iceland, if sexual relations became so bad between a man and a woman, a woman had the right to take her leave and her property.<sup>108</sup> Due to these laws and to the orderly passing of inheritance prized by pagan marriage, Unn's demand for divorce is an honorable decision to both her and her family. Without proper sexual relations a woman could not conceive a child, and without a child orderly passing of inheritance could not commence. It was also shameful for both the woman and her family if she could not entice her husband into her bed. By proving the lack of intimacy was the fault of Hrut and not herself through her successful divorce, Unn is able to

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<sup>105</sup> The three-fold process for a woman to divorce her husband is described in great detail in this saga, whereas later in the same saga a man can divorce his wife with a simple declaration. For the account of Thrain's instantaneous divorce from his wife Thorhild see: Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 55-56.

<sup>106</sup> By not allowing Unn to have her property, Hrut violates the law. "If a man gives cause for the separation, then the woman has the right to claim her pride-price and dowry, and it is lawful to summon for that property on the next ordinary day after the Sunday." Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 65.

<sup>107</sup> "If on account of negligence a man does not sleep in the same bed as his wife for six seasons, then any claim she has to property and to personal compensation lies with her kinsmen, but she herself has the right to take care of her own property." Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 77.

<sup>108</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 272.

protect her personal honor from the disgrace of not being able to sexually please her husband.

The next woman in *Njal's Saga* that exhibits an ability to protect her personal honor in the realm of marriage is Hallgerd Hoskuldsdottir. In her first betrothal Hallgerd's father, Hoskuld, does not consult her about her first betrothal, because he has his mind set on marrying Hallgerd to Thorvald. Hallgerd tells her father that he must not love her as much as he says he does, because if he did he would have consulted her about the proposal. Hallgerd also says that she believes the marriage to be beneath what her father had promised her. Even though Hallgerd considers herself ill-matched, her father Hoskuld reminds her it is his opinion that matters.<sup>109</sup>

After Thorvald's death, Hallgerd marries Glum.<sup>110</sup> This time Hallgerd's father gives her the privilege of consent. Thorarin asks Hoskuld and Hrut for the betrothal of Hallgerd to his brother Glum, but Hrut decides that they should tell Hallgerd all of the arrangements for her marriage to Glum, and then ask her opinion on the match. Glum asks her opinion saying: "now tell us, as a woman with a mind of your own, whether this match is to your liking. If you have no heart for an agreement with us, we will say no more about it."<sup>111</sup> Hallgerd responds that she believes that she could come to love Glum

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<sup>109</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 19-20.

<sup>110</sup> See page 27 for an account of Thorvald's death.

<sup>111</sup> The original text reads: "Glúmr mælti: 'Um kaup við föður þinn höfu vit Þórarinn, bróðirminn, tala nökkut, at ek munda fá þín, Hallgerðr, ef þat er þinn vili sem þeira. Munt þú nú segja, er þú ert skörungr, hvárt þ er nökkut nær þínu skapi; en ef þér er engi hugr á kaupum viðoss, þá viljum vér ekki um tala.'" This literally means "Glum spoke: 'about bargain with your father we Thorarin, brother of mine, spoke somewhat, that I receive your hand, Hallgerd, if that is your will as theirs. Should you now say, you who are an outstanding woman, whether that this is somewhat near your temper; but if you are of heart in this bargain with us, then we will not talk about it.'" The term "hugr" can mean either "heart" or "mind" in this case. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 44.

if their tempers match. Hrut and Hoskuld then name witnesses and allow Hallgerd to betroth herself.<sup>112</sup>

Hallgerd's second betrothal is interesting because although she is a widow, and therefore privileged to some form of consent, *Grágás II* still states that "where a widow is betrothed to someone, her consent is to be obtained unless her father gives her in betrothal, then he shall decide."<sup>113</sup> Since Hoskuld is still alive and still privileged to give Hallgerd in betrothal without her consent, Hallgerd's male kinsmen greatly honor her by asking her opinion on the match.

After Glum dies, Hrut and Hoskuld again allow Hallgerd to betroth herself to her next husband, Gunnar.<sup>114</sup> Gunnar is first attracted to Hallgerd because she speaks boldly to him and asks him to tell her of his travels. Hallgerd tells Gunnar that she is unmarried because there are not many who want to take the risk, and that she is very demanding when it comes to men.<sup>115</sup> Hallgerd tells Gunnar that if marriage is on his mind then he must go to her father. Hallgerd's uncle, Hrut, warns Gunnar that he and Hallgerd are an uneven match because Gunnar is valiant and accomplished while she has a mixed character. Despite this warning, Gunnar is determined to have Hallgerd for his wife. Hrut and Hoskuld again allow Hallgerd to betroth herself, this time to Gunnar.<sup>116</sup>

At their marriage feast, Hallgerd enjoys an even greater mark of prestige when she betroths her daughter, Thorgerd, to Thrain. Thrain has little love for his wife

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<sup>112</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 27-28.

<sup>113</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 53.

<sup>114</sup> See pages 27-28 for information on Glum's death.

<sup>115</sup> The original text reads: "Hon segir, at svá væri, - 'ok er þat ekki margra at hætta á þat,' segir hon. 'Þykki þér hvergi fullkosta?' segir hann. 'Eigi er þat,' segir hon, 'en mannvönd mun ek vera.'" This literally means "she said that to be so – 'and that not many that risk in that,' said she. 'Think you nowhere fullmatched?' said he. 'Not that,' said she, 'but particular about men shall I be.'" The term "hætta" can mean either "venture" or "risk" in this case. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 85-86.

<sup>116</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 53-54.

Thorhild the Poetess. At Hallgerd and Gunnar's wedding feast Thrain sets his sights on Thorgerd, Hallgerd and Glum's fourteen-year-old daughter. Thorhild notices Thrain's interest in Thorgerd and jealously composes a mocking couplet for him. Thrain says that he will not suffer her mocking and malicious language anymore and declares himself divorced from her in one simple statement. Thrain then asks Hoskuld for the hand of his granddaughter, Thorgerd. Hoskuld is hesitant because Thrain had just parted from Thorhild, but he still agrees to the match. Despite Thrain asking Hoskuld for Thorgerd's hand, it is Hallgerd who betroths her daughter.<sup>117</sup>

Hallgerd's ability to betroth herself and her daughter in marriage reveals Hallgerd's power over her own honor. *Grágás II* allows for the betrothal of a daughter by a mother in the case that the father and brothers are non-existent or dead.<sup>118</sup> Thrain asks Hoskuld for Thorgerd, revealing that he believes the decision is in Hoskuld's power. Hoskuld gives his consent, but ultimately it is Hallgerd who betroths her daughter and honored with the power of decision. *Njal's Saga* never clearly states why Hallgerd's male kinsmen allow her the privilege of betrothal. Regardless, through her freedom to choose a husband Hallgerd is able to protect a degree of her personal honor in the realm of marriage.

Hildigunn is another woman in *Njal's Saga* who enjoys the privilege of consent. Hildigunn is the daughter of Starkad, the son of Thord Frey's Goði. Njal asks Hildigunn's uncle, Flosi, on behalf of his foster-son, Hoskuld, for Hildigunn's hand as she is the best choice that Njal knows of for Hoskuld. Flosi says that they will ask Hildigunn her opinion. When approached about the possible betrothal Hildigunn refuses

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<sup>117</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 56.

<sup>118</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, (K:144; Ib p. 29), 53.

since Hoskuld is not a *goði*, and she reminds Flosi that he had promised not to marry her to a man who was not a *goði*. She says she will marry Hoskuld if they find a chieftaincy for him, but otherwise she will not consider it. Njal then puts great effort into setting up the Goði of Hvitanes for Hoskuld. Once Hoskuld becomes a *goði* he marries Hildigunn.<sup>119</sup>

Hildigunn exhibits great authority and power over her personal honor. She is angry and dishonored by Flosi's attempt to betroth her to a man beneath what he promised her. Instead of meekly accepting the proposal or referring the decision to her male kinsmen, Hildigunn boldly demands that Flosi keep his promise. Hildigunn is not a widow, and even by thirteenth-century Christian law she has no guaranteed right of consent. Hildigunn's portrayal in *Njal's Saga* proves that some women in the Icelandic sagas are able to make their personal honor a priority in the realm of marriage.

#### *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*

In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* women divorce their husbands, decide their own marriages, and consider men as good or bad matches. *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* notes that men can find great honor in a good wife and a happy marriage. Men also find honor in this saga when their daughters, sisters, and mothers make a good match.<sup>120</sup> This saga also exhibits the stigma of dishonor associated with a woman refusing a good match, even if she is a widow, and especially if her father favors the

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<sup>119</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 164, 167.

<sup>120</sup> For examples of kinsmen honored by a good match see: Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 312, 316, 356.

marriage. Women in this saga take their personal honor into account and refuse to enter or stay in a marriage that is unsatisfying.<sup>121</sup>

In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, certain women have the chance to choose their husbands.<sup>122</sup> Jorunn, the alleged best match in the entire west fjords, decides whether or not she wants to marry Hoskuld. She responds saying: “nothing I have heard of you, Hoskuld, would make me inclined to refuse you.” Her response echoes the right she has to refuse Hoskuld if she did find something disagreeable about him.<sup>123</sup> Jorunn and Hoskuld’s former slave-woman, Melkorka, also has the right to decide who she marries. At first, Melkorka refuses the marriage offer of Thorbjorn Pock-marked. Later in the saga Melkorka finally agrees to marry Thorbjorn because she needs his help to send her son, Olaf the Peacock, to Ireland. Even though he has the right to betroth his mother, Olaf leaves it up to Melkorka to ultimately decide her betrothal.<sup>124</sup> Melkorka’s example is interesting because even as a former slave-woman she has the power to refuse an unpleasant marriage proposal.

Thorgerd Egilsdottir, the alleged best match in Borgafjord, also decides who she wants to marry. Thorgerd’s father refers Olaf the Peacock’s marriage proposal to Thorgerd because he says she will not accept anyone she does not want for a husband. The saga notes that Thorgerd is her father’s favorite child out of many children, and so Thorgerd takes offense that her father wants to marry her to the son of a former slave.

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<sup>121</sup> Loren Auerbach notes that in the marriages of this saga there is generally a negative result when the woman is not consulted or her wishes taken into account and a positive result is achieved when the woman is consulted and able to make her own choices. Auerbach, 42.

