


Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature
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ZOE BOROVSKY

Never in Public
Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature

In the medieval Icelandic family sagas, women as well as men gained and bestowed honor by performing verbally. While men's performances took place in the official, public realm, women promoted and defended the honor of the household in the domestic, private realm. With the introduction of writing, the boundary between public and private was more strictly enforced, and women's participation in the honor system became more restricted.

THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC family sagas have frequently been cited by scholars for their portrayals of strong, independent women who fearlessly take up a sword to seek vengeance in blood feud, divorce their lackluster husbands at the drop of a hat, or speak their minds openly and eloquently in the pursuit of honor. Conventional and feminist research on gender in Old Norse literature and medieval Icelandic culture has typically focused on images of the "strong woman" in these texts and argues for or against the veracity of these striking female figures.[1] Recently, Icelandic literary scholar Helga Kress (1993) has cited the presence of the "strong woman" as evidence of an ancient female hegemony—an oral tradition—that was later eclipsed by the emerging Viking patriarchy and finally submerged by the Christian hierarchy. On the other hand, medieval Scandinavian historian Birgit Sawyer has argued that it is nearly impossible, because of the nature and lack of the sources, to answer the question of whether Scandinavian women had "higher status and greater freedom of action" in pre-Christian times than they did later (1993:212).

Clearly this discussion is related to the long-standing debate about the sources themselves; the Icelandic family "sagas" (related to the verb *segja,* to "say" or "tell") were not recorded until the 13th century, although they relate events that took place during the so-called Saga Age (850–1050), during which Norwegian chieftains migrated with their families to Iceland and established a Commonwealth (or Freestate). These anonymous prose narratives (such as *Njál's saga, Laxdœla saga, Egil's saga,* and *Gísla saga*) give the impression that they are careful transcriptions of oral histories, local legends, and folklore by quoting verses said to

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have been composed at the time, giving specific details, and sometimes mentioning the names of oral sources. Although scholars continue to debate the extent to which the sagas are the literary products of writers fully versed in Christian, ecclesiastical tradition as opposed to an oral genre that developed much earlier and flourished up until the time that medieval scribes recorded them on vellums, some folklorists and anthropologists (Bauman 1986; Turner 1971) have viewed the sagas as rich sources of local legends and familial lore that document the transition from an oral-based, pagan Commonwealth to a literate outpost of Christendom.[2] My own view, and my point of departure for this essay, is that the sagas can be read as documents that straddle the terrain between (oral) "history" and (written) "fiction" because they were intended to provide the medieval audience with a sense of their past that would resonate with the present. Amid the turbulent events of the 13th century, as the Commonwealth came to an end, Icelanders were poised to cast themselves as either die-hard traditionalists determined to preserve and venerate the past against the inevitable tide of Norwegian dominance or as more open and urbane subjects willing to embrace and appreciate the new currents from the continent. From this perspective—a kind of "stereoscopic" view—I propose to survey the oral genres as they are depicted in the sagas, devoting special attention to gender roles and the contexts for these performances, looking for evidence of a historic shift in women's roles. As I will show, we most likely owe the preservation of the notion of the "strong woman" to Icelanders' ability to produce and consume sagas locally, and these local players were—to various degrees but for different purposes—as concerned with local traditions (and a nationalist agenda) as they were with maintaining peaceful relations with monarchs and men of the cloth on the mainland.

Undoubtedly the conversion of Iceland was considered to be one of the most important events in the history of the country. Several accounts of the acceptance of Christianity exist, each describing the various conflicts between pagans and Christians that led up to the unusual compromise that, according to Ari Þórgilsson's *Íslendingabók* ("Book of the Icelanders"), took place at the Althing of 999–1000.[3] So it seems remarkable that in the conversion episode of *Njáls saga,* one of the most popular sagas at the end of the 13th century (Lönnroth 1976:2), a woman, the pagan priestess Steinunn, plays the role of the defender of the venerable pagan past against the wholly unlikeable and overly contentious German missionary, Þangbrandr, who was sent by the Norwegian king to convert Iceland. Prior to his meeting with the pagan priestess, the missionary had killed four men: a rival who challenged him to a duel, a sorcerer who nearly caused him to be swallowed up in a chasm, Vetrliði the skald, and a man who led an ambush against him.[4] Þangbrandr's encounter with the priestess offers a notable example of how the sagas depict women exerting their influence on public matters. Steinunn meets Þangbrandr while he travels about the western districts after a storm destroys his ship:

> Steinunn kom í mót honum, móðir Skáld-Refs; hon boðaði Þangbrandi heiðni ok talði lengi fyrir honum. Þangbrandr þagði, meðan hon talaði, en talaði lengi eptir ok sneri því öllu, er hon hafði

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mælt, í villu. "Hefir þú heyrt þat," sagði hon, "er Þórr bauð Kristi á hólm, ok treystisk han eigi at berjask við Þór?" "Heyrt hefi ek þat," segir Þangbrandr, "at Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska, þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði." "Veiztú," segir hon, "hverr brotit hefir skip þitt?" "Hvat segir þú til?" segir hann. "Þat mun ek segja þér," segir hon:

10. Braut fyrir bjöllu gæti,
bönd ráku Val strandar,
mögfellandi mellu,
móstalls, Vísund allan;
hlífðit Kristr, þá er kneyfði
knörr, málmfeta varra;
lítt ætla ek, at guð gætti
Gylfa hreins at einu.

Aðra vísu kvað hon:

11. Þórr brá Þvinnils d ýri
Þangbrands ór stað löngu,
hristi búss ok beysti
barðs ok laust við jörðu.
Muna skíð um sjá síðan
sundfært Atals grundar,
hregg því at hart tók leggja,
hánum kennt, í spánu.

Eptir þat skilðusk þau Steinunn ok Þangbrandr, ok fóru Þeir vestr til Barðastrandar. [*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:265–267]

[Steinunn, the mother of Poet-Ref, came to see him. She lectured to him for a long time and tried to convert him to paganism. Thangbrand listened to her in silence, but when she had finished he spoke at length, turning all her own arguments against her. "Did you ever hear," she asked, "how Thor challenged Christ to a duel, and Christ did not dare to accept the challenge?" "I have heard," said Thangbrand, "that Thor would be nothing but dust and ashes if God did not permit him to live." "Do you know who wrecked your ship?" she asked. "Who do you think?" asked Thangbrand. "I will tell you," she replied:

"It was Thor's giant-killing hammer
That smashed the ocean-striding Bison;
It was our gods who drove
The bell-ringer's boat ashore.
Your Christ could not save
This buffalo of the sea from destruction;
I do not think your God
Kept guard over him at all."

She added:

"Thor seized the great ship,
Shook its frame

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And beat its timbers
And hurled it on the rocks;
That ship will never
Sail the seas again,
For Thor's relentless thrashing
Smashed it into fragments."

With that, Steinunn and Thangbrand parted. Thangbrand and his men travelled west to Bardastrand. (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:221–222)]

This encounter between Steinunn and Þangbrandr can be read as an oral performance, which, as demonstrated by Richard Bauman, served as a means of gaining and bestowing (or denying) honor in medieval Icelandic society (1986:146). It demonstrates the agonistic quality of verbal exchange in a performance society and can be seen as a "flyting" or a form of "reciprocal name-calling" that functions as verbal and intellectual combat (Ong 1989:44; Parks 1990:71–77).[5] Steinunn initiates the encounter by preaching the pagan faith to Þangbrandr. He listens but turns everything she says into falsehood. Steinunn resorts to insulting Christ. By failing to accept the challenge to a duel with Þórr, Christ would be considered a *níðingr,* a coward (Sørensen 1983:32). After Þangbrandr counters with his reply, maintaining that the Christian god is more powerful than Þórr, Steinunn recites two *dróttkvætt* (court poetry) stanzas, revealing that it was Þórr who smashed Þangbrandr's ship into fragments or wood chips ("í spánu"). The stanzas constitute a neat comeback to Þangbrandr's assertion that Þórr would be dust and ashes ("mold og aska") if God did not want him to live.

Steinunn exposes the discrepancy between Þangbrandr's hierarchical theory of an all-powerful God and the reality of the situation: why would God allow his priest's ship to be destroyed by the pagan god? Þangbrandr was apparently not equal to Steinunn's dróttkvætt challenge. He is clearly defeated in this flyting, for he has no rebuttal and Steinunn has the last word. Although Þangbrandr killed Vetrliði the skald for his *níð* verses (Lindow 1988:131), Steinunn's verses are not overtly níð verses, that is, ones that symbolically accuse another of submitting sexually to a more aggressive partner.[6] This might account for why her verses (and not Vetrliði's) were preserved by the Christian written tradition. The "consummate skill with which these verses are composed," as Gabriel Turville-Petre writes, "shows that Steinunn knew much of the older poetry and was well practised in the art" (1976:66). Perhaps these verses were more memorable for their artistry than the insult. For a member of an honor-obsessed society, however, the níð implications of Steinunn's verse are not subtle. According to Carol Delaney, who studies a similar preoccupation with honor in modern Turkish society, if "the boundary of what is his has been penetrated or broken by someone else," it puts that person in a position of powerlessness and shame (1987:40).

Steinunn's defamatory allegations that Christ not only is a coward but could not prevent the pagan god Þórr from smashing Þangbrandr's ship therefore constitute a shaming of the Christian god as well as his priest. Þangbrandr's failure to take up her verbal challenge with a verse of his own is a failure to protect the belief system

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he is promoting and a failure to assert his own verbal competence. To be shamed by a woman must have been a severe humiliation for Þangbrandr, equivalent to being struck by a woman, as Auðr strikes Eyjólfr in *Gísla saga* (*Gísla saga* 1943:101).[7]

Seen in a larger context, Steinunn's encounter with Þangbrandr can be viewed as a social drama, that is, as a way of working out conflicts within and between societies where "conflicting groups and personages attempt to assert their own and deplete their opponents' paradigms" (Turner 1974:15). Steinunn's encounter with Þangbrandr represents an encounter between the pagan Icelandic Freestate and the Christian Norwegian monarchy. Victor Turner has applied his concept of social drama to the whole of *Njáls saga,* in which the transition (a "disastrous submission") from the Icelandic Freestate to the Norwegian monarchy is narratively traced (1971:361). Turner reads *Njáls saga,* which he calls an "anthropological paradise" (1971:361), as a product of "Sturlunga lay and chieftainly literate thought, reflecting on the written deposits of traditions about the early generations of the Commonwealth and, no doubt, on the oral traditions of great families as well" (1971:360).