<sup>122</sup> Unn the Deep-minded is able to choose the husbands of her dead son’s daughters, Groa and Olof, and insist on the marriage of her favorite grandson. Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 279, 281.

<sup>123</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 289.

<sup>124</sup> “A son sixteen winters old or older, freeborn and a lawful heir and intelligent enough to take charge of his inheritance, is the man with the right to give his mother in betrothal. Although Olaf is the son of a slave-woman he is a freeborn man and thus able to betroth his mother.” Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 53.

Thorgerd's father is unable to convince Thorgerd to marry Olaf, and it is only after she speaks with Olaf in private that Thorgerd agrees to marry Olaf.<sup>125</sup>

Jorunn, Melkorka, and Thorgerd are all women from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* that are able to choose or refuse their suitors. These women have a great sense of personal pride and a devotion to their own honor when entering into marriage. No woman in medieval Iceland wanted to end up in an ill-matched, unsatisfying, and unhappy marriage. These three women are able to ensure their marital happiness through their own free-will of consent.

Vigdis is another strong female character in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* in the realm of marriage. Vigdis defends her personal honor and the honor of her family by shaming her deceitful husband and divorcing him. The example of Vigdis holds true to the reality that a woman's husband and in-laws were the furthest kin that she possessed in medieval Iceland. Vigdis' example provides evidence that even a woman's most distant blood relations enjoyed more loyalty from her than her own husband during this time. This reinforces Joel T. Rosenthal's idea that Icelandic society did not expect women to put the legal ties to their husbands above the blood loyalty they had known since birth.<sup>126</sup>

The saga notes that Vigdis is made of sterner stuff than her husband, Thord. When her kinsman Thorolf seeks her protection, Vigdis vows to do her best. A man named Ingjald is pursuing Thorolf for the murder of his brother, Hall. Thord therefore does not want Thorolf staying at his home because he is an outlaw. Vigdis refuses to go back on her word despite the fact that her husband wants Thorolf out. Vigdis gets her way simply by stating that she will not go back on her word. Due of his wife's strong

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<sup>125</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 279, 281, 284, 304, 313-314.

<sup>126</sup> Rosenthal, 139.

insistence, Thorolf stays all winter even though the situation puts Thord in danger.<sup>127</sup>

This shows Vigdis' great authority in her household.

Thord goes behind Vigdis's back and strikes a deal with Ingjald. Thord agrees to hand over Thorolf for silver and the forgiveness of his offence at harboring an outlaw. Vigdis discovers the deal between Thord and Ingjald. Unwilling to have her kinsman captured, Vigdis arranges Thorolf's escape behind Thord's back. Vigdis promises her slave, Asgaut, his freedom and wealth in return for helping Thorolf escape. Thorolf credits Vigdis for his escape and notes how shameful it is that a woman like Vigdis "should be so poorly married."<sup>128</sup>

Ingjald and Thord are both angry at Thorolf's escape. Ingjald believes that Thord deceived him, and he demands the bribe money back. Vigdis tells Ingjald and Thord they both got what they deserved, and she demands that the bribe money be returned to Ingjald because it is dishonorable money. When Vigdis offers the money to Ingjald, she swings the purse in his face and hits him repeatedly. Vigdis keeps the money, and Ingjald is so shaken that he leaves as quickly as possible. Vigdis gives the bribe money to Asgaut along with his freedom for helping her kinsman. Vigdis then announces her divorce from Thord, and she takes her property to go live with her kinsmen.<sup>129</sup>

Vigdis shows no loyalty to her husband, and even willingly puts him in danger for the sake of a distant relative.<sup>130</sup> Vigdis exemplifies the themes of female dedication to personal honor and kinship ties over marriage. She appears completely accepting of her

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<sup>127</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 292.

<sup>128</sup> The original text reads: "Pykki mér Vigdísí þetta mál drengiliga hafa farit; er þat mikill harmr, er þvílík kona skal hafa svá ósköruligt gjaförð." This literally means "seems to me that Vigdis behaved manfully behaved; it is great sorrow, that such a woman has so poor marriage." Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 35.

<sup>129</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 294-295.

<sup>130</sup> The saga states that Vigdis is distantly related to Thorolf. Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 292.

kinsman and all of his faults, but she is harsh and relentless in pointing out the faults of her husband and Ingjald. The fact that Vigdis strikes Ingjald proves that she harbors great hatred for him, and she is thoroughly disgusted by the scheme to capture her kinsman. By helping her kinsman escape, Vigdis protects her familial and personal honor at the cost of her husband's honor. Vigdis seems unconcerned by the dishonor her husband suffers from the whole affair, and promptly divorces him so that his dishonor cannot subsequently tarnish her honor and the honor of her kinsmen.

Gudrun Osvifsdottir is another woman from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* who takes control over her own honor in the realm of marriage. The saga claims that Gudrun is the most beautiful woman ever in Iceland. She is as clever as she is good-looking, the shrewdest of women, highly articulate, and generous.<sup>131</sup> Her father first marries Gudrun to Thorvald against her will.<sup>132</sup> Gudrun controls the finances during her marriage to Thorvald, and she receives any finery she desires from him. Gudrun demands precious objects from Thorvald and vents her anger when he fails to buy them. After allegations arise about the affection between Gudrun and Thord Ingunnarson, Gudrun asks Thorvald to buy her a new treasure. Angered by the rumors, Thorvald slaps Gudrun in the face saying there is no limit to her demands. The slap humiliates Gudrun, and she plots with Thord to divorce her husband for slapping her. Gudrun seeks to humiliate Thorvald by also accusing him of cross-dressing. Wearing clothing considered

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<sup>131</sup> The original text reads “kvenna vænst, er upp óxu á Íslandi, bæði at ásjánu ok vitsmunum,” which means “the most promising woman brought up in Iceland, both in looks and in intelligence,” and “kurteis kona,” which means “a courteous, well-bred woman,” and “örlynd,” which means “of a generous nature,” and “allra kvenna var hon koenst ok bezt orði farin,” which means “she is the cleverest and most articulate of all women.” *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 86 quoted in Auerbach, 36.

<sup>132</sup> Jenny Jochens notes that in *Laxdæla Saga* Gudrun's father does not consult her about her first marriage contracted at the age of fifteen, and “she let it be known that she was displeased.” For more information see: Jenny M. Jochens, “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17 (1986), 35-50.

suitable for the opposite sex was sufficient grounds for divorce, and either a man or a woman could make such a claim by medieval Icelandic law.<sup>133</sup> Gudrun then announces her divorce from Thorvald and later accuses Thord's wife, Aud, of cross-dressing as well.<sup>134</sup> Gudrun makes this accusation so that Thord can divorce Aud and marry her instead.<sup>135</sup>

After Kotkel and his clan kill Thord, Gudrun and Olaf the Peacock's son, Kjartan, become affectionate with one another.<sup>136</sup> Kjartan enjoys Gudrun's company as she is "both clever and good with words," and his father, Olaf the Peacock, calls Gudrun "much superior to other women."<sup>137</sup> Olaf further praises Gudrun as the only woman he considers a worthy match for Kjartan. Later in the saga, Kjartan leaves on a voyage and refuses to take Gudrun with him. He claims this is because she is the only capable one to run her farm since her brothers are inexperienced and her father is old. He asks her to wait for him for three years, but Gudrun refuses.<sup>138</sup> It appears that despite her refusal, Gudrun indeed waits for Kjartan as she does not marry while he is away, and she refuses Bolli's proposal at first because Kjartan is still alive. When he asks for Gudrun to be his wife, Bolli assumes that Osvif has the power to make the decision, but Osvif tells him that as Gudrun is a widow she can answer for herself. After some prodding from her

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<sup>133</sup> "If women become so deviant that they wear men's clothing, or whatever male fashion they adopt in order to be different, and likewise if men adopt women's fashion, whatever form it takes, then the penalty for that, whichever of them does it, is lesser outlawry." Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 69.

<sup>134</sup> Gudrun accuses Aud, called "Breeches-Aud," of wearing men's breeches and a codpiece like a masculine woman. Thord then promptly divorces Aud for her cross-dressing, and marries Gudrun. Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 334-335.

<sup>135</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 327, 332-334.

<sup>136</sup> See page 78 for an account of Thord's death.

<sup>137</sup> The original text reads: "þótti Kjartani gott at tala við Guðrúnu, því at hon var bæði vitr ok málsnjöll." This literally means "Thought Kjartan good to talk with Gudrun, because she was both wise and made good use of speech." The term "málsnjöll" also means "eloquent." Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 112.

<sup>138</sup> Loren Auerbach makes the claim that the underlying tragedy of the saga is that Gudrun, who is as strong a personality and as promising as Kjartan, is unable to fulfill her evident potential to travel abroad, and therefore her wise and generous disposition is here destroyed. For more information see: Auerbach, 38.

father, Gudrun reconsiders her answer to Bolli's proposal.<sup>139</sup> It appears that although she does not want to marry Bolli, Gudrun consents to the betrothal to avoid the dishonor to her family for refusing a good match.<sup>140</sup>

In another incident later in the saga after Bolli's death, Gudrun uses her power to betroth herself to trick Thorgils Holluson. Gudrun at first refuses to marry Thorgils in return for helping her sons with revenge for Bolli. Later, Gudrun schemes with Snorri the Goði to trick Thorgils into helping her sons without actually marrying him. Gudrun claims she will not marry any other man in Iceland but Thorgils, when in reality she is going to marry Thorkel who is at sea and not in Iceland. After Thorgils helps Gudrun's sons carry out revenge for Bolli, Gudrun lets Thorgils know her true intentions. Gudrun boldly tells Thorgils that she does "not intend you to be so fortunate as to have me for your wife."<sup>141</sup> Thorgils is livid and Gudrun tries to give him gifts to ease his fury, but he refuses the dishonor of accepting material gifts in place of a wife. Meanwhile, Gudrun refers the marriage decision about Thorkel to her sons even though she has a say because she is a widow. Gudrun's sons believe she knows what is best, and so Gudrun marries Thorkel and gives her own wedding feast.<sup>142</sup>

Gudrun Osvifsdottir is a very strong female character in the Icelandic sagas. She uses divorce and trickery to achieve her goals, and only in the case of Bolli's proposal does Gudrun truly seem to care about anyone's opinion but her own. It is in Bolli's proposal and her reluctant acceptance that Gudrun's respect for her kinsmen's honor is

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<sup>139</sup> The text reads "Ok er Ósvífr tók þetta mál svá þvert, þá fyrirtók Guðrún eigi fyrir sína hönd ok var þó in tregasta í öllu," which means "And when Ósvífr opposed her so strongly in this, then Guðrún for her part did not refuse but was nevertheless most unwilling in all respects." *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 129 quoted in Auerbach, 56.

<sup>140</sup> Osvif says, "If you refuse a man like Bolli many people will say that your answer shows more recklessness than foresight." Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 344, 346, 354, 356.

<sup>141</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 399.

<sup>142</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 388-389, 399, 402, 403.

put before her own. Otherwise, Gudrun ruthlessly uses elements of the Icelandic marriage system to get what she wants. She can divorce Thorvald simply for slapping her, but Gudrun takes the allegations further and ensures that Thorvald's honor suffers as hers does from his slap.<sup>143</sup> Gudrun does not think twice about splitting up Thord and Aud's marriage at the expense of Aud's honor. She also is not concerned with Thorgils' honor when she baits him with the promise of her betrothal if he to helps her sons. Gudrun uses whatever means available to protect her honor in her marriages.

### *The Saga of the Volsungs*

Unlike the previous two sagas, in *The Saga of the Volsungs* women rarely have a say in who they marry. This is probably because the saga is set in the fourth and fifth centuries, much earlier than the setting of *Njal's Saga* and *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Divorce is completely absent from this saga, and women do not betroth themselves or other women. However, there are two women in the saga who are able to choose their husbands. These women, Hjordis and Brynhild, are two of the strongest female characters in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Both women are so wise and beautiful that their fathers value their opinions within the realm of marriage.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* notes that Hjordis is fair and wise. King Sigmund and King Lyngvi both approach Hjordis' father, King Eylimi, for her hand in marriage. King Eylimi lets Hjordis choose her husband between the two kings because of her great wisdom. Hjordis chooses the most famous king, King Sigmund. King Lyngvi becomes angry and vows revenge against the Volsungs and King Eylimi. The two parties

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<sup>143</sup> It was considered a great dishonor to be accused of cross-dressing. For another example see: Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 209- 210, 333.

eventually face off in battle, and both King Sigmund and King Eylimi fall. A pregnant Hjordis stays by Sigmund's side until he dies on the battlefield.<sup>144</sup>

King Eylimi allows Hjordis to choose her husband because she is wise and he has faith in her choice. Hjordis shows a level of concern for her honor when she picks the more famous king to marry. She wants to make the best marriage possible for the sake of her father's honor and her own. Hjordis chooses well, and shows great devotion to her husband even up to the moment of his death. She is pregnant with their son, Sigurd, who proves to be one of the greatest Norse heroes of all time.

Brynhild also has a level of consent in her marriage. After she disobeys her god, Odin, on the battlefield, Odin punishes Brynhild by forcing her to marry. Brynhild makes a counter-vow that she will not marry anyone who knows fear. When Sigurd meets and speaks with Brynhild he says he wants to marry her because she is to his liking, and Brynhild says she prefers to marry Sigurd over any other man.<sup>145</sup> When he learns of Sigurd's infatuation, Brynhild's foster-brother, Alsvið, hints to Sigurd that Brynhild has turned down many men, and that Sigurd should be prepared for disappointment.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, Brynhild turns down Sigurd at first because she is a shield-maiden and it is not fated that they live together because she loves fighting.<sup>147</sup> Despite

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<sup>144</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 52, 54.

<sup>145</sup> Instead of taking a bride from his own people, the daughter of a friendly neighbor, the Hero Lover prefers to go to a foreign land and win a maiden by facing danger and overcoming obstacles. Or, he deliberately chooses the daughter of an enemy and goes bravely to his death for her sake. For more information see: Grace Fleming van Sweringen, "Main Literary types of men in Germanic Hero-Sagas" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 14, no. 2 (1915): 212-225.

<sup>146</sup> "There has yet to be a man that she allows to sit by her or to whom she gives ale to drink. She wants to go warring and win all kinds of fame." The original text reads "leð rúms hjá sér" which means "lets room beside her." The word "rúm" can mean "room", "seat", "space", or "bed." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 74.

<sup>147</sup> Brynhild's claim in this section, "Ek, em skjaldmœr," literally means "I am shield-maiden." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 75.

this assertion, Sigurd swears he will marry her or no other woman, and Brynhild swears likewise.<sup>148</sup>

After Grimhild tricks Sigurd into marrying her daughter Gudrun, Grimhild tells her son, Gunnar, that he is prospering in all matters except that he is not married and suggests that he marry Brynhild.<sup>149</sup> Gunnar says that she is beautiful and he is not unwilling. When Gunnar and his brothers ask Brynhild's father, King Budli, for Brynhild's hand in marriage, he says he is in favor unless Brynhild refuses, because she is very proud and she will only marry the man she wants.<sup>150</sup> Brynhild's foster-father, Heimir, also says that the choice is Brynhild's, and that she will only marry the man who passes through the fire surrounding her hall.<sup>151</sup> Sigurd in Gunnar's form passes through the flames and claims that he has permission from her father and her foster father to marry Brynhild. Even though he has this permission and he rode through the fire and offers great wealth for her hand, the decision is still entirely up to Brynhild. Brynhild reveals that her father once gave her an ultimatum to marry the man she wanted or to lose his wealth and friendship. Brynhild says that all she wants to do is defend the land and be a commander of one-third of King Budli's army. Brynhild consents to marry the man she wants only because she thinks herself powerless to contend with her father.<sup>152</sup>

Even though Odin and her father force Brynhild to marry, she still has some freedom of choice in the matter. The saga claims that Brynhild has this freedom of

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<sup>148</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 67, 71-72, 74-75.

<sup>149</sup> See page 69 for an account of how Grimhild tricks Sigurd into marrying Gudrun.

<sup>150</sup> The original text reads "hann tók því vel, ef hún vill eigi níta, and segir hana svá stóra, at þann ein mann mun hún ega, er hún vill." This literally means "he took this well, if she will not refuse, and says her so much that the one man shall she have who she will." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 80.

<sup>151</sup> The original text reads "Heimir kvað hennar kör vera, hvern hún skal eiga..." which literally means "Heimir said of her choic to be who she shall have/marry." The word "eiga" can mean "have" or "marry." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 80.

<sup>152</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 80-81, 85.

choice because of her wisdom, but it is more likely that this choice echoes the Christian time period of the written manuscript. King Budli allows her the right to choose her husband, and Odin allows her to vow only to marry a fearless man. The fact that Brynhild can make a counter-vow to Odin, the most powerful of the Norse gods and her personal sovereign as a shield-maiden, shows the measure of power and authority Brynhild has over her own fate. Brynhild's greatest desire is to be a warrior. Since she must marry because of stipulations from her father and punishment from Odin, Brynhild makes her own standards for her suitors. These standards are based on nearly impossible feats and qualities. All men know fear, and no man can ride through fire without some type of supernatural aid. By making these tremendous requirements of a suitor, Brynhild tries to ensure that she will never have to marry. If she does not ever marry, then Brynhild is free to be a warrior and uphold her personal desires and honor.

### Conclusion

There is evidence from three different Icelandic sagas that protecting personal honor within the realm of marriage was an acceptable part of the female code of honor in medieval Iceland. In *Njal's Saga* Hallgerd protects her personal honor in marriage by betrothing herself and her daughter. Hildigunn also upholds her own honor when she refuses to marry beneath her personal standards. In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, Jorunn, Melkorka, and Thorgerd Egilsdottir all decide their own marriages and protect themselves from a dishonorable union. Gudrun Osvifsdottir protects her honor through divorce after her husband mistreats her. Gudrun also uses marriage as bait to goad Thorgils Hollason into helping her complete revenge for Bolli. This same revenge upholds her sons' honor and her honor as Bolli's widow. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*,

Hjordis and Brynhild both choose their husbands because of their remarkable wisdom. Hjoridis' father allows her to choose between two kings even though it undoubtedly would bring war against him. Brynhild's father and Odin allow her to set her own extreme standards for a husband, and she turns down many unwanted suitors that could bring shame to her or hinder her desire to be a warrior.

These examples make the argument that women in these sagas are able to protect their personal honor through their own resources within the realm of marriage. Consent, divorce, and trickery are major ways within the marriage system that these women exploit to defend what they consider most important. Whether it is a happy marriage, revenge, or warfare, all of these women have their own personal agendas and codes of honor to uphold and protect through whatever means necessary. Though limited in their resources, marriage appears to be one effective instrument that Icelandic women could utilize to their favor.

### CHAPTER THREE: WOMEN'S CODE OF HONOR WITHIN THE SUPERNATURAL

Supernatural events within the Icelandic sagas expose the fine line between what distinguished honor and dishonor for women in medieval Iceland. In these sagas, women participate in supernatural events more frequently than men. The sources often describe women who have psychic abilities or are elements of Old Norse religion, such as Norns or Valkyries, in respectful terms. In contrast, the sources often describe women who practice sorcery and witchcraft as cowardly monsters. Black sorcery was a source of dishonor for both men and women. However, women followed a much stricter code of honor than men within the supernatural, because due to the patriarchal ideals of medieval Christianity it was much easier for women to fall into disgrace than men.

The Icelandic sagas are a literary convention, reflecting then-current ecclesiastical ideas about the proper place of women in society. During pagan times, Icelandic society regarded women highly for religious reasons. Old Norse religion associated women with wisdom and magic. These women also allegedly possessed special links with nature and supernatural sources of power. There are more than fifteen different terms for female sorcerers recorded in the sources.<sup>153</sup> The most prominent representations of women in Old Norse religion are Sibyls, Valkyries, and Norns. There is also a separate category of Norse pagan gods called the *Vanir* who are mostly female in nature.<sup>154</sup> The *Vanir*

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<sup>153</sup> National Museum of Natural History, *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh and Elizabeth I. Ward (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 71.