In this social drama Steinunn is introduced as the mother of a skald, Skáld-Refr, who became a distinguished poet in the 11th century. She represents the verbal display and performance tradition of the past—the pagan, oral, "group" (to use Mary Douglas's [1992] term) society—and becomes not only an emblem of empowered women's speech but also one of Icelandic verbal dexterity and the feats of oral prowess that earned them audiences and patrons in powerful courts. Þangbrandr, on the other hand, represents the new paradigm of a written Christian "grid" society. This "grid" is the perspective from which the 13th-century saga composers remembered and narrated their past.

Else Mundal (1983) contrasts these two paradigms—the oral and the written—and explores the consequences of this transition for women as reflected in the medieval literature from Iceland. Mundal finds that women took active roles in oral literature before they were locked out of the male-dominated literate culture. She characterizes medieval Icelandic literature with strong influences from oral culture (Eddic poetry, skaldic poetry, medieval ballads, and *fornaldarsögur* [mythic-heroic sagas]) as being "pro-womanly" (1983:11). In these texts she finds more women as main characters, a more positive attitude toward independent women, and stories in which women have choices in relationships. On the other hand, texts that (according to Mundal) are more influenced by literate culture (kings' sagas and family sagas) have fewer women as main characters, less acceptance of independent women, and stories in which women are powerless in their relationships. Mundal concludes that the transition from oral to written culture was a misfortune *(ei ulukke)* for women, particularly when the oral tradition and its performers lost prestige. Because women were excluded from the more prestigious, intellectual spheres in which literature was written, they could only participate in the anonymous oral tradition, thus making their contributions invisible (Mundal 1983:23).

Mundal's tendency to view oral culture as a utopia is a tendency that can be traced back to the early works on orality and literacy that theorized the change as

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a simple paradigm shift rather than a complex interactive process. Goody and Watt (1968) proposed that in an oral society the past was impossible to ignore because it was transmitted face to face. A written or printed past is easier to avoid or escape. Literate individuals and groups could therefore become alienated from (or deliberately distance themselves from) their past and cultural heritage. More recently, Jack Goody (1987) has formulated the transition not as oral versus written but as oral versus oral *and* written (printed); he locates the interface between these two paradigms on three fronts: between societies, within societies, and within individuals themselves. This discussion allows for a more complex analysis of the saga as a type of ethnographic record. Christian saga writers of the 13th century belonged to an oral tradition that embraced written culture once it "submitted" to the Norwegian monarchy. The saga writers looked back on or remember their independent, oral-performance past with ambivalence. Thus, the social drama that takes place between Steinunn and Þangbrandr reflects the drama that took place within the individual saga writer who incorporated oral sources into his written text.

Turner evaluates the political shift from Icelandic independence to dependence as "a disastrous submission" just as Mundal considers the shift from oral to written society "a misfortune" for women based on the prominence of independent, powerful women in "oral" texts and dependent, powerless women in "literate" texts. Carol Clover offers a both/and solution to the problem of the discrepancy between powerless and powerful women in the Old Norse sources. Rather than relegating one to oral and the other to literate sources, or one to fact and the other to fiction (see Jochens 1986), Clover postulates that women had two simultaneous statuses. They were officially powerless in the law codes and the public realm, but, because women were scarce, their unofficial status in the private realm was strengthened (Clover 1988:180). Simply stated, women were powerful in the private sphere and powerless in the public sphere.

Returning to Steinunn, note that she has no official position or office of authority. Yet she confronts Þangbrandr and preaches to him authoritatively, without any sense of "shame." She performs, in a sense, as a man. Unlike a man who is shamed by assuming a woman's position, Steinunn suffers no dishonor for playing a man's role.[8] The saga writer seems to imply a tacit approval of Steinunn's behavior by preserving her verbal performance even though he refrains from explicitly praising her heathen preaching. Þangbrandr, however, suffers a serious loss of honor in his encounter with Steinunn. Because he cannot meet her verbal challenge and cannot kill her as he did Vetrliði, he is shamed by her.[9] She pushes him back into a powerless position.

In the next chapter of *Njáls saga* Þangbrandr accomplishes his most dramatic defeat of a berserk before an audience of 200 heathens during a feast at the household of Gestr Oddleifsson. Gestr is so impressed that he has his entire household baptized. Þangbrandr's display at Gestr's feast is a performance in a public setting. Bauman recognizes two forms of performances: the large-scale, scheduled, public forms like festivals, ceremonies, and fairs; and the domestic, face-to-face, spontaneous forms of everyday life (1978:28, 1986:133). He focuses on "oral performance"

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as a means of gaining honor by displaying for an audience one's communicative skill and effectiveness and finds that the performance of "the more public forms of folklore is largely reserved for males" (1986:147). Bauman calls attention to the need for studies that focus on what women do in male-dominated, honor-based societies:

> If we recognize, as I think we must, that ideologies of male dominance, the hegemony of public value systems that glorify manhood, and the expressive forms that sustain such systems are of central importance to the place of women as well as men in these societies, studies of such systems may be recognized as indispensable to a unified perspective on gender. It will take more than this, of course; we will also need research that focuses explicitly on women in such societies, that explores female modes of existence and avenues of artistic expression in societies that glorify manhood. If performance and valorization of the more public forms of folklore is largely reserved to males, as it seems to be in the societies reported on in the works I have mentioned, that in itself is a significant finding. [1986:147]

The most important public event in medieval Iceland was the annual meeting of the Althing. The Althing was the center of the social space where Icelandic law obtained (Hastrup 1985:144). It was established in 930 C.E. along with the Icelandic constitution. At the Althing, one-third of the law of Iceland was recited by the "lawspeaker" every year, until 1277, when the king of Norway began to share legislative authority with the Althing. The performance roles at the Althing—lawspeakers, chieftains, judges, plaintiffs, and witnesses—were filled by males. A woman inheriting a chieftaincy was "to transfer the chieftaincy to someone in that assembly third" (*Grágás* 1980:137). A woman could attend the Althing as a member of the general public, but she would have had to "sit on the outside of the benches" (*Grágás* 1980:189).[10] *Grágás* (the medieval Icelandic law code) specified five suitable male substitutes to the assembly for a woman who headed the household (*Grágás* 1980:151). Although a woman might own the office and could unofficially function as a *gyðja* (chieftainess), only a man could officially perform as *goði* (chieftain). This was probably due to the fact that a successful case required a force of weapon-bearing supporters, as William Miller puts it, "to give the law its teeth, in procedure as well as in executing judgements, once obtained" (1983:172). In this respect Icelandic law was similar to Old Germanic law and early Roman law, in that "the woman was . . . similarly considered to be lacking in juridical capacity to look after her own interests" (Herlihy 1976:14).

However, the Icelandic law codes were inconsistent with regard to the kinds of cases women could plead, which suggests a legal loophole. A widow or an unmarried girl of 20 could take charge of her own lawsuit if it was about an assault or a minor wound (*Grágás* 1980:158). One version of *Grágás,* "Konungsbók," states that a woman in a similar position (widowed or beyond the age of 20) could prosecute a killing case (*Grágás* 1980:157), but another version, "Staðarhólsbók," contradicts this and stipulates that in no instance could a woman be a plaintiff (Finsen 1974:335). *Eyrbyggja saga* states that women lost their rights as plaintiffs after a legal disaster circa 992 (1935:103–104).[11] Women attended the Althing but did not have access to performance roles in the center of the social-legal space. However,

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according to the Baugatal portion of *Grágás* that lists the kinsmen required to pay or to collect wergild in compensation for a slain kinsman, the unmarried daughter of a sonless, brotherless, and fatherless man could be constrained to function as a son (Clover 1986b:46). Although such women may never have performed officially as *goðar* or *gyðjur* (chieftains), the law code certainly suggests that women might have played an active role in the prosecution of blood feud and in matters of inheritance.[12]

Women in Norway may have had more access to a political audience in the early Norwegian court. In Snorri's *Heimskringla* Hildr Hrólfsdóttir is quoted reciting a skaldic verse to King Harald Fairhair (ca. 900) pleading her son's case (Sturlusson 1941–51:123–124). Her son, Göngu-Hrólfr (perhaps equivalent to Rollo in Normandy), had been outlawed by the king. Hildr's performance was keyed for a high-intensity emotional impact; her stanza warns the king that his men will suffer the wrath of her angered warrior son.