<sup>154</sup> Judith Jesch notes that some of the Norse goddesses interact with the male world of war instead of being passive victims or causes of conflict. Jesch, 138.

promote kinship values, and pagan Icelandic women revered them highly within the privacy of their homes.<sup>155</sup>

Most of these pagan religious women in the sources are powerful agents of Odin, who is master of the “female” magic of *seiður*, which is a fundamental source of his power. Although Odin’s cult *Æsir* is mostly masculine, and Valhalla is a totally male world, Odin often relies on women such as Valkyries and Norns to carry out most of his work on the material plane. Valkyries in particular are abundant in the Icelandic sagas doing the work of Odin. The ultimate destiny of a Valkyrie/shield-maiden is to marry. Pagan Icelanders believed that these agents of Odin were highly valuable as wives because sons of these women could inherit their proud, confident, and wise qualities.<sup>156</sup>

While pagan Icelanders did not doubt the wisdom and power of women, Iceland’s conversion to Christianity held many implications for women within the supernatural realm. Iceland’s new Christian religion demonized heathenism along with magic and sorcery, which in turn tainted the many representations of powerful pagan women. Christian saints replaced the female goddesses and rendered women comparatively powerless within the new religion. Women now only participated passively in worship. Medieval Christianity valued generosity and piety in women and undermined the tradition of women as transmitters of knowledge and power. If women did not fit into the new Christian ideal, then they suffered the bulk of the blame for activities that churchmen considered inappropriate and evil.<sup>157</sup>

In addition to the changing religious climate of Iceland during the writing of the Icelandic sagas, new Icelandic laws known as the *Grágás* became a part of the public

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<sup>155</sup> Sawyer and Sawyer, 191-192, 195-196.

<sup>156</sup> Sawyer and Sawyer, 194, 196.

<sup>157</sup> Sawyer and Sawyer, 196, 199-200, 210, 212.

political and legal atmosphere in the twelfth through the thirteenth centuries. Christian beliefs and values permeate these early Icelandic laws, especially concerning the practice of witchcraft and heathenism. By law, Icelander could only believe in the Christian God and His saints. Icelandic law condemned and punished the worship of any other being with lesser outlawry. The use of spells, witchcraft, and magic, also resulted in lesser outlawry. While the law punished exhibition of any superstition or heathenism with lesser outlawry, the penalty for practicing black sorcery was even more serious. Anyone caught using the words or magic of black sorcery to bring about the death or sickness of any living being, including animals, became a full outlaw. Full outlawry cast the offender out of Icelandic society, deprived of rights and property, and eligible to be killed by anyone with impunity.<sup>158</sup>

*Grágás I* clearly demonstrates that there was not an iota of tolerance for any kind of witchcraft and heathenism in Christian Iceland. Women were subject to the same penalty as men for any departure from the law, including the practicing of black sorcery, witchcraft, and heathenism.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, female honor and male honor could both suffer due to illicit activities and anti-Christian sentiment during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In fact, because of the afore mentioned hostile Christian climate toward women who did not function within the prescribed Christian ideal, women were at an even higher risk than men for damage to their honor due to involvement in witchcraft and sorcery.

The parts women played in the supernatural were imperative to the multi-faceted system of honor for women in medieval Iceland. When in these Icelandic sagas shape-

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<sup>158</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 246.

<sup>159</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 220.

shifting occurs with frequency and ease and magic spells can be for good or evil, it is because at this time audiences were willing to accept these phenomena with some degree of credulity.<sup>160</sup> Women participate within the supernatural in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, *Eirik the Red's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Njal's Saga*. In many cases, Icelandic Christian law had a great effect on the writers of the Icelandic sagas and their portrayals of supernatural events.

### *The Saga of the Volsungs*

The events in *The Saga of the Volsungs* take place in the fourth and fifth centuries, although an anonymous author wrote the saga in the thirteenth century. This saga exhibits a plethora of supernatural events and activities. This may be due to the early setting of the saga, and it is also one of the most beloved and imaginative tales in Icelandic literary history. This saga portrays women as both respectable and evil participants in supernatural events, whereas the saga almost always represents men in honorable terms. *The Saga of the Volsungs* particularly describes supernatural female roles within Old Norse religion, black sorcery, witchcraft, dreams, and psychic abilities.

Throughout *The Saga of the Volsungs* Odin is a prevalent force. It is Odin's wife, Frigg, and his *óskmær* that provide Rerir and his wife with their son, Volsung.<sup>161</sup> Volsung grows within his mother for six years before he is cut from her womb and comes out alive and well-grown. Odin's *óskmær* who gives the apple of fertility to Rerir and his wife is actually Hljod, the daughter of the giant Hrimnir. Later in the saga, Hljod becomes Volsung's wife and Signy's mother. The fact that female forces bring about the

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<sup>160</sup> Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1973), 119.

<sup>161</sup> "Óskmær" means "wish-maiden" and is a rare term describing one of the many supernatural women associated with Odin. The term may come from the word "óskamær" which has a meaning similar to that of "stepdaughter." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 36.

supernatural event of Volsung's conception and birth is indicative of the major importance of women in Norse pagan religion.<sup>162</sup>

Hljod's supernatural powers appear to transfer to her son Sigmund and her daughter Signy. The twin siblings constantly face supernatural meetings, beliefs, and dilemmas. The marriage of Signy to King Siggeir is one event that displays some of the supernatural connections of the Volsung family. At her wedding, Signy says that she knows through her own foresight and *kynfylgja* that the marriage to King Siggeir will end badly. In Old Norse religion, *Kynfylgja* is a female family guardian spirit who has ways of connecting with members of the associated family as this *kynfylgja* does with Signy over her doomed marriage to King Siggeir.<sup>163</sup>

Sigmund has a different encounter with the supernatural at his sister's wedding. Odin appears in disguise and thrusts his sword into Barnstock, the tree in the Volsung family's dining hall, and claims to give his sword to whoever can pull it from Barnstock. Sigmund easily pulls the sword from Barnstock claiming it as his own and shaming King Siggeir for not being the one to obtain the sword. The sword becomes known by the name "Gram" and has a legacy that lasts throughout the saga.<sup>164</sup> In contrast to his sister's contact with the female family spirit, Sigmund appears to have contact on more than one occasion with Odin himself. Odin bequeaths a supernatural weapon to Sigmund, but he does not give anything to Signy. This may have been due to the fact that in thirteenth-century Iceland women could not bear weapons.<sup>165</sup> However, Odin's Valkyries still dress and fight like men in *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

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<sup>162</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 37, 112.

<sup>163</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 39, 114.

<sup>164</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 38-39, 54.

<sup>165</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 317.

Aside from Signy's foresight and Sigmund's magic sword, the twins also come into contact with much darker elements of the supernatural. In particular, both experience the power and potential evil of shape-shifting. After King Volsung and his men fall to King Siggeir in battle, King Volsung's ten sons are bound and held captive in the woods. The first night that Signy's brothers are in the woods, a large and grim-looking she-wolf comes at midnight to the stocks. She bites one of the brothers to death and eats him. She comes eight more nights in a row and eats one of the brothers each night until all but Sigmund are dead. On the tenth night when the she-wolf comes for Sigmund, Signy instructs her brother to fill his face and mouth with honey so that the she-wolf would lick it off. While the she-wolf licks inside Sigmund's mouth, Sigmund bites the she-wolf's tongue, rips it out, and kills her. The saga suggests that the she-wolf is King Siggeir's mother, who assumes this shape through witchcraft and sorcery in which she is a skilled practitioner.<sup>166</sup>

Signy experiences shape-shifting from a different perspective than her brother. Instead of being pursued by a shape-shifter, Signy becomes a shape-shifter in order to get what she wants. What Signy wants is to bear a son who is strong enough and worthy enough to help her and Sigmund avenge their father and brothers. After failing more than once to produce a worthy son by King Siggeir, Signy resorts to sorcery to conceive a powerful son. Specifically, Signy trades places with a sorceress and then visits Sigmund's *jarðhús* and sleeps with him. This incestuous union made possible through sorcery brings about the birth of Signy and Sigmund's son, Sinfjotli, who proves to be the perfect candidate to help Signy and Sigmund with their vengeance.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 41.

<sup>167</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 43.

The separate encounters of Signy and Sigmund with shape-shifting relates some interesting insight into women participating in black sorcery and what this meant for female honor. The saga portrays Sigmund honorably in his encounter with the ravenous she-wolf. He outsmarts her and kills her, thus avenging his nine brothers that she ate. However, the saga presents Signy in a situation that is precarious to her honor as a female. Although Sinfjotli brings his family and father honor, the actual process that Signy goes through to conceive Sinfjotli is dishonorable. Resorting to sorcery and incest were illicit activities punishable by full outlawry and even death in Iceland during the thirteenth century.<sup>168</sup> According to medieval Icelandic law, Signy commits major incest. Major incest included sexual relations with kin as distant as second cousins.<sup>169</sup>

The argument that perhaps Signy's actions were acceptable for the fourth and fifth centuries has its problems. Concerning incest before Christian regulation and influence, Jenny Jochens claims that "prohibiting sexual relations within the immediate nuclear family is a near universal human phenomenon, and it was presumably found among Nordic people."<sup>170</sup> This statement reflects an ancient aversion against incest.

Sigmund's defeat of an evil sorceress, and Signy's fraternization with a sorceress likely received different responses from medieval Icelandic readers concerning the honor of these actions. Sigmund's honor was not compromised in the minds of Christian and law-abiding Icelanders, because he kills the sorceress and avenges his brothers. Signy, in contrast, consorts with a sorceress, acts as a sorceress, and commits major incest with her twin brother without his knowledge. Although there is no open condemnation for

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<sup>168</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* (K: 162), 81. Major incest with affines or with kin carries a penalty of full outlawry.

<sup>169</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* (K 144; Ib p. 29), 54-55.

<sup>170</sup> Jochens, 22-23.

Signy's actions in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, her honor in the mind of a thirteenth-century Icelander was certainly compromised.