The longest skaldic poem composed by a woman, Jórunn skáldmær (i.e., the "poet-maiden"), is called "Sendibítr" ("Biting message"). Jórunn's *drápa* (the long form for dróttkvætt or court poetry), of which only three half strophes and two strophes are preserved in Snorri's *Heimskringla,* bestowed honor on the chieftain-skald Guðormr sindri for reconciling King Harald Fairhair and his son Hálfdan by means of his diplomatic verses (Sturlusson 1941–51:142). The title refers perhaps to Jórunn's criticism of the strife between father and son. Harmful words or advice, as Peter Hallberg points out, are said to *bíta* (bite) one's opponents just as a weapon would (1983:54).[13]

Although Jórunn is not mentioned in Snorri's "Skáldatal" (listing of court poets), two other women skalds are: Vilborg, a *hirðskáld* (poet attached to the king's retinue), with Óláfr kyrri (1066–93); and the Icelandic Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir (d. 1271) (Mundal 1983:15). Unfortunately, none of the verses composed by these two women (and perhaps spoken in the public arena) was preserved. However, Steinvör's cousin, Sturla Þórðarson, records—in *Íslendinga saga*—a stanza spoken to Steinvör in a dream that portends the killing of her father, the indomitable Sighvatr Sturluson (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:421). (I will return to Steinvör twice in this essay: once as she appears in *Sturlunga saga* to fashion vengeance for her father and finally in a special section on Steinvör and Sturla.) The few verses composed by women that have been preserved support the notion that women's participation in the official, public realm was limited in Norway as well as in Iceland.[14]

Women were similarly excluded from performance roles in the church. They could not be priests or monks, nor could they perform the simplest ceremonies. *Grágás* very clearly states that a woman should never baptize a child; it was better for a woman to teach a man the emergency procedure than to risk baptism by a woman (*Grágás* 1980:25). The bishops of Iceland were members of the *Lögrétta* (the lawmaking body of Iceland); the first bishop was admitted in 1056, and the second, in 1106. They became important participants at the Althing (Hastrup 1985:187, 215, 216). One saga mentions that the abbess of Kirkjubær attended the Althing, but this seems to be in an informal capacity (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:140). With the introduction of Christianity, the chieftains were ordained as priests or

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had their sons ordained.[15] Thus, the sacred realm of the early church merged with the social-legal administration of Iceland, creating a male-centered vernacular Christianity.

This early interface could be characterized by compromise and exchange between the two paradigms. The conversion itself was such a compromise. Three heathen practices were allowed in Iceland: eating horsemeat, exposing infants, and sacrificing to pagan gods in private or secret: "skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varð fjörbaugsgarð, ef váttum of kvæmi við" [men may sacrifice secretly if they wish but were deemed lesser outlaws if such acts were witnessed] (*Íslendingabók* 1968:17). The interface of the sacred and secular paradigms retains the agonistic character begun by Steinunn and Þangbrandr, but now the interface is located within Icelandic society itself. This interface between the written Christian tradition and the oral chieftainly tradition prompted the process of recording the oral history of Iceland. Obviously the chieftains would seek to enhance their prestige by venerating the local, vernacular past. This rise of a vernacular literate tradition developed out of the need within the "Sturlunga lay and chieftainly literate" circle to assert an account of the settlement period and their ancestors which would encourage local communal pride and increase their honor and prestige in a response to the process of latinization and the influence of hagiographic literature (Turner 1971:360).[16] This "ritual of elevation" (a nearly universal medieval Christian story according to Patrick Geary) would trace the rites of passage of the first settlers and tell "the story of how an important powerful individual leaves his home, wanders through many dangers, and is finally welcomed into a position of honor and authority in a new community" (Geary 1978:154).

After the Icelandic submission to the Norwegian monarchy, the local, kinship-based power of the goðar was seriously threatened in both the sacred and the secular realm. The chieftains were more susceptible to pressure from the international ecclesiastical movement toward a universal, autonomous church, and the movement toward separating the sacred realm from the secular realm was strengthened (Hastrup 1985:188). Traditional life was in upheaval: the customary bond of the Icelandic chieftains to the monarchy based on the gift and face-to-face exchange was replaced with the depersonalized, abstract notion of taxation, and the concrete reality of inalienable hereditary land was latinized to reflect the concept of private or individual ownership for the benefit of both the church and the state. The church and state would each seek to designate family property as its own. The old chieftainships and values were in a state of crisis, uncertainty, and change. This fear of modernization in a traditional oral culture could often lead to a turning inward, a retreat into the past and archaism (Stock 1983:473–476). Old Norse literature bears all the signs of just such a retreat from modernization to traditionalism in an attempt to restore a sense of "communitas," to borrow Turner's term, which he defines as continuity, wholeness, and unity (1977:94–130). Turner maintains that when structural power and authority is in the hands of the men (as we have seen in the social-legal or public realm), it is the marginal power of the women that represents the wholeness of the community at large (Turner 1974:152, 1977:111).

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It is just such women (usually maternal figures like Steinunn, who is presented as the mother of a well-known skald), marginalized by both the church and the state, that came to represent communitas and the performances that bond the local community (or the family) together.[17] Steinunn's encounter suggests that there could be a significant amount of overlap between the official public and the unofficial private realms. One can analyze the encounter between Steinunn and Þangbrandr as an oral performance and evaluate it in terms of personal honor, but the episode is part of a much larger "cultural performance" in which the entire country must evaluate its belief and value system. The symbolic and ritualistic encounters in the unofficial realm had their ramifications in the official legal realm, as one discovers in the next chapter of *Njáls saga,* in which Þangbrandr returns to Norway and the king detains Icelanders who are staying there. The private realm does not seem to be containable or sealed off from the public realm—a separation that would prevent private, local conflicts from escalating into what Turner calls "a national crisis had there been a nation" (1971:370). The power of women in the private realm is perhaps best exemplified by Turner's following statement:

> The saga relates, in terms of personalities, the story of a society. Njál succeeds in keeping local peace for a while but cannot curb his own sons, who disobey him in order to *carry out their mother's [Bergþora's] will.* Yet the greatest men of Iceland hang upon his words when he proposes to establish legal machinery, such as the Fifth Court, and give him support. The irony of the saga is that it is through the continual disobedience of his own sons, who undertake revenge killings *against his [Njáll's] will,* that the final disasters come about, exposing the impotence of Icelandic redressive institutions. [1971:370, emphasis added]

Here it is Bergþora's ability to influence her sons (privately, unofficially, yet persistently) that effectively undermines Njáll's efforts to negotiate an end to the feud using official, public means. Clover writes, "And it is precisely, as R. G. Thomas perceived, in personal relations, not in the public sphere, that saga women exert their authority. Predictably enough, the great majority of examples of women's 'proud and independent behavior' (including those listed by Thomas himself) constitute acts of insubordination against *husbands"* (1988:180, emphasis in original). These powerful women—disenfranchised in the official, legal realm—insisted on rocking the boat and disrupting the official order or "grid." Or at least the sagas depict them as doing so.

These women performed in the more private space. In addition to the social-legal concept of official public space, with its center at the Althing, there was another spatial dimension with the farmstead as the center and the world outside as the periphery. Old Scandinavian law made a distinction between two horizontally opposed legal spaces, between *innangarðs* (inside the fence) and *útangarðs* (outside the fence) (Gurevich 1969:43). The "inviolable home" was inside the fence that surrounded the farm, whereas the public space was outside the fence and the *stofa* (main room) within the house where guests were received (Hastrup 1985:60, 141). Women who managed households signified their control over the

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space innangarðs by wearing the keys of their farmstead hanging on a chain attached to a brooch (Simpson 1967:65).

An excellent example of the power women wielded from innangarðs, signified by their keys, is from *Þórðar saga kakala*. Steinvör's brother, Þórðr, appeals to her for help in rousing the family to avenge the death of their father, Sighvatr. Steinvör's husband Hálfdan is reluctant to take part in the vengeance until Steinvör incites him with the following speech:

> hefi ek hann ok sjaldan eggjat at ganga í stórmæli, en nú mun ek þat bert gera, at lítit mun verða okkart samþykki, ef þú veitir eigi Þórði, bróður mínum. Mun þá svá fara, sem minnr er at sköpuðu, at ek mun taka vápnin ok vita, ef nökkurir menn vili fylgja mér, en ek mun fá þér af hendi búrluklana. [I have seldom egged him on to take part in serious matters. But now I will make it clear that our accord will be rare if you do not help Þórðr, my brother. If less than that happens, according to the course of events, then I will take up weapons and find out if anyone will follow me, and I will turn the pantry keys over to you.][18] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:6]

Steinvör goads her husband into taking action by threatening him with the shame of being reduced to tending the household while she herself would take up a sword and display the qualities of *drengskapr* (literally, manliness). The sagas contain many of these *hvöt,* or incitements, which are often combined with a lament for the deceased.[19] As Clover points out, "the lament (text) serves as a mnemonic of revenge and hence an incitement (subtext)" (1986a:169). According to Miller, when a lament was accompanied by a bloody token, it constituted a legal ceremony (or ritual), usually performed by women, that functioned to organize the kin group for vengeance taking (1983:175, 185). The performance of a lament in a blood feud system bestowed honor on a dead hero. Urging vengeance was, according to Clover, "the ultimate form of respect, and like the men who take it, the women who urge it are, in so doing, paying due honor to the departed" (1986a:173).

As Steinvör demonstrates, women had the power to shame those who refused to take vengeance. Steinvör incites her husband by suggesting a symbolic reversal—offering to exchange her keys for her husband's weapons. Women's performances—mourning, whetting, goading, threatening—function to arouse and bind together the forces of the kin group and direct those forces toward acts of restitution that often involved violence.

The hvöt was evaluated by the revenge that was taken; in *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar* Þorbjörg's whetting leads to the death of 24 men. For this effective performance the saga designates her as "mikill kvenskörungr" (*Harðar saga* 1991:97), which has been translated as "a woman of great presence and spirit" (Clover 1986a:145). In the feud system, women gained honor for themselves and their families by performing a successful lament/hvöt.