The next Volsung to experience supernatural events is Hjordis and Sigmund's son, Sigurd. Throughout his appearance in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Sigurd seems to be in Odin's favor. Like his father, Sigurd receives a powerful gift from Odin. Instead of a magical sword, Sigurd receives a magical steed called "Grani" descended from Odin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. Sigurd also reforges Odin's magical sword, "Gram," which Odin apparently has no qualms with Sigurd wielding. Odin also steps in and saves Sigurd's life by reversing Regin's treacherous ill advice before Sigurd's battle with Fafnir the dragon. Odin's protection of Sigurd and Sigurd's success in slaying the dragon Fafnir provides readers of this saga with another image of male honor benefitting from contact with the supernatural.<sup>171</sup>

Killing the dragon, Fafnir, not only gives Sigurd great honor, but also allows Sigurd to understand the speech of birds after eating Fafnir's heart. The birds lead Sigurd to the shield-maiden Brynhild and more encounters with the supernatural.<sup>172</sup> Brynhild has her own encounter with Odin when he stabs her with a sleeping-thorn for killing the king he had promised victory. As her punishment, Odin forbids Brynhild to ever have another victory and requires that she marry. This indicates that Brynhild is likely one of Odin's Valkyries. This is an interesting notion because if Brynhild is indeed one of Odin's Valkyries and she disobeyed him, this proves that Odin's female agents on the material plane had some level of free will. If this was true, these females also answered to a code of honor just like any other woman. By disobeying Odin, Brynhild suffers

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<sup>171</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 56, 63.

<sup>172</sup> Birds are usually associated with Odin and his ravens. Jesch, 127.

dishonor not because she dresses and acts like a man, but because she does not follow divine orders and predetermined fate.<sup>173</sup>

Brynhild may suffer dishonor for her insubordination, but she gains honor through her supernatural wisdom. Brynhild possesses psychic knowledge and knows about virtually everything. After Brynhild teaches Sigurd about runes of every kind, Sigurd seeks more counsel from Brynhild because he believes that there is no other woman in the world as wise. Brynhild also tells men and women their future and interprets their dreams, which adds to her honor as a wise woman.<sup>174</sup>

Women in *The Saga of the Volsungs* are more sensitive to having prophetic dreams than men. In some cases, women receive warnings in their dreams that they try to relate to their husbands who are the ones in danger. Kostbera implores her husband, Hogni, to listen to her dream of evil and destruction caused by King Atli. Even though the saga claims that Kostbera often has premonitions of evil, Hogni dismisses her vision and thus seals his fate and death at the hands of King Atli. Gunnar's wife, Glaumvor, also has dreams of evil and destruction caused by King Atli. Gunnar dismisses her dream, and he also meets his end at the hands of King Atli.<sup>175</sup> Women's dreams are an interesting part of female honor in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. While Kostbera and Glaumvor have dreams that come true, their dreams both bring death. These morbid predictions are similar to the duties of Odin's Norns.<sup>176</sup> By having dreams and premonitions that predict men's fates, women in *The Saga of the Volsungs* appear to

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<sup>173</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 66-67.

<sup>174</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 68-71.

<sup>175</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 98-99.

<sup>176</sup> Odin's Norns control the fates of men. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 114.

possess some of the same capabilities and honor associated with women in the service of Odin.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* depicts women both as honorable and dishonorable participants in the supernatural world. There is one sorceress in this saga that there is no question of her dishonor. The saga describes Grimhild as a grim-minded woman well-versed in magic.<sup>177</sup> Grimhild wants Sigurd for her daughter Gudrun because of his wealth and fame, even though he loves Brynhild. To get her way, Grimhild gives Sigurd bewitched ale that makes him forget all about Brynhild. Even worse, Grimhild teaches Sigurd and her son, Gunnar, how to exchange shapes so that Gunnar can get through Brynhild's fire and take her maiden-head in Sigurd's form. Grimhild then uses witchcraft and sorcery along with Gunnar and his men to bewitch her other son Guttworm into killing Sigurd. Grimhild's persuasions and witchcraft make her son Guttworm so violent, fierce, and relentless and he kills Sigurd in his bed.<sup>178</sup> Gudrun awakes to the horror and eventually finds out that it was her own kin who killed her husband. Once again Grimhild resorts to witchcraft and forces Gudrun to drink "an evil potion" that makes her forget all of her grievances against her brothers.<sup>179</sup> Grimhild's actions within the supernatural are the most dishonorable of any woman in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. This is because instead of facing people or admitting to her faults, Grimhild simply brews a

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<sup>177</sup> The saga's author describes Grimhild as "Grimhildr var grimhuguð kona," which literally means "Grimhild was fierce-minded or grim-hearted woman." The word "grimmr" can mean either "fierce" or "grim" and the word "hugr" can mean either "mind" or "heart." Grimhild is later described as "fjölkunngu," which means "skilled in magic." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 76.

<sup>178</sup> The original text reads "ok við þessa fæðslu varð hann svá æfr ok ájarn ok allt sman ok fortölur Grimhildar, at hann hét at gera þetta verk." This literally means and with this feeding he was so violent and eager and all together with Grimhild's exhortations, that he promised to do this work." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 90.

<sup>179</sup> The saga calls the drink "meinsamligan drykk." The compound *meinsamligan* comes from the two words "mein" and "samr" which together mean "violent" or "harmful." Heimskringla. "Völsunga saga." Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 94.

potion or casts a spell that gives her the results she wants. Brynhild claims that “there is no woman worse or more cowardly” than Grimhild.<sup>180</sup> The real source of Grimhild’s dishonor lies with her cowardice and abuse of supernatural elements.<sup>181</sup>

*The Saga of the Volsungs* represents women both positively and negatively within the supernatural. In this saga, females gain honor through supernatural elements by assisting Odin in his quests on earth, possessing psychic abilities and dreams, and by their supernatural wisdom. Women achieve grave dishonor in this saga through the abuse of supernatural elements. Shape-shifting to kill helpless men, shape-shifting to deceitfully commit incest, disobeying Odin, and using potions and spells to achieve goals dishonestly are all ways women in this saga fall into dishonor within the supernatural realm. While this saga rarely depicts men as abusing the supernatural, the saga portrays women on more than one occasion using witchcraft to gain their personal and often evil desires. Therefore, within *The Saga of the Volsungs*, it is not the use of supernatural elements that causes dishonor for a woman but her abuse of those elements. As long as these women use their supernatural talents to embrace fate rather than manipulate it, their honor is untarnished.

### *The Vinland Sagas*

Both *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik’s Saga* depict events that occur during the tenth and eleventh centuries, but the two manuscripts date back to different times. Each saga includes events which give evidence about the honor and dishonor associated with

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<sup>180</sup> The original text reads “ok eigum vér Grímhildi illt at launa. Henni finnst engi kona huglausari né verri.” Brynhild literally says “and we have Grimhild to reward evilly. No woman to be found more heartless nor worse than she.” Heimskringla. “Völsunga saga.” Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 85.

<sup>181</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 75, 78-80, 85, 89-90, 94.

the supernatural. Interestingly, the Christian *Eirik's Saga* holds not only more supernatural elements, but also more details about these events.

*Grænlinga Saga* does not have any examples of women using or abusing witchcraft. What the saga does offer is insight into how one woman handles various paranormal events. Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir is widely regarded as a heroine in Icelandic literature. She is wise, beautiful, kind, and wide-traveled. Her honor is virtually unparalleled by any other woman represented in the sagas. It is important to scrutinize her encounters with the supernatural, because Gudrid's treatment of these events is informative of what was honorable and dishonorable conduct when faced with paranormal activity in medieval Iceland.

The first major supernatural event in *Grænlinga Saga* deals with a sickness that infects and kills certain people from Gudrid's village. Thorstein the Black's wife, Grimhild, and Gudrid's husband, Thorstein Eiriksson, both catch the disease and are bedridden in the same room. Grimhild is the first to die from the mysterious disease. After some time passes, Grimhild's corpse comes back from the dead and raises itself on its elbow and pushes its feet out of bed and gropes for her shoes. Thorstein Eiriksson and Gudrid are both in the room when this happens, but as soon as Thorstein the Black returns to the room Grimhild falls back down into her bed dead. Thorstein Eiriksson soon dies from the same disease that kills Grimhild. Gudrid is so distraught that Thorstein the Black picks her up in his arms and sits down with her on his lap.<sup>182</sup> He promises to do whatever it takes to make her happy again, when Thorstein Eiriksson's

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<sup>182</sup> The original text reads “þá tók Þorsteinn bóndi Guðrið af stólinum í fang sér ok settist í annan bekkinn með hana gegnt líki Þorsteins ok talði um fyrir henna marga vega ok huggaði hana ok hét henna því...” Literally this means “then took Thorstein Gudrid from the seats to hold her and sit on another bench with her against Thorstein's form and spoke about honorable and courageous marriages for her, and he promised her this.” Icelandic Saga Database. “Grænlinga saga.”

corpse rises in his bed and asks “where is Gudrid?”<sup>183</sup> Thorstein the Black advises Gudrid not to answer the corpse, and he instead asks the corpse what it wants. Thorstein Eiriksson wants to tell Gudrid that he has found peace in another place and does not want her to be dismal over his death. He also tells Gudrid her destiny of a long and adventurous life including remarriage, residence in Iceland, and a pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>184</sup>

Shortly after her husband’s death, Gudrid marries Karlsefni and gives birth to a son, Snorri. One day while she is sitting by her son’s cradle, a shadow falls across the door and a pale, large-eyed woman wearing a black tunic appears in Gudrid’s doorway. The ghostly figure asks Gudrid her name, and when Gudrid asks the ghost for hers she replies that it is Gudrid as well. The human Gudrid is about to offer the specter a seat, but the woman vanishes after a nearby crash. The crash was over some Vinland natives trying to steal weapons from Karlsefni’s men. No one sees the ghostly woman except for Gudrid, and the figure does not appear again in the saga.<sup>185</sup>

These supernatural events surrounding Gudrid Thorbjarnarsdottir in *Grænlandinga Saga* are interesting because Gudrid is the receiver of these events, not the perpetrator. Spirits beyond the material plane visit Gudrid, but none of these spirits threaten her in any way. On the contrary, the spirit of her husband Thorstein Eiriksson gives her good fortune, and the woman who visits her home could possibly be there to protect Gudrid and Snorri from the dangers of Karlsefni’s men and the natives who were close by. Thorstein Eiriksson’s spirit may also have been trying to protect Gudrid from an unwanted advance from Thorstein the Black. It is after Thorstein the Black takes a distraught Gudrid into his lap that Thorstein Eiriksson rises from the dead and gives

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<sup>183</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 63.

<sup>184</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 63-64.