To be successful these performances had to be timed for maximum emotional impact. A woman could adjust the intensity of the performance explicitly by increasing the fixity of form and using poetic verse, as Þorbjörg does in *Harðar saga* (1991:90) and Þuríðr does in *Heiðarvíga saga* (1938:277–279).[20] Hildigunnr, in *Njáls saga,* keyed her lament to incite her Uncle Flosi to take vengeance on the

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sons of Njáll by using special codes symbolic of mourning: her hair was worn loosely, the tablecloth was torn, and she produced a bloody token from her dead husband. Hildigunnr's implicit codes signified a household in disequilibrium because of the loss of an important member. Women performed symbolic rituals that represented the imbalance of the household and demanded that balance be restored by an act of restitution or revenge. The setting of these performances was innangarðs, the center of the woman's space, and usually at mealtime, when she was most capable of binding an audience to her performance.[21] Guðrún, in *Guðmundar saga dýra* (a saga in the compilation of contemporary sagas called *Sturlunga saga*), served singed sheep heads and feet for breakfast, a metonymic reminder, directed at her husband and brothers, of the burning that their household suffered two summers previously:

> En at dagverðarmáli um daginn kómu fram fyrir þá diskar, en þar var ekki annat á en höfuðsviður ok fætr af fé því, er slátrat hafði verit um haustit.
>
> Þorgrímr spurði: "Hví sætir harkageta sjá? Þætti mér nú heldr til annars um vart fyrir manna sakir."
>
> Guðrún svarar: "Ekki verðr mér jafndrjúgdeilt sem sviðin."
>
> Vigfúss, bróðir hennar, svarar: "Eigi er þat, at þú minnir oss eigi á, hvat vér eigum, þar er sviðin eru."
>
> [But at the time of the main meal, plates were set before them, but there was nothing on them other than the singed heads and feet of the sheep that had been killed during the fall.
>
> Þorgrímr asked, "What is the reason for this coarse food? It seems to me now that we deserve better on account of the men."
>
> Guðrún answers, "For me there is nothing as long-lasting as the singed sheep heads."
>
> Vigfúss, her brother, answers, "It is not as if you have not reminded us what we have to do regarding the singed sheep heads."] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:195–196]

By serving the coarse food to the men at their household, Guðrún denies her husband an important quality of drengskapr, that is, her hospitality. She confronts him with a "face-to-face" symbol of the dishonor they have suffered in the past, implying that their "group" honor will not be restored until he takes revenge.

In her article "Hildigunnr's Lament," Clover challenges the scholarly assumption "that the female laments are commonly, though not unanimously, assumed to stem at least in part (fictional situation and motifs) from continental ballad tradition and thus to constitute a late layer in the Eddic accretion, whereas the male laments of skaldic tradition are generally supposed to stem from native and probably Germanic roots" (1986a:153–154). Clover sees a social reality of exclusion from the legal arena in the feud society of Iceland "behind the motif of the whetting woman in Edda and saga" (1986a:174). Although women were alienated from the formal judicial and legislative system represented by the Althing and were excluded from the blood feud payments stipulated in "Baugatal," they could participate in the informal blood feud system of honor and politics by urging revenge with hvöt or lament poetry.[22] By performing this type of poetry women also participated in the semiotic system of honor; the demand for revenge was not appeased and the honor of the kinsmen was not restored by the legal compensation for a killing. The ritual performance of a whetting and revenge takes precedence over the legal performance of compensation negotiated and paid in the

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official legal manner. While bestowing honor on men who showed drengskapr or men who performed verbally, a woman increased her own reputation for being a *kvenskörungr* (brave woman).

Bauman (1978) examines the oral performances of the more public forms of folklore during scheduled events like weddings and festivals (similar to Þangbrandr's performance at Gestr's feast). Although these activities took place innangarðs, they were set in the public stofa of the household. And although women attended these weddings, they are not represented as performing at the feasts. Usually one reads of women serving the guests. The exception is a disruptive performance; a certain níð couplet recited by a woman comes from such an occasion. In *Njáls saga* Þorhildr skáldkona, who is "orðgífr mikit" (a great word witch) and "ok fór með flimtan" (someone who deals in satire or lampoons) (*Vatnsdœla saga* 1938:87), is invited to help serve at the wedding tables. Her husband cannot keep his eyes off a beautiful 14-year-old girl. The *skáldkona* (female skald) recites a couplet chastising him for his wandering eyes: "Era gapriplar góðir / gægr er þér í augum" [Gapers are no good / your eyes are agog] (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:89). Her words were certainly effective; according to the saga, her husband leapt over a table, named witnesses, and declared himself divorced on the spot. Another wedding, the well-known one from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða,* portrays the mistress of the household attempting to soften sharp exchanges between guests. She plays the role of mediator in a flyting that begins in good fun but ends on a sour note when one guest takes offense and eventually leaves the feast (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:26).

Although women's participation was limited and restricted during these more public events, their "reputation-seeking behavior" was, according to Bauman, "itself crafted and enacted before an audience with the goal of being celebrated in poems and stories" (1986:146). An example of such honor-seeking behavior by a woman can be seen in the actions of Unnr the Deep-Minded (called Auðr in *Íslendingabók),* who performed in this way at the wedding of her grandson in *Laxdœla saga* (*Laxdœla saga* 1934:11–13). Unnr was quite old but invited many people to her magnificent feast. At the feast she announced her heir and then retired to her bedchamber, where she was found dead the next morning. The wedding feast was Unnr's ultimate performance of hospitality. Her performance was then evaluated by the guests: they thought it noteworthy "hversu Unnr hafði haldit virðingu sinni til dauðadags" [how Unnr had maintained her honor until her dying day] (*Laxdœla saga* 1934:13). Unnr's opening passage in *Laxdœla saga* is also an example of how sagas functioned as rituals of elevation of an ancestor or settler. In this case Unnr or Auðr slides up the strong-weak continuum to a position of power and prestige that is normally occupied by a man but is not "off-limits" to the exceptional woman.

There is little here to distinguish the quality of a *drengr / höfuðskörungr* (brave man) from that of a kvenskörungr (brave woman).[23] When a woman performs as a drengr, she earns the honor of being known as a kvenskörungr. That implies, as Clover has suggested, "a single standard of behavior, a system that obviously advantaged the male but at the same time a system in which, because the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise

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and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall, the potential for gender overlap in the social hierarchy was always present" (1982:400).

Women performed for other types of events that took place innangarðs in the sagas. In *Eiríks saga rauða,* Þorbjörg lítilvölva (Little sibyl) performed a *seiðr* (incantation) (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935:206–209). A seiðr could be performed either as a divination or as a curse against a specific person (see Strömbäck 1970). The pagan practice is described by Snorri Sturlusson in *Ynglinga saga* (1941–51). In chapter 4, Snorri tells that Freyja taught the gods seiðr: "Dóttir Njarðar var Freyja; hon var blótgyðja; hon kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vönum var títt" [Njórðr's daughter was Freyja; she was a heathen priestess; she was the first to teach the Æsir gods the incantations the Vanir gods practiced] (Sturlusson 1941–51:13).

In chapter 7, Óðinn becomes the "seiðr-master":

> Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mönnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mönnum vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt. [Óðinn knew that feat—one that gives great power and that he himself performed—called seiðr. From this he could discern the destiny of men and predict events that had not yet occurred. He could also inflict death, or misfortune, or sickness and deprive men of their wits or strength and transfer it to others by means of it. But the practice of this sorcery is accompanied by such lewdness that men consider it shameful to perform, so the feat was taught to the priestesses.] [Sturlusson 1941–51:19]

The seiðr in *Eiríks saga rauða* was a divination during a time of famine in Greenland. Þorbjörg is invited to a feast "at vita, hvé nær létta myndi óárani þessu, sem yfir stóð" [to discern how soon the famine that troubled them now might cease] (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935:206). She comes to the household in the evening dressed in an elaborate costume: "ok hon hafði staf í hendi, ok var á knappr; hann var búinn með messingu og settr steinum ofan um knappinn" [and she had a staff in her hand with a knob on it; it was ornamented with brass and set with stones just below the knob] (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935:206). A woman carrying such a knobbed staff is depicted on Danish gold-foil figures from the sixth century (Simpson 1967:190–191). A staff was said to be found in the grave of a *seiðkona* (seiðr woman) in *Laxdœla saga.*[24] The term *völva* (f.), which is part of Þorbjörg's name, is derived from *völr* (m.), or staff. DeVries (1961) interprets the word *völva* to mean *stabträgerin,* or staff bearer. Not all women who performed seiðr were called "völur"; they could be called "seiðkonur" (seiðr women), "spákonur" (prophetesses), or "vísindakonur" (wise women) or not be given any special title at all.

Þorbjörg did not perform the first evening of the feast. Her host asks her to look over the household, herd, and home, but she makes no comment until the next evening. The performance is worth quoting:

> En um morgininn, at áliðnum degi, var henni veittr sá umbúningr, sem hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja seiðinn. Hon bað ok fá sér konur þær, er kynni fræði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlokur hétu. En þær konur fundusk eigi. Þá var leitat at um bæinn, ef nökkurr kynni. Þá segir Guðríðr:

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"Hvárki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstra mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur." Þorkell segir: "Þá ertu happfróð." Hon segir: "Þetta er þat eitt atferli, er ek ætla í engum atbeina at vera, því at ek em kristin kona." Þorbjörg segir: "Svá mætti verða, at þú yrðir mönnum at liði hér um, en þú værir þá kona ekki verri en áðr; en við Þorkel mun ek meta at fá þá hluti til, er hafa þarf." Þorkell herðir nú at Guðríði, en hon kvezk gera mundu sem han vildi. Slógu þá konur hring um hjallinn, en Þorbjörg sat á uppi. Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit, svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttisk heyrt hafa með fegri rödd kvæði kveðit, sá er þar var hjá. Spákonan þakkar henni kvæðit ok kvað margar þær náttúrur nú til hafa sótt ok þykkja fagrt at heyra, er kvæðit var svá vel flutt,—"er áðr vildu við oss skiljask ok engan hlýðni oss veita. En mér eru nú margir þeir hlutir auðsýnir, er áðr var ek dulið, ok margir aðrir. En ek kann þér þat segja, Þorkell, at hallæri þetta mun ekki haldask lengr en í vetr, ok mun batna árgangr sem várar. Sóttarfar þat, sem á hefir legit, man ok batna vánu bráðara. En þér, Guðríðr, skal ek launa í hönd liðsinni þat, er oss hefir af þér staðit, því at þín forlög eru mér nú allglöggsæ. Þú munt gjaforð fá hér á Grœnlandi, þat er sæmiligastr er, þó at þér verði þat eigi langæðar, því at vegar þínir liggja út til Íslands, ok man þar koma frá þér bæði mikil ætt ok góð, ok yfir þínum kynkvíslum skína bjartari geislar en ek hafa megin til at geta slíkt vandliga sét; enda far þú nú heil ok vel, dóttir." Síþan gengu menn at vísindakonunni ok frétti þá hverr þess, er mest forvitni var á at vita. Hon var ok góð af frásögnum; gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði. [*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935:207–209]

[But on the morrow, towards the end of day, she (Thorbjorg) was fitted out with the apparatus she needed to perform her spells. She asked too to procure her such women as knew the lore which was necessary for the spell, and bore the name Varðlokur or Spiritlocks. But no such women were to be found, so there was a search right through the house to find whether anyone was versed in these matters.