<sup>185</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 66.

Gudrid good news about her future. This may be to ensure that Gudrid does not make any rash decisions and marry a man she does not want out of grief. It appears these spirits mean only to protect Gudrid's honor and give her hope. Gudrid also exhibits honorable behavior, because she remains calm during these paranormal encounters and does not resort to any weak behavior such as hysterics or fainting. Icelandic sagas particularly note it as honorable behavior when a woman bears her emotions well.<sup>186</sup>

*Eirik's Saga* also includes two supernatural events that involve Gudrid Thorbjarnarsdottir. Whereas *Grænlandinga Saga* does not have any women who actually practice witchcraft, *Eirik's Saga* includes detailed information about the sorceress, Thorbjorg. The saga describes Thorbjorg as a prophetess, known as the "Little Sybil."<sup>187</sup> Those who are most curious about their own fortunes or the season's prospects often invite Thorbjorg to feasts. One night Thorkel of Herjolfsness, the chief farmer in the district, invites Thorbjorg to a feast at his house. A male escort comes for Thorbjorg that night, and a high-seat is made ready for her at the table. Thorbjorg shows up elaborately dressed, with a belt of touchwood from which hung a large pouch, in which she kept the charms she needed for her witchcraft.<sup>188</sup> When Thorbjorg arrives everyone offers her respectful greetings "to which she responded according to her opinion of each person."<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> This was also considered honorable behavior for a man. Olaf the Peacock and Hrefna both bear the news of Kjartan's death with dignity. Gudrun Osvifsdottir was greatly stricken by Thorkel's death but bore her grief with dignity. The author of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* comments on how each took the news honorably. For more information see: Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 373, 374, 418.

<sup>187</sup> The original text reads "sú kona var þarí byggð, er Þorbjörg hét. Hon var spákona ok var kölluð lítil völv." This literally means "the woman was there dwelling, who was called Thorbjorg. She was prophetess and was called little witch." "Spákona" is a compound of the words "spá" which means "prophecy" and "kona" which means "woman." Icelandic Saga Database. "Eiríks saga rauða."

<sup>188</sup> Since *Eirik's Saga* was written during the thirteenth century, Thorbjorg's possession of these stones would have been against Christian law. The actual event timing was also meant to be after the conversion as both Gudrid and her father Thorbjorn show an aversion to participating in such pagan activities. For more information see: Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 39

<sup>189</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 81-82.

Later the next day, in order to grant Thorkel's request of prediction of the season, Thorbjorg asks for the assistance of women who know the spells needed for performing the witchcraft. At first it appears that there are no such women available. Then Gudrid Thorbjarnarsdottir claims, "I am neither a sorceress nor a witch, but when I was in Iceland my foster-mother Halldis taught me spells which she called Warlock-songs," she quickly adds that "this is the sort of knowledge and ceremony that I want nothing to do with, for I am a Christian."<sup>190</sup> Thorbjorg claims that Gudrid could be of great help to others over this, and not be any the worse a woman for it. But it is only after Thorkel puts pressure on Gudrid that she consents to participate in the ceremony. Gudrid sings the song and Thorbjorg sees spirits and the future. After the ceremony ends, Thorbjorg thanks Gudrid by telling her fortune which ends with a bright light over her progeny. Thorbjorg's predictions about the weather and Gudrid's future ultimately come true, because "there were few things that did not turn out as she prophesied."<sup>191</sup>

This supernatural event featuring the sorceress Thorbjorg and the Christian Gudrid is informative concerning the honorable and dishonorable participation in witchcraft after the Christianization of Iceland. Thorbjorg is well-dressed, offered the high-seat at many feasts, and her visions are often correct. Thorbjorg also appears to have great power over men such as Thorkel who esteem her predictions about the farming season.<sup>192</sup> However, Gudrid's comments against witchcraft and her father Thorbjorn's blatant refusal to remain in the house during the pagan ceremony show that

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<sup>190</sup> Here Gudrid's response proves that the events taking place were against Christian law. Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 83.

<sup>191</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 82-83.

<sup>192</sup> The power of witches over the weather was a chief reason why they were held in such profound respect. For more information see: Schlauch, 121.

not everyone respected the sorcery.<sup>193</sup> Thorbjorg's pagan image clashes with the morals of the two devout Christians at the feast, Gudrid and her father. The author of this saga does not particularly depict Thorbjorg as evil or dishonorable, but there is considerable attention given to the fact that Gudrid participates in the sorcery against her will, as Thorbjorg resorts to Thorkel to force Gudrid to participate in the ceremony.<sup>194</sup>

Thirteenth-century Icelandic law forbid forcing a person to participate in illicit activities. Therefore, Thorbjorg is an anti-Christian force who makes Gudrid participate in an act of witchcraft that goes against her religion and her code of honor.

*Eirik's Saga* also retells the supernatural event of Grimhild and Thorstein Eiriksson's return from death. There are some differences in this account from the earlier *Grænlandinga Saga*. Sigríð is the name of Thorstein the Black's more attractive wife compared to the enormous Grimhild in *Grænlandinga Saga*. Like her counterpart Grimhild, Sigríð also rises from the dead in this saga but instead of groping for her shoes, she tries to climb into bed with Thorstein Eiriksson who is also sick with the mysterious disease.<sup>195</sup> Instead of Sigríð falling back into bed and dying, this time it takes driving an axe into Sigríð's chest to stop her. It is not long after this episode that Thorstein Eiriksson dies from the same disease and rises from the dead summoning Gudrid as he does in *Grænlandinga Saga*. This time when Gudrid asks Thorstein the Black if she

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<sup>193</sup> The original text reads "þá var sent eftir Þorbirni, því at hann vildi eigi heima vera, meðan slík hindrvithi var framið." This literally means "then Thorbjorn was sent after, that he for this reason would not be home within such superstition/heathenism was forward." The term "hindrvithi" can mean either "superstition" or "heathenism" both of which were against Christian beliefs. Icelandic Saga Database. "Eiríks saga rauða."

<sup>194</sup> Thorbjorg says to Gudrid "But I shall leave it to Thorkel to provide whatever is required." Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 83.

<sup>195</sup> The original text describes Sigríð as "undir klæðin hjá honum," which literally means "under the clothing/garment beside of him." The term "klæðin" can mean either "clothing" or "garment." Sigríð is obviously under some sort of cover that is also over Thorstein as she is right beside him. Icelandic Saga Database. "Eiríks saga rauða."

should answer her husband's corpse, he says that it is Gudrid's decision if she wants to answer him. Gudrid chooses to answer her husband because she believes her Christian God will protect her.<sup>196</sup> As with *Grænlandinga Saga*, Thorstein Eiriksson tells Gudrid of her prosperous destiny, and then warns her against marrying a Greenlander.<sup>197</sup>

This account of Sigrid and Thorstein Eiriksson's return from death is a product of a later time.<sup>198</sup> This is seen through Gudrid's piety and her greater level of free-will. Thorstein the Black allows Gudrid to make her own decision whether or not to answer her husband's corpse instead of instructing her to remain silent while he takes on the dangerous task of responding to the undead man. This may have been due to what Jenny Jochens discusses as the privilege of consent that Christianity awarded women.<sup>199</sup> Although this mostly applied to a woman's say in a Christian marriage, it was also an extension of free-will among Norse women. If a woman had the right of consent to who she married, then she likely had the free-will to answer to her husband in a case such as this. If Thorstein the Black had denied Gudrid the right to answer her husband's corpse, it would have insulted her honor as a Christian woman protected by God.

*Eirik's Saga* depicts Sigrid as a beautiful woman whose corpse attempts to climb into bed with Gudrid's husband. Thorstein the Black brutally stops her by driving an axe into her chest. This violent display is likely for the benefit of Gudrid and Sigrid's honor.

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<sup>196</sup> Examples of Christian piety are abundant in *Eirik's Saga* as opposed to *Grænlandinga Saga*. This is most likely due to the fact that *Eirik's Saga* was written as a deliberate revision of *Grænlandinga Saga* to include a better account of the Norse discovery of America, and to include more Christian elements which are virtually absent for the earlier and more primitive *Grænlandinga Saga*. Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 34, 37.

<sup>197</sup> Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, 89-90.

<sup>198</sup> It must be observed that it is the actual body of the dead man which returns to haunt and plague living people, not a subtle and imponderable spirit. Icelandic ghosts are very solid; very physical. In order to "lay" them, someone has to fight with them and kill them afresh. These violently active corpses are known as draugar. Thus the strange part played by animated corpses in Icelandic sagas, and even in modern folk-tales, preserves a very ancient point of view with surprising fidelity. For more information see: Schlauch, 140.

<sup>199</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 17.

The penalty for adultery in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland was full outlawry.<sup>200</sup> Even though the events of *Eirik's Saga* take place in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the writer of the saga lived in thirteenth-century Iceland and likely included some sensitivity to current Icelandic law in this revised tale. Therefore, Thorstein the Black protects the honor of Sigrid by stopping her involuntarily committing adultery through her corpse climbing into bed with Gudrid's husband. This also protects Gudrid's honor, because her husband also does not commit adultery with not only another woman, but a dead woman.

The main difference concerning female honor between the two sagas is that in *Grænlandinga Saga* supernatural forces protect Gudrid's honor, and in *Eirik's Saga* supernatural forces assault Gudrid's honor. Both sagas depict Gudrid Thorbjanarsdottir as a wise and beautiful woman. She does not appear to achieve any real dishonor in either saga, even when she participates in Thorbjorg's witchcraft. This is because she is forced to participate and does not choose to do so of her own Christian free-will. She does achieve honor by remaining calm, collected, and fearless in the face of supernatural events, whether through her faith in her Christian god or through her own personal strength.

#### *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*

*The Saga of the People of Laxardal* is a saga filled with strong female characters, but the occurrence of supernatural elements is much less frequent than in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, and *Eirik's Saga*. There is only one particular incident directly involving sorcery in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and Kotkel, his wife Grima, and their sons are the perpetrators. Otherwise, the bulk of the supernatural elements within the saga deal exclusively with dreams and psychic visions.

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<sup>200</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* 70-71.

*The Saga of the People of Laxardal* condemns the practice of witchcraft and sorcery as dishonorable and unpopular. The saga demonstrates this in the treatment of Kotkel and his family. Kotkel and his clan live at Urdir in Skalmarfjord where their presence is anything but welcome. It does not take long for their witchcraft to attract angry attention. Gudrun Osvifsdottir's mother-in-law, Ingunn, comes from her farm at Skalmarnes to visit her son, Thord. She says Kotkel and his wife and sons are making her life miserable by stealing her livestock and practicing sorcery.<sup>201</sup> Thord does not waste time in traveling to Kotkel to address this horrible offense. Thord charges Kotkel's family with theft and sorcery, an offense punishable by full outlawry.<sup>202</sup>

In retaliation, Kotkel's family mounts a high platform for witchcraft and chant powerful incantations of sorcery, creating a great blizzard. Because of the weather, Thord and his companions drown on the ferry taking them back to Tjaldanes from Skalmarnes. The news of this event spread. Men capable of such sorcery as Kotkel and his family were truly evil by medieval Icelandic values.<sup>203</sup> These events lead to the death of Kotkel and his wife. Hrut and Olaf set out with fifteen others and stone Kotkel and Grima to death.<sup>204</sup>

The episode involving Kotkel's clan and their black sorcery indicates the code of honor that both men and women follow concerning the practice of witchcraft in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. Both Kotkel and Grima are equally responsible and punished by death for their use of black sorcery. In medieval Iceland, honorable men and women condemned the use of witchcraft and sought the death of those who abused human life

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<sup>201</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 336.

<sup>202</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 39.

<sup>203</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 337.

<sup>204</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 337, 340-341.

through the means of sorcery. Gudrid and Ingunn are two women in this scenario who exhibit zero tolerance for black sorcery. Ingunn is intent on having Kotkel and his clan answer for their sorcery that makes her life miserable. Later in the saga, Gudrid is even more eager to bring about the death of Kotkel and his clan for their witchcraft that kills her husband. The actions of these two prominent women display the honorable way of handling the illicit use of supernatural elements in a society that found it unpopular, dishonorable, and punishable by death.

Aside from Kotkel and his family, the remainder of the supernatural elements within *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* involves women and supernatural visions. Fortune-telling and wisdom are qualities highly valued in both men and women in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*.<sup>205</sup> However, dreams are the medium through which women act in the supernatural the most in this saga. On a couple of occasions, women come to men in this saga as violent and angry spirits. The first example is Olaf the Peacock's dream of an angry woman who is the spirit of the mother of the ox he once killed. The woman is furious that Olaf killed her son, and in return condemns his favorite son to die.<sup>206</sup> The next occasion where an angry and violent woman comes to a man in a dream is An's dream of a horrible woman eviscerating him and replacing his entrails with twigs.<sup>207</sup> Kjartan and the other men with An make fun of his dream and call An "twig-belly" as a joke. Aud (Breeches-Aud) argues that An's dream is serious and nothing to joke about and warns Kjartan of the dangers on the road ahead. Kjartan refuses to listen

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<sup>205</sup> Gest Oddleifsson and Gudrun Osvifdottir gained considerable honor from telling men their fortunes and interpreting dreams. For more information see: Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 328, 330, 413.

<sup>206</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 326.

<sup>207</sup> "A horrible-looking woman approached me and tugged me sharply out of bed. She had a cleaver in one hand and a wooden meat tray in the other. Placing the cleaver on my chest, she slit me open right down the front, took out all my entrails and put in twigs instead. The she went off." Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 368.

to such nonsense and claims that he will continue on his way. Aud's warning is prophetic as Kjartan and his men walk right into their deaths at the hands of Bolli and his men.<sup>208</sup>

An dies along with Kjartan and the others, but he rises from the dead with the aid of the same woman in his previous dream. An dreams that the woman comes back and removes the twigs from his belly, replaces his bowls, and thus brings him back to life. The people keeping watch over the bodies are frightened at the sight of An alive, but he speaks to them claiming that in the name of God he was never dead but unconscious.<sup>209</sup> The woman in An's dream proves to be a protective spirit rather than the vengeful woman who comes to Olaf in his dream. The horrible woman in An's dream is likely an agent sent from God to protect An and make it possible for him to avenge the murders of Kjartan and the others. This dream woman was likely an attempt by the author to Christianize a pagan element in the oral tradition of this saga. Aud's role in this scenario is ambiguous because it is uncertain whether or not Kjartan and his men would have survived if they had simply heeded her warning and brought more men on their journey.<sup>210</sup>

Gudrun Osvifdottir is another woman in this saga involved in the supernatural. Towards the end of the saga, Gudrun sees a vision of a ghost in the churchyard. This ghost attempts to relay some news to Gudrun, but she replies saying: "keep silent about

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<sup>208</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 370-372.

<sup>209</sup> "But An spoke to them saying, "Fear not, I tell you, in God's name. I was alive and in my right mind up until the moment when I lost consciousness. The I dreamed that this same woman came to me as before, and now she removed the twigs from my stomach and replaced my entrails, after which I became whole again." Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 373.

<sup>210</sup> After hearing about An's dream, Aud suggests that Kjartan should either stay at Hol longer or take a few more men with him than he came with if he is determined to ride off. Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 368.

it, you wretch.”<sup>211</sup> She then passes through the ghost towards the church where she thinks she sees the ghosts of Thorkel and his companions who had just drowned that very day. Gudrun sees them with seawater dripping from their clothing. She does not speak to them but enters the church and stays there until she gets the nerve to go look for them in the main room. When Gudrun sees that no one is there she is very shaken by the occurrence.<sup>212</sup>

After this paranormal encounter, the saga notes that Gudrun becomes very religious and spends long hours praying in the church. Her granddaughter Herdis dreams of an angry woman that demands Herdis tell Gudrun that her crying and tossing and turning over her each night is causing her great distress. When Gudrun hears about Herdis’s dream she has the floorboards removed under the spot she usually kneels. Underneath these floorboards Gudrun discovers bones, a chest pendant, and a large magician’s staff. She then decides that a prophetess must have been buried under the church.<sup>213</sup> Gudrun has the bones removed and put in a place “little frequented by men.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> The original text reads: “ok er hon gekk í kirkjugarð shliðit, þá sá hon draug standa fyrir sér. Hann laut yfir hana ok mælti: ‘mikill tíðendi, Guðrún,’ sagði hann. Guðrún svarar: ‘þegi þú yfir þeim þá, armi.’” This literally means “and when she went to the churchyard, then she saw undead men standing before her. He bowed over her and spoke: ‘great tidings, Gudrun,’ said he. Gudrun said ‘silent you over them then, wretched.’” The word “draugr” can mean “undead man” or “ghost.” The term “armr” can mean “wretched,” “hateful,” or “wicked.” Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 179.

<sup>212</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 418.

<sup>213</sup> The original text reads: “þar fundusk undir bein; þau vǫru blá ok illilig; þar fannsk ok kinga ok seiðstafr mikill. Þóttusk men þá vita, at þar mundi verit hafá vǫluleiði nökkut. Vǫru þau bein færð langt í brott, þar sem sízt var manna vegr.” This literally means “They found under there bones, though black and ugly; there they found a brooch and a great enchanter’s staff. The men there thought they knew that a Sybil’s barrow of some kind must lay there. The bones were sent away, there where least would be of men’s way.” The term “seiðstafr” is a compound word of “seiðr” which means “enchanter” and “stafr” which can mean both “wand” and “staff.” The word “vǫluleiði” is a compound word of “vǫlva” which means “sybil” or “prophetess,” and the word “leið” which means “way.” Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 224.

<sup>214</sup> Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 418-419.

Gudrun Osvifsdottir has an encounter with the ghosts of her husband and his men and her granddaughter has a vision of a witch who wants to relay a message to Gudrun. Gudrun handles these supernatural encounters by not interacting with any of these spirits. She ignores the ghosts of Thorkel and his men, and she simply removes the prophetess' bones and puts them somewhere no one will find them. Her actions are honorable and loyal to her religion. She does not fraternize with supernatural beings, and she removes the bones of a pagan from beneath the Christian church not out of respect for the prophetess, but for the peace of worshippers in the church. The lack of ceremony in the saga for the transfer of the prophetess' bones demonstrates this. The saga only states that Gudrun moves the bones to a remote place little frequented by men. The fact that Gudrun removes these bones from the church proves that the corpse was not worthy of burial at a church.<sup>215</sup>

Women within supernatural occurrences in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* behave honorably as long as they condemn the practice of witchcraft or protect men through God's will. The saga depicts women such as Grima who abuse the use of supernatural elements as evil and deserving of a violent death. Gudrun Osvifsdottir in particular provides an example within *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* of how Medieval Icelanders expected Christian women to conduct themselves when faced with a supernatural situation.

### *Njal's Saga*

Supernatural events fill *Njal's Saga* involving second sight, apparitions of personal spirits, omens, witch-rides, curses, and a graphic vision of Valkyries.

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<sup>215</sup> "A body with no right to church burial is to be buried at a place beyond bowshot of anyone's homefield wall, where there is neither arable land nor meadow land and from where no water flows to farms; and no funeral service is to be sung for it." Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 30.

Throughout the saga men possess the power of second sight, have visions of personal spirits, and witness omens for battle.<sup>216</sup> Men such as Njal gain great honor from their supernatural abilities, but men who abuse their power are dishonorable.<sup>217</sup> However, a sexual curse, second sight, and a vision of Valkyries are the only supernatural episodes within *Njal's Saga* that directly involve female honor.

The sexual curse that Queen Gunnhild lays on Hrut indicates the female power over the supernatural. Queen Gunnhild is the widow of Eirik Bloodaxe, king of Norway. In *Njal's Saga*, Queen Gunnhild holds great power over her son, King Harald Greycloak, and she uses this power to have her way sexually with Hrut.<sup>218</sup> Gunnhild demands that Hrut sleep with her in the upper room for two consecutive weeks, and she threatens to kill the other men there if they tell anyone about her and Hrut. Gunnhild becomes angry when she finds out that Hrut wishes to return to Iceland because he is already betrothed to Unn. Because of her jealousy and the fact that Hrut did not tell her about the other woman, Gunnhild puts a curse on him that he would not be able to enjoy himself sexually with Unn, but he would be able to enjoy other women.<sup>219</sup> This curse proves true as there is little intimacy between Hrut and Unn during their marriage. Unn is so upset at the lack

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<sup>216</sup> Hoskuld dreamed about a big bear which was the personal spirit of Gunnar of Hlidarendi. Thord sees a goat lying in the hollow of a tree covered in blood, Njal said that Thord had seen his personal spirit and that he was a doomed man. Njal saw fierce personal spirits of many of Gunnar's enemies. A great deal of blood appeared on Gunnar's halberd and it was an omen for battles called "wound-rain." Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 40, 69, 115, 119.