"I am unversed in magic, neither am I a prophetess," said Gudrid then, "but Halldis my foster-mother taught me in Iceland the chant which she called Varðlokur."

"Then you are wise in good time," said Thorbjorg.

"This is a kind of proceeding I feel I can play no part in," said Gudrid, "for I am a Christian woman."

"Yet it might happen," said Thorbjorg, "that you could prove helpful to folk in this affair, and still be no worse a woman than before. But it is Thorkel I must look to procure me the things I need."

Thorkel now pressed Gudrid hard, till she said she would do as he wished. The women now formed a circle round the platform on which Thorbjorg was seated. Gudrid recited the chant so beautifully and well that no one who was present could say he had heard a chant recited by a lovelier voice. The seeress thanked her for the chant, adding that many spirits had been drawn there now who thought it lovely to lend ear, the chant had been so admirably delivered—spirits "who before wished to keep their distance from us and give us no hearing. And now many things are apparent to me which earlier were hidden from me as from many others. And I can tell you, Thorkel, that this famine will not last longer than this winter, and that the season will mend when spring comes. The sickness which has afflicted us, that too will mend sooner than was expected. As for you, Gudrid, I will repay you here and now for the help we have derived from you, for your fate is now all clear to me. You will make a match here in Greenland, the most distinguished there is, yet it will not be of long duration; for your ways lie out to Iceland, where there will spring from you a great and goodly progeny, and over the branches of your family will shine beams brighter than I have power to see precisely as they are. And so, my daughter, farewell now, and happiness go with you."

After this men approached the prophetess and inquired, each of them, about what they were most concerned to know. She was free with her information, and little indeed of what she said failed to come about. (*Eirik the Red* 1961:135–137)]

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Chanting or music is a feature of seiðr that, according to Mircea Eliade, connects it to "classic shamanic séance" (1964:386).[25] Here a member of the audience performs as a kind of prelude to the völva's ecstatic performance. Such a prelude can be considered a means of binding the audience to the performer and including them in the ritual. Guðríðr's performance was keyed by a disclaimer, framing her performance with what Bauman calls "a surface denial of any real competence at all" (1978:22), or perhaps a complicated claim to verbal competence (mastery of the form) via a denial of paganism (the content). Women formed a concentric circle around the raised platform, or *seiðhiallr,* while Guðríðr chanted the spell called "Varðlokur."[26] The chant was evaluated by the audience and the völva; Guðríðr's prestige increased because of her display of verbal competence. The völva next prophesied the fate of the household and the individuals in the household. The narrative of the chain of events is then interrupted by an evaluation of Þorbjörg's prophecies based on the outcome of the saga. The völva in this text was consulted when there was a disequilibrium between innangarðs and útangarðs. The household was in danger, but the performance of seiðr apparently drew spirits and restored balance as well as a sense of communitas.

A similar instance is recorded in *Landnámabók.* Þuríðr sundafyllir of Hálogaland practiced seiðr. During a bad year for fishing, she filled the sound with fish by her performance:

> Þuríðr sundafyllir ok Völu-Steinn son hennar fór af Hálogalandi til Íslands ok nam Bolungarvík ok bjöggu í Vatsnesi; Hon var því kölluð sundafyllir, at hon seiddi til þess í hallæri á Hálogalandi, at hvert sund var fullt af fiskum. [Þuríðr sound-filler and her son Völu-Stein traveled from Hálogaland (Norway) to Iceland and reached Bolungarvík and lived in Vatness; for the following reason she was called "sound-filler": during a famine in Hálogaland, she performed seiðr, thus causing each sound to be filled with fish.] [*Landnámabók* 1968, part 1:186]

Þuríðr's seiðr earned her such renown that her name was changed to honor her performance. The other interesting thing to note about these two seiðr performances is their connection to fertility. Þorbjörg predicts the end of the famine, and Guðríðr ends it and is prophesied to be the source of "bæði mikil ætt ok góð" [progeny both great and outstanding] (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935:209). Her offspring are described with the image of branches of a tree. Both seiðr performances occurred when the fertility of the community was threatened. As Turner has observed of more structured societies, the "marginal" person or the "outsider" is summoned when the official order is in peril or out of balance with outside forces and when harmony with those forces is desired (1974:152, 1979:111).

Seiðr was also performed to put a curse on someone, as the Norwegian Queen Gunnhildr curses Egill in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar:* "Svá er sagt, at Gunnhildr lét seið efla ok lét þat seiða, at Egill Skalla-Grímsson skyldi aldri ró bíða á Íslandi, fyrr en hon sæi hann" [It is said that Gunnhildr performed seiðr so that Egill Skalla-Grímsson should never rest easy in Iceland before she might see him again] (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 1933:176). Furthermore, although seiðr performances seemed primarily associated with women, both men and women—sometimes as

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couples—practiced seiðr.[27] However, it was considered especially shameful for men; all the divination seiðr adduced by Strömbäck (1935) were reported to have been performed by women. According to Gro Steinsland and Kari Vogt, "Volvens profetiske evne innebar seid-utøvelse—en funksjon som bare kunne tolereres når den ble utført av kvinner" [The völva's prophetic capability implies seiðr performance—a function that could only be tolerated when it was carried out by women] (1981:104). In the Eddic poem "Lokasenna," Loki insults Óðinn by saying that his participation in seiðr makes him cowardly or effeminate: "oc hugða ec þat args aðal [and that, I think, is an emasculate quality] (Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 24). The most detailed descriptions of seiðr performances are of those performed by women.[28]

I turn now to the performances of völur in the Eddic poems. This adds another dimension to my analysis of women and performance, as I am dealing with mythological material. On the relationship between mythological and topographical space Gurevich writes, "Scandinavian topography is not characterized by purely geographical coordinates; it is permeated by emotional and religious sense, and geographical space is at the same time religious and mythological space" (1969:45). In the vertical model of the Scandinavian mythological cosmos, the opposition is between life and death, represented by the World-Ash, Yggdrasill. Life above, in the masculine space of Valhall, is contrasted with the feminine space, below, in Hel (Hastrup 1985:149).

According to Steinsland and Vogt, Óðinn consulted with a völva when the gods were in a crisis situation (1981:104). In "Baldrs draumar," Óðinn woke the völva from her grave to find out about Baldr's fate (Boer 1922: st. 4). In "Gróugaldr," after a son wakes his mother from "death's doors" ("vek ek þik dauðra dura"), she asks him why he disturbs someone "er til moldar er komin / ok ór ljóðheimum liðin" [who has turned to dust / and disappeared from the world of humans] (Boer 1922: st. 2). The last line of another Eddic poem, "Völuspá," "nú mun hon søcqvaz" [now she will sink] (Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 66), depicts the völva's sinking or "sliding" back to a position of powerlessness once her performance ends.

"Völuspá" begins with the völva's speech, but one discovers right away what Óðinn wants to know:

vildo, at ec Valföður,
vél fyrtelja
forn spiöll fira,
þau er fremst um man.
[You wish that I, Val-father,
would set about telling
the old lore of people,
the most distant that I remember.] [Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 1]

The völva tells about the beginning of the world and prophesies the end. In return for her performance, Óðinn pays her with arm rings and jewels.

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The vertical movement made clearer in the Eddic poems and explained by Hastrup (1985) clarifies the seiðr performances in the sagas. Hastrup considers the vertical model of cosmology, symbolized by Yggdrasill, the tree of fate, to be "explicitly concerned with the irreversibility of time" (1985:150). In this light, the staff or völr that the völva carries—and the object from which the name of her profession derives—evokes the vertical model, just as the tree does. The platform, which raises her up, expresses her vertical movement from the powerless space below, like the völur in the Eddic poems "Baldrs draumar," "Gróugaldr," and "Völuspá." In the sagas the völva is the primary performer. She is elevated into the powerful space (further emphasized by the phallic staff she carries). She slides or moves up into a space of prestige.

Hastrup also writes about the horizontal model of the cosmos, which corresponds with the geographical/legal concept of innangarðs and útangarðs. Gurevich considers the farmstead "a prototype model of the universe" that can be seen in the basic opposition between *Miðgarðr* (the middle yard)/*Ásgarðr* (the yard of the Æsir gods) versus *Útgarðr* (the outer yard) or the gods versus the giants (1969:43). This horizontal model expresses the reversibility or "cyclicality" of life (Hastrup 1985:150). In the saga texts, women's seiðr performances take place innangarðs. But in "Völuspá," the völva is said to be *úti* (outside) (Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 28). In this case Óðinn is the primary performer, the one who journeys to the space of the other; the repositories of wisdom and power are reversed and reside now in the "female" space below, in Hel. As in the seiðr performances in the sagas, the status quo of structured society is endangered and the male representative seeks out the marginal female member to restore unity. The voice of the völva binds together the past with the future and narrates the social drama between the gods and the giants—their common origins, their feuds, and their final confrontation. Her voice represents the interface between the cults of the earth (Útgarðr) and the ancestral cults (Ásgarðr), just as Þorbjörg's brings the Greenlandic community into harmony with external forces.