<sup>217</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 20.

<sup>218</sup> Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Viking Age: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 130.

<sup>219</sup> The original text reads: "Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: '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 megu vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel: þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins,' Hrut hló at ok gekk í braut." This literally means "She took her arms around neck of his and kissed him and spoke: 'if I so much power on you as I think, then I lay that on you, that no son shall you receive with woman, when you set out for Iceland, but perform your will you shall with other women. And have now are neither of us well: you were not faithful to me in your talk,' Hrut laughed and went away." Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 21.

of intimacy between her and Hrut that she begs her father for a divorce from Hrut because he cannot perform sexually in a way that pleases her even though they had tried everything to enjoy each other.<sup>220</sup> Unn gets her divorce and the separation greatly dishonors Hrut for his inability to consummate his marriage.<sup>221</sup>

Queen Gunnhild's curse exhibits her personal power within the supernatural realm. She believes Hrut damaged her honor by hiding his betrothal from her during their sexual affair. Gunnhild's supernatural retaliation awards her a sense of revenge and compromises a degree of Hrut's honor as a man and a husband. The author of *Njal's Saga* does not condemn Gunnhild's actions as dishonorable, and it appears that the only one whose honor is truly tarnished from the curse is Hrut.

In *Njal's Saga* possessing "second sight" means that an individual has psychic powers that can be inherited and greatly add to one's reputation if practiced honorably.<sup>222</sup> Njal is the most famous of the characters in the saga possessing this supernatural ability, but there are also a few women in the saga that have second sight. Saeunn, an old woman at Bergthorshvol, is wise in many ways, and she can foretell the future. She tells Njal to put the chickweed growing beside his house in water or to burn it quickly because the chickweed will one day catch the house on fire and burn Njal and Bergthora within. Njal and his sons ignore her. This is to their demise because that very chickweed is indeed what Flosi and his men use to set Njal's house on fire burning everyone to death inside.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, 77.

<sup>221</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 12-18.

<sup>222</sup> Helgi has second sight and Kari says his visions are legitimate because Helgi's father, Njal, has second sight. The term for second sight is "forspár" which means "foreseeing" and "prophesying." Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 139.

<sup>223</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 214, 220.

Njal's wife, Bergthora also seems to possess some measure of second sight. On the night of the burning, Bergthora tells her household to choose their food for the night and to choose what each liked best because it would be the last time she served food in her household. She says she could tell much more if she wanted and that their enemies would arrive before they had finished eating.<sup>224</sup> Bergthora proves to be right as it is the last time she serves any of them food in her house, because Flosi and his men burn down the house.<sup>225</sup>

Another woman in *Njal's Saga* who has a psychic vision is Thorvald's mother, Yngvild. After the brothers agree to help Flosi, Yngvild tells her sons that she had a dream that Thorvald would die wearing a red tunic and leggings badly tied and so tight that they looked sewed on. Her sons Thorvald and Thorkel laugh at her and dismiss her vision as nonsense. Yngvild's dream proves not to be nonsense later in the saga when Thorvald meets his brutal death at the hands of Thorgeir Skorargeir.<sup>226</sup>

Unlike Saeunn who possesses second sight for much of her life, whether or not Bergthora or Yngvild possess the power of second sight other than in these particular circumstances is uncertain. What is certain is that the visions of each of these women come to pass, and each woman's family doubts her claims. It appears that if the families of Saeunn, Bergthora and Yngvild had taken their visions seriously, like they would have a man of Njal's stature, then certain death may have been avoided and the honor of these

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<sup>224</sup> The original text reads "þenna aptan inn sama mœlti Bergþóra til hjóna sinna: 'Nú skulu þér kjósa yðr mat í kveld at hverr hafi þat er mest fýsir til, því at þenna aptan mun ek bera síðast mat fyrir hjón mín...ok má ek miklu fleira af segja, ef ek vil.'" This literally means "In this same evening, Bergthora spoke to her households: 'Now shall you choose your meal this evening that which I have that is most desired to for this reason this evening must I bring last meal before my households...and may I much more of saying if I wish.'" Gordon, 92-93.

<sup>225</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 216.

<sup>226</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 236, 271.

women would have increased just like it did for men who possessed credible and valuable psychic powers.

The final supernatural occurrence in *Njal's Saga* involving women takes place on Good Friday. A man named Dorrud walks outside and sees twelve people riding together to a women's room, and then they disappear inside. Dorrud goes up to the room and looks in through a window and sees that there are women inside and that they have a loom set up. The women use men's heads for weights, men's intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater. The women speak verses and when they finish weaving, they pull down the cloth and tear it to pieces, each keeping a piece in her hand.<sup>227</sup> In his translation of *Njal's Saga*, Robert Cook notes that the poem these women recite is known as "The Fatal Sisters" and the women are Valkyries who compare the act of weaving to that of battle.<sup>228</sup> These Valkyries describe and even direct the battle they weave. This supernatural episode is especially odd at this point in the saga because it is a pagan vision filled with elements of Odin and not Christianity. This type of female power and honor associated with the Old Norse religion appears out of place, but it still indicates of the vast power female agents of Odin possess on the material plane.

### Conclusion

The supernatural realm is another major theme in the code of honor for medieval Icelandic women. Despite the high status they enjoyed within the pagan Norse religion, the new Christian religion held Icelandic women to a much stricter code of ethics than men, and supernatural activities were no exception. Women in the sagas tread a fine line

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<sup>227</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 303-307.

<sup>228</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 342.

between what was acceptable and what was unacceptable behavior in using supernatural elements. The five sagas only blatantly portray women as evil and dishonorable when they actively abuse supernatural power. The sagas generally describe women more honorably when they use their psychic abilities instead of sorcery.

In these Icelandic sagas, women take part in supernatural events, but they follow strict rules that correlate closely with the Christian laws of thirteenth-century Iceland. Women could not use sorcery or witchcraft to harm anyone or anything, and so it is clear why King Siggeir's mother and Grimhild from *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and Grima from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* fall into grave dishonor for their use of black sorcery to achieve their goals at the expense of others. Signy from *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Thorbjorg from *Grænlandinga Saga*, and Queen Gunnhild from *Njal's Saga* are much more difficult to analyze. Though all women resort to witchcraft to carry out their agendas, none of the sagas openly condemn these women. Signy commits major incest through the aid of witchcraft, and so in the eyes of a thirteenth-century Icelandic her actions are illegal and abominable. Thorbjorg also was likely viewed as a shameful woman by thirteenth-century Icelandic Christian values. Thorbjorg essentially forces the Christian Gudrid to help her in a ceremony of witchcraft, therefore making Gudrid violate her beliefs and values as a Christian woman. In contrast, Christian Icelanders most likely did not view Queen Gunnhild as harshly as Signy or Thorbjorg. Gunnhild's actions cause Unn great distress, but the only one whose honor truly suffers from the whole ordeal is Hrut who incites Gunnhild to lay the curse through his deceit.

The women in these sagas who achieve honor do so through their righteous use of and proper response to supernatural powers. Kostbera, Glaumvor, and Brynhild from

*The Saga of the Volsungs*, and Saeunn, Bergthora, and Yngvild from *Njal's Saga* all honorably attempt to protect men from violent ends by telling them of their prophetic visions and dreams. Gudrid Thorbjarnarsdottir from *Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga*, and Gudrun Osvifsdottir from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* act honorably in their appropriate responses to supernatural situations. Neither of these women compromises her Christian faith by her actions, and both women resort to their faith to carry them through the paranormal experiences.

Whether women act honorably or dishonorably within these five sagas, these examples prove that there was a correlation between the supernatural and the code of honor for medieval Icelandic women. Women could either adhere to this code of ethics when dealing with the supernatural or they could fall into severe dishonor by exploiting and abusing supernatural powers to achieve their own selfish goals.

## CONCLUSION

There was a separate and unique code of honor and ethics for women living in Iceland during the Viking Age. According to the five sagas used in this thesis, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Grænlandinga Saga*, *Eirik's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Njal's Saga*, female honor mainly pertained to the realms of kinship, marriage, and the supernatural. Protecting familial honor was a major part of the Icelandic female code of honor. According to the evidence, in Icelandic society a woman should always put the protection and honor of her family above herself. If a woman put herself before her family in medieval Iceland, it meant grave dishonor for her and misfortune for her kinsmen. Protecting personal honor within the realm of marriage was an acceptable part of the female code of honor in medieval Iceland. Women in these sagas are able to protect their personal honor through their own resources within the realm of marriage. Marriage appears to be one effective instrument that the women in the Icelandic sagas can utilize to their favor without risking their honor. There was a correlation between the supernatural and the code of honor for medieval Icelandic women. Women could either adhere to the code of ethics when dealing with the supernatural or they could fall into severe dishonor by exploiting and abusing supernatural powers to achieve their own selfish goals.

The evidence provided proves that the women in medieval Iceland had a specific code of honor separate from men. Women in the Icelandic sagas find honor in protecting the honor of their kinsmen, not entering into a marriage that would compromise their

honor, divorcing a man who insults their honor, and using supernatural elements to help or protect others. Respectively, women in these sagas find dishonor in putting their personal agenda before the honor of their families, refusing good marriages, and abusing supernatural powers by using sorcery to harm others. The sagas describe these women favorably when they abide by this code of ethics and condemn them when they stray from these honorable standards.

Men did not have the same responsibilities as women in medieval Iceland, so it is appropriate that these sagas depict male and female honorable actions within different realms. Men gain honor in these sagas mostly by physical fighting, traveling abroad, and leading successful political and legal careers. Women are rarely described as fighting or traveling, and they are never involved in political life. Kinship, marriage, and the supernatural are all realms that men take part in, but these sagas describe women as the main actors within these areas. Since medieval Icelandic women were the main focus in the areas of kinship, marriage, and the supernatural, they stood to gain more honor or dishonor from their actions within these realms than men.

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