For the connection between seiðr and fertility, I turn to a text in *Flateyjarbók*, "Völsaþáttr," which is inserted in *Óláfs saga helga* (1945). This *þáttr* (tale) is about King (and Saint) Óláfr's journey to a farming family in northern Norway, where paganism was still practiced. The pagan family's horse died and was being slaughtered (perhaps for the meat). The son brings the horse's penis into the house and chases his sister and a servant woman with it. Finally his mother, with a wry comment about how nothing should go to waste, wraps the horse's penis in linen with onions and other herbs and stores it in a chest. Each evening she performs a ritual with the penis, which she now addresses by the proper name "Völsi." She removes Völsi from the chest, gives it to her husband, and then recites a verse. Each member of the household does the same.

This ritual continues until King Óláfr and his men come to the household in disguise, each claiming to be named "Grímr." (The name Grímr means "mask" and was a name that Óðinn assumed when he traveled in disguise.) That evening the household and guests participate in the ritual and recite the poems as usual, but after the king recites his verse, he tosses Völsi to the dog. Once the king disposes of

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Völsi, the entire family converts to Christianity as if released from their slavish devotion to the lewd pagan relic.

The text has been interpreted by most scholars as an old fertility rite. Folke Ström finds *hieros gamos* symbolism in the confrontation between a fertility god and feminine powers (1954:30). Most scholars are concerned with the philological problems the word *mörnir* poses. It can be read as either "sword" (m. sg.) or "giantesses" (f. pl.); it occurs in the following stanza:

Aukinn ertu Uolse
ok vpp vm tekinn
lini gæddr
en laukum studdr
þiggi Maurnir þetta blæti
en þu bonde sealfr
ber þu at þe Uolsa.
[You have increased, Völsi
and been lifted up
prepared with linen
and propped with leeks
Accept Maurnir this sacrifice
but you, yourself, farmer
take Völsi to you.] [*Óláfs saga helga* 1945:43]

Steinsland and Vogt (1981:103) connect the name Völsi to *völr* (m., staff) and *völva* (f., staff bearer).[29] They consider the horse's penis to be a cultish counterpart of the völva's staff. They interpret the last verse that the woman speaks as a *spá* (prophesy):

hefui mig um hiarra
ok a hurdasa
vita ef ek borgit fæ
blætinu helga.
[lift me over the hinges
and onto the door beam
so that I can be assured
of the holy offer.] [*Óláfs saga helga* 1945:445]

Steinsland and Vogt draw a parallel between *hurdasa* (door beam) and the words of a slave woman being sacrificed in the burial of a Viking chieftain as recorded by Ibn Fadlan around 922 (1981:105). The slave woman is lifted three times to look over the top of a structure also called a door frame (Simpson 1967:197). Steinsland and Vogt interpret "Völsaþáttr" as a Christian reworking of "en gammel og velkjent motsetning mellom Odinreligion og volveinstitusjon" [an old and well-known contrast between Óðinic religion and the völva institution] (1981:105). They read the "core" myth (under the Christian revision) as a confrontation between a male-dominated, central, Óðinic cult of chieftains and warriors (represented here by the Christian King Óláfr) and a local, feminine, agrarian cult. This

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performance does seem to be portrayed from a very different perspective than the other seiðr performances.

If one compares "Völsaþáttr" to the encounter between Steinunn and Þangbrandr in *Njáls saga,* one can see that the attitudes toward the encounter between pagan and Christian forces are quite different. In the þáttr, the king displays his verbal competence by composing his own verse (unlike Þangbrandr) and makes his final, ritual gesture of throwing the cult object to the dog. In this verbal encounter the Christian representative "shames" the pagan participants whose rituals seem to be a grotesque version of seiðr. The woman's connection to the horse (represented by his penis) is made to seem lewd, vulgar, and excessive rather than sacred. It is interesting, though, that she asks to be lifted onto the door beam, as if to ride it as one would ride a horse. Yggdrasill, the tree of fate, means, literally, "Yggr's [Óðinn's] horse." The völva who performs the seiðr in *Örvar-Odds saga* (1943–44: ch. 2) also has a connection with a horse and performs *náttfarsseiðr* (night-travelling seiðr). In the þáttr, King Óláfr has the last word and succeeds in converting the household. In a sense he "emasculates," silences, and pushes back the phallic woman—or even the ritual performance itself. The king represents not only Christianity but the official power of the public realm. Ritual performances that had the potential force to unite the local, family-based powers of the pagan past and disrupt the king's official legal journey through his new Christian realm are shown less tolerance and shamed into silence. The law of the social-legal realm is, in a sense, cutting its teeth by asserting its precedence over the ritual performances in the private realm where women wielded their influence and authority. The king is portrayed as a hero capable of seeking out and silencing these threats to a stable order.

As noted earlier, the Christian church offered no formal performance roles to women. It was in the interest of both the church and the state to limit blood feuding and reduce the power of the family. This meant reducing or subduing the informal, family-based power innangarðs, in the farmstead, where women were able to participate in the politics of blood feud and the semiotic system of honor. Valuing the public over the private meant that honor would be distributed to those and by those who participated in the social-legal realm. Private performances, such as hvöt and seiðr, that stirred up blood feud and undermined the official power of the church and state may have been a source or site of cultural anxiety that would lead to elaborate fantasies in order to "play out" or "work through" the social drama of confrontation between old and new in the collective cultural imagination.

An example of this type of cultural fantasy about women's performances occurs in chapter 190 of Sturla Þorðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:519–522). The performance takes place in a series of dreams that foreshadows the sequence of events leading up to the fall of the Icelandic Freestate, when tribute from the North and South Quarter of Iceland was pledged to King Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63) at the Althing in 1262. Jóreiðr's dreams are framed in Christian terms; readers are told that she dreamed them in the church at Miðjumdalr. In each dream Jóreiðr encounters a woman from the mythic past: Guðrún

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Gjúkadóttir (the wife of Sigurðr and the Niflung sister of Gunnar and Högni), the woman who performs hvöt and lament in Eddic poetry.[30] In Jóreiðr's dreams Guðrún appears to her riding a grey horse. When Jóreiðr asks her where she came from, " 'Norðan kom ek at,' segir hon, 'ór násheim' " ["I come from the north," she says, "out of Násheim"] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:519). Násheim is the realm of the dead, hence the pagan past. When Jóreiðr worries that she is speaking with a heathen woman, Guðrún replies, "Engu skal þik þat skipta . . . hvárt ek em kristin eða heiðin, en vinr em ek vinar míns" [You should not worry yourself . . . over whether I am a Christian or a heathen, for I am a friend to my friends] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:521). Guðrún appears on three consecutive nights in Jóreiðr's dreams and answers questions about the fates of various men. The fourth time she appears she recites the following verse:

Þá vas betra,
es fyr baugum réð
Brandr inn örvi
ok burr skata.
En nú es fyr löndum
ok lengi mun
Hákon konungr
ok hans synir.
[Those days were better,
when Brandr ruled
and shared his wealth with all
as his sons did as well.
But now over the land
and probably for a long time
King Hákon rules
as his sons will, too.] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:522]

In the saga the mythical Guðrún laments the loss of the Icelandic Freestate to the Norwegian monarch and prophesies Iceland's continued subjugation to Hákon's sons.

Women's performances, their "voices," are increasingly interiorized or distanced until they can only be heard in the realm of visions, dreams, and myth. If the official order suppresses or eliminates oral, family-based performances in both the sacred and the secular spheres (as seen with the chieftainships), the natural recourse is interiorization (in the dream world) and archaism (the use of Eddic material). However, the oral tradition continued in Iceland, and it appears that women continued to participate in it. Vésteinn Ólason notes that most of the ballad informants in the 19th century were women (1982:23). Maintaining an oral tradition alongside the official written tradition may have been an alternative form of expression for forces and desires that were not part of but were not considered disruptive to the official legal realm. This "alternative" oral tradition maintained a continuity with the pagan performances and "group" values of the past. It may have coexisted in a muted fashion with the written tradition, dialoguing with and contributing to that tradition. At times and in some texts (such as during the

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nationalistic impulses of the 19th century and in the fornaldarsögur) oral traditions and forms seem almost amplified.

In the saga texts it appears that the use of "powerful" marginal female figures to perform pagan rituals of vengeance or prophesy has the advantage that saga writers and audience members who officially endorsed the Norwegian monarchy (as Sturla Þórðarson, the author of *Íslendinga saga,* did) could unofficially express the loss of continuity with their past by fantasizing or imagining those sentiments expressed by a woman from the mythic past. Women's "voice" in these sagas may not represent what women like Steinvör actually said or felt, but it may instead represent what Icelanders collectively wished to express in a complex way—a way that simultaneously brought them face to face with their past and distanced them from it. This allowed one to evoke the past in order to identify with the aggressive and heroic attributes, the verbal acumen, and the binding rituals of the family; and, at the same time, one could disavow the pagan attributes (the demand for violence) by virtue of the fact that those who uttered these blasphemies were dream figures of women from the past. Women are thus constrained to stand for the past as a way of remembering and preserving the connection to the past but evoking it in a way that minimizes its potential disruption of or threat to the present symbolic order.

Although women's influence was limited to the domestic sphere, the sagas show that their activities in that realm were consequential for their families. I will venture a step further and propose, in the following discussion of Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir (whose hvöt is mentioned above), that one measure of women's influence is the way that, in other versions of the events, their activities are portrayed in different lights, according to the interests of the saga writer and the extent to which the "group" values were considered a threat to those interests. For example, Unnr the Deep-Minded, who, according to *Laxdœla saga,* was given a burial similar to that of a pagan chieftain (1934:13), is, in *Landnámabók* ("The Book of Settlements") depicted setting up crosses when she first reaches Iceland and insisting on a grave in consecrated ground before she dies (1968, part 1:139, 147). Thus whereas *Laxdœla saga* exalts her family, *Landnámabók* attributes her exceptional status among the first settlers of Iceland to her faith. As I show below, Steinvör, one of the last members of the powerful Sturlung dynasty to attempt a show of force, was cast in several lights in the various sagas that make up *Sturlunga saga.*

In 1263 Sturla Þórðarson (nephew of the great Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson) found himself exiled from Iceland and shipwrecked in Norway precisely where he would find the least support: in the district where King Hákon's son Magnús was staying with his fleet. According to the Icelandic account of these events, *Sturla þáttr* in *Sturlunga saga* (1946, 2:227–236), a good friend of the Sturlungs and an advisor to the young King Magnús, Gautr á Meli, advised Sturla to pledge his services to Magnús and thereby save his life.[31] Sturla followed Gautr's advice but was given a chilly royal reception.

One evening, however, Sturla was asked to entertain the king's men as they prepared to retire for the night. Sturla's performance gathered such a large audience that

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the queen, who was also aboard the ship, took notice and asked what was happening on the deck. She was told,

> "Þar vilja menn heyra til sögu, er hann Íslendingrinn segir." Hon mælti: "Hvat sögu er þat?" Hann svaraði: "Þat er frá trollkonu mikilli, ok er góð sagan, enda er vel frá sagt." ["Men are trying to listen to a saga that the Icelander is telling over there." She said, "Which saga is that?" He answered, "It is about a huge troll wife, a good saga, and the telling is even better."] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:232–233]

This incident is well known to saga scholars because it is often cited as evidence that sagas were recited orally as a way of entertaining a medieval Scandinavian audience. The saga that Sturla told, according to *Sturla þáttr,* was called *Huldar saga.* It was, undoubtedly, what scholars today would call a *fornaldarsaga,* or mythic-heroic saga. The corpus of extant fornaldarsögur consists of an eclectic group of roughly thirty-five sagas. Unfortunately Sturla's version of *Huldar saga* is not among the fornaldarsögur that we have today.[32] This account of the performance gives the impression that it was a well-known tale in 13th-century Scandinavia, for the men on board are said to have judged that Sturla's performance of it was better than any other they had heard (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:233).

The next day brought no breeze to send King Magnús on his journey, but the queen—despite the king's previous admonishment that she pay the Icelander no heed—sent for Sturla after the men had eaten. She asked that he "hafa með sér trollkonusöguna" [bring along the saga of the troll wife] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:233). She may have thought that Sturla would have a written version of his saga, but *Sturla þáttr* does not indicate that Sturla's version of *Huldar saga* was ever recorded. The queen responded with enthusiasm to Sturla's performance, but Magnús remained silent, even after Sturla recited a poem he had composed about the king himself. The next evening, however, the king sent for Sturla, served him wine, and asked him to recite the poem he had composed about Magnús's father, King Hákon Hákonarson. Finally, Sturla received words of praise from the king: "Þat ætla ek, at þú kveðir betr en páfinn" [In my opinion, you recite better than the pope himself] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:234).

Through his artistry, and despite previous enmity between the Icelandic Sturlung family and the Norwegian monarchy, Sturla gained a privileged relationship with the king. Iceland had only recently submitted to the Norwegian crown (1262) and officially endorsed being governed by a monarch. Sturla—well aware that his Uncle Snorri's death was related to the deterioration of his relations with King Hákon—assures Magnús of his loyalty:

> En nú veit ek, herra, at ek hefi affluttr verit við föður yðvarn ok yðr af óvinum mínum ok eigi með sönnu efni. Nú þarf ek sem allir aðrir guðs miskunnar ok yðvarrar ásjá, herra, ok nú er allt mitt mál á yðru valdi. [Now I know, your Majesty, that I have been at odds with you and your father because of my enemies, and unjustly so. Now, by God's grace and Your protection, Sire, I place all the faculty of my speech at your disposal.] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:234]

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With the support of the queen, Sturla gained the royal favor and the patronage of the king as well: "Ok litlu síðar kom Sturla í ina mestu kærleika við konunginn" [And a little later, Sturla came into the closest friendship with the king] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:234). The þáttr then tells how Sturla went on to set together ("setja saman") sagas about both King Magnús and his father King Hákon.[33]

Queen Engilborg's enthusiasm for the Icelander's poetry surprised King Magnús: "Kanntu mjök gerla at heyra?" [Can you follow it much at all?] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:233). Apparently, Magnús had not expected the Danish-born and cloister-educated Engilborg (in Norwegian and Danish, Ingelborg), daughter of the Danish King Erik Plovpenning, to appreciate (or understand) Icelandic verse.[34] She may, however, have been familiar with the Icelandic tradition through the work of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum (History of the Danes),* written in Latin and dedicated to the Danish King Valdemar II (1170–1241), Engilborg's grandfather. In the preface to this work, Saxo cites Icelanders as the sources of much of his material:

> The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence. They regard it a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement it is as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinized their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognized such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses. [1979:5]

In his introduction, Saxo pledges the service of his pen to Engilborg's grandfather, King Valdemar II: "Now following the ancient right of hereditary service, I am resolved, with the forces of my mind at least, to soldier for you like those loyal fighters my father and my grandfather, who were recognized frequenters of your renowned sire's war camp" (1979:6). Perhaps the queen recognized that Sturla could perform the same function for King Magnús as Saxo performed for King Valdemar of Denmark. Valdemar transferred power and rights from the Danish *þing* (a meeting of local chieftains or authorities) to a more centralized control by the Danish crown (Barber 1992:386). Just as Saxo pledged his pen to Valdemar, Sturla pledges his service to Magnús, as quoted above.

The king's praise of Sturla—if one trusts the account of his words as recorded in *Sturlu þáttr*—that he recites better than the pope himself is also telling. The centralized control that Engilborg's grandfather (the Danish King Valdemar II) achieved during his reign was threatened and eventually curtailed significantly during the reign of her father, Erik, who was assassinated in 1250. After Erik Plovpenning's death, the Danish aristocracy joined forces with the church to restrict the power of the crown. No doubt Queen Engilborg, Erik's daughter, saw in the impoverished and exiled Icelander a man with Saxo's talents, but one who worked *in the vernacular* rather than the Latin language of the church. If Magnús, like Valdemar, was to establish a monarchy in which law and administration would descend from the crown, he would have to prevent an alliance between the

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chieftains—whose power resided in the local þings—and the "native" church, as well as the universal church, whose power lay in the hands of the pope.

For Magnús to run his monarchy from the top down meant an increase in the use of written records as opposed to traditional oral communication, as well as the promotion of the vernacular language as the administrative and legal language of the realm. As a former lawspeaker of Iceland, Sturla's literacy and familiarity with the traditional Icelandic law code—the very root of local Icelandic power vested in the chieftains and their families—would certainly serve to further Magnús's goal of creating more uniformity in—and control over—the laws of the people he ruled. Indeed, Sturla delivered *Járnsiða (Ironside),* Magnús's first revision of the Icelandic law code, to Iceland in 1271.

Apparently, it was after he delivered this written document from King Magnús to the Icelanders that Sturla composed *Íslendinga saga.* Keeping this in mind, I want to return to the previous discussion of fantasies about women's performances and the complex construction of "woman's" voice. Specifically I want to return to Sturla's cousin, Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir. I have referred to Steinvör as one of the women listed in "Skáldatal," of Snorri's *Edda* (1931:355), as a skald for the Norwegian chieftain Gautr á Meli, the same chieftain who advised Sturla on his dealings with King Magnús. I have also referred to her hvöt performance described in the saga about her brother, Þórðr, entitled *Þórðar saga kakala.* In this saga Steinvör undermines her husband's authority twice, siding and riding with her brother Þórðr to lead the Sturlung family (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:15–17). Yet her headstrong behavior is treated favorably in this saga; she is called a "höfuðskörungr."

On the other hand, she is treated as a disruptive element in another saga in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, *Þorgils saga skarða.*[35] Here she wields the power of the family by manipulating the inheritance of her brother's Sturlung property out of the king's hands and back under the control of the family. Þórðr kakali, Steinvör's brother, has no legitimate children who survived him. Thus Steinvör acts as the sole survivor of her father Sighvatr in assigning the custody of what the family perceived as their inalienable "group" property. Jóhannesson writes, "After the annual session of the Althing in 1255, she gave her son-in-law, Þorvarðr Þórarinsson the right to the entire inheritance including liegemen" (1974:271). In *Þorgils saga skarða* it is told, "Sögðu menn, at hon *eggjaði* hann á at halda sem hann vœri *drengr* til" [It is said that she *urged* him to behave *manfully*] (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 2:211, emphasis added). In the saga of Þorgils skarði (the king's representative), Steinvör is portrayed as a woman who goads her son-in-law into pitting the family's claim to property against the king's power to distribute the property of an individual who has sworn allegiance to him. Steinvör's son-in-law Þorvarðr, according to Jóhannesson, "would not abandon his entirely lawful claim to Eyjafjörður, where Þorgils had nothing more to support his authority than an order from the king. On the night of 28 January 1258, Þorgils stayed overnight at Hrafnagil in Eyjafjörður. There Þorvarðr captured him and had him executed along with two of his companions" (1974:271). Both men must have felt they had "legitimate" claims to the Eyjafjörður property, yet *Þorgils saga skarða* emphasizes how deeply Þorgils (the

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king's choice) was mourned. In this saga Steinvör is portrayed as the voice of the past that causes strife between (otherwise) reasonable men.

While Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir is treated unfavorably in *Þorgils saga skarða* and rather favorably in *Þórðar saga kakala,* she is presented in a more complex manner as a prophetic and somewhat enigmatic figure in *Íslendinga saga,* the saga that forms the cornerstone of *Sturlunga saga,* composed by her cousin, the historian Sturla Þórðarson. In *Íslendinga saga* Steinvör relates a dream verse that portends the death of her father Sighvatr at the battle of Örlyggstaðir (1238), just as Jóreiðr's dream (in the same saga) portends the end of the Icelandic Freestate. Steinvör dreams that she is outside in a desolate pasture ("eyðitröð") when she sees a man she recognizes (Þorgrímr ór Gunnarsholt) sitting on a fence and looking at a head that lies in the pasture. He speaks this verse to her:

Sit ek, ok sék á
svarit Steinvarar:
Hví liggr hér á vegg
höfuð i örtröð?
[I sit and wait for
Steinvör's answer:
Why would a head lie
Here on the wall in this abandoned pasture?] [*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 1:421]

Steinvör's dream poem illustrates the complexities of determining what constitutes "women's voice" in the sagas. Although Steinvör is named as a skald, what Sturla, her cousin, constrains her to "say" is not even presented as her "own" words but as words spoken to her by a man in her dream. However, judging from the content and the context, the poem seems to express the same—though more veiled—sentiment as Jóreiðr's dream, a feeling of loss and senseless destruction. The dream may have been intended as Steinvör's premonition of the death of her father and brothers, which resulted in her having to "answer" for a "headless" family by assuming the role as "höfuðskörungr" of the Sturlung family. Sturla avoids directly praising or blaming Steinvör for taking on that role, but the inclusion of this verse (along with Jóreiðr's) suggests that he felt it was significant to remember the forces that impelled her to do so without passing judgment. I read Steinvör's verse not as "women's voice" or even Steinvör's voice but as Sturla's complex "remembering" of Steinvör's voice—Sturla is supposed to have composed *Íslendinga saga* between 1270 and 1280, Steinvör to have dreamed the verse in 1238—a voice that stands for the Sturlung past and a tribute (in the form of a question) to the answer that he himself did not or could not give. Sturla chose (or was constrained by forces larger than himself) in 1263 to serve King Magnús of Norway at the urging of the same Norwegian chieftain whom Steinvör composed verses for: Gautr á Meli. Thus Steinvör's "voice" in Sturla's saga may not represent her voice at all but, instead, what Sturla (or the "Sturlunga lay and chieftainly literate" composers) could not openly or officially express but felt impelled to record for other reasons. By constraining Jóreiðr and Steinvör to stand for and lament the

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past, Sturla can speak with two voices: one that unofficially identifies with the loss of the oral, family past and another that officially disavows and distances itself from that past and embraces the new written order of the Norwegian monarchy.

Judging from the Old Norse literary and historical sources I have examined, I would conclude that women may have contributed to the oral semiotic system of medieval Iceland, especially in the private or innangarðs realm. Performances by women were enacted in crisis situations in order to maintain an equilibrium between the household and the outer world and to restore a sense of wholeness. Women were responsible for maintaining the honor of the household to which they belonged, but they were also concerned with their own personal honor. The church and the state offered no performance roles for women. With the increase of their influence and the devaluing of the honor of the family, performance rituals enacted in the private realm were subordinated to legal rituals in the public realm, giving women less access to performance roles and influence in public affairs. Accounts of women's visions and dreams may have been the result of the cultural constraint that demanded that marginal figures (such as women, slaves, and old men) stand for or become "mouthpieces" for the past, but they may also have been an actual outlet for the expression of discontent with the new social order. These accounts could be evidence of the increasing interiorization of women's voice and a retreat into archaism, just as the saga texts show evidence of the same retreat.

I find, contrary to Mundal, that women's participation in the oral transmission of cultural heritage was limited but not completely dominated by males as Bauman implies. An oral culture does not guarantee that women will participate equally in the semiotic system. Structures were already in place restricting women to the private sphere before literacy was introduced. However, this may not have been a serious disadvantage for women until the public sphere became privileged by the emerging church and state institutions, making the boundary between the private and the public realms less permeable. Prior to this sealing off, women's performances had teeth. Their rituals often undermined official legal settlements made in the public sphere. It is in this light that Flosi's response, "Köld eru kvenna ráð" [Cold are the counsels of women] to Hildigunnr's hvöt should be interpreted. Her voice bites as severely as the northern cold, binding him to his kinsmen and goading them into vengeance.

Notes

[1]For a concise, up-to-date synopsis of the debate, see Jochens 1996:234–239. See also Birgit Sawyer's "Women: Ideal and Reality" (Sawyer and Sawyer 1993:188–213).

[2]Peter Hallberg (1962:49–69) provides a useful summary of this discussion. For more recent contributions, see William Miller (1990:43–76), who argues for the social/historical value of the sagas. He writes, "It is rather the tale's very artfulness that gives us sufficient social and normative structure to make social and moral as well as literary sense of the events it relates" (1990:76). The debate continues with the contributions of scholars who read history as cultural myths or fiction. John Lindow (1997) and Margaret Clunies Ross (1997) argue for the "relevance of myth to society and history" by pointing

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out the prevalence of mythic elements and structures in texts that previously have been considered historical documents (Lindow 1997:463).

[3]Of these accounts, *Njáls saga* (ca. 1280), *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (ca. 1300), and *Kristni saga* (ca. 1300) are late sources. The earlier accounts are *Íslendingabók* (ca. 1125–30), *Hungrvaka* (ca. 1215), and *Þorvalds þáttr Koðránssonar* (ca. 1250). For a critical comparison and analysis of these accounts, see Ahlback 1990.

[4]A *skáld* (skald) is a court poet and historian, but the attachment to a specific court or king (ever since Iceland was a Commonwealth, before 1264) was arranged on a case-by-case basis. Some sagas feature these skalds, their families, and their poetry (often composed in the courtly meter called *dróttkvætt),* such as *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, Grettis saga,* and *Gísla saga.*

[5]On verbal dueling and the flyting or *senna* in Old Norse literature, see Clover 1979, Parks 1990, and Swenson 1991.

[6]Bo Almqvist considers Steinunn's verse to be modeled on an anonymously composed pastiche verse about the destruction of an earlier missionary's ship. He treats her verses as part of the background for níð verses against the missionaries but does not give an in-depth analysis of her verses as níð proper, which would have implications of sexual perversion. He does note however that the kenning *mögfellandi mellu* ("slayer of giantwoman's kinsman," i.e., Þórr) would imply that Steinunn considers Þangbrandr to be an offspring of the giants (1974:87).

[7]According to Sørensen, "In the world of the saga it is shameful for a man to be struck or wounded by a woman, because he cannot avenge himself. It was an infamous deed to use force against a woman" (1983:76).

[8]This is also true of "strong masculine women" in Mediterranean countries, who, according to David Gilmore, are "praised and admired for performing man's roles when circumstances so dictate" (1987:9).

[9]In *Íslendingabók,* Ari reports that Þangbrandr had slain two or three men who slandered him ("Þá es hann höfðo nítt") (*Landnámabók* 1968, part 1:14).

[10]Women did participate in the settlement of cases that concerned them at the Althing. Hallgerðr in *Sturlu saga* is given a choice in the settlement of her abduction case (*Sturlanga saga* 1946, 1:103–104). Although it is not clear whether she is consulted in public or privately, the point is that she participates in the settlement of her case.

[11]Rather than fault the traditional legal system and its reliance on force, women in general were judged not fit to prosecute a case based on this single failure to gain more compensation for the killing of the renowned chieftain Arnkell. According to the saga,

> En með því at eptirmálit varð eigi svá sœmiligt, sem líkligt Þótti um svá mikinn höfðingja, sem Arnkell var, þá færðu landsstjórnarmenn lög á því, at aldri síðan skyldi kona vera vígsakaraðili né yngri karlmaðr en sextán vetra, ok hefir þat haldizk jafnan síðan. [*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935:103–104]
>
> [Because the action over the killing of this outstanding man had gone so badly, the leading men of Iceland made it law that neither a woman, nor a man under the age of sixteen, should ever again be allowed to raise a manslaughter action, and this has been the law ever since (Pálsson and Edwards 1973:125).]

[12]Gro Steinsland cites several occurrences of the word *gyðja* in *Landnámabók* and in the family sagas (1985:34–35). She traces the gyðjur in *Landnámabók* to two districts in Norway: Trøndelag and Sogn. Sogn, she contends, has a rather high number of graves of wealthy women from the Viking period.

[13]Hallberg (1983) refers to a stanza in "Hávamál"—"Ofarla *bíta* / ec sá einom hal / orð illrar kono; / fláráð tunga / varð hánom at fiörlagi, / oc Þeygi um sanna söc" (Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 118, emphasis added)—in which an evil woman's tongue is likened to a sword that "bites" or kills a man. He also remarks on how the evil counsel of Svanhild's husband's advisor (Bicca) kills her in "Sigurðurqviða in skamma": "Hána muno *bíta* / Bicca ráð" (Neckel and Kuhn 1962: st. 64, emphasis added).

[14]Mundal concludes very differently. She prefers to calculate the loss of the majority of verses composed by women and estimates their total number to be about one hundred (1983:14). See Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (1961–63) for more on skaldic poems alleged to have been composed by women.

[15]A maiden named Ingunn—so learned that she could correct Latin texts that were recited to her as she sewed—is said to have taught male pupils at the cathedral school in Hólar early in the 12th century, as

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it is reported in chapter 27 of *Jóns saga helga* (1981:43). Because of her exceptional (oral) learning, Ingunn gained access to the public sphere of learning normally reserved for men.

[16]This agonistic exchange (a social drama in itself) can also be seen in the development of two sets of written law codes; *Halfiðaskrá* was the first written law code in Scandinavia, adopted by the Althing in 1118. By 1123 the bishops had the Christian law *(Kristinnalaga þáttr)* codified and passed at the Althing. In 1253 the national law was subordinated to the Christian law (Hastrup 1985:216–218).

[17]Carl Lindahl studies a similar figure, the loathly lady, in late medieval romances from the Continent (such as Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale,* c. 1390). He writes, "The figure of the loathly lady could serve as a social magnet to which other disenfranchised groups were drawn" (1995:71). See also John G. Cawelti's analysis of modern audience's identification with both the monster and its victims in formulaic fiction (1976:255).

[18]Unless noted otherwise, translations are my own.

[19]This tradition may indeed be very old, for Tacitus in "Germania" writes in 98 A.D. about the German tribes in battle:

> et in proximo pignora, unde feminarum ululatus audiri, unde vagitus infantium. . . . Memoriae proditur quasdam acies inclinatas iam et labantes a feminis restitutas constantia precum et obiectu pectorum et monstrata comminus captivitate. [and their loved ones remain near, close enough that the wails of women and cries of infants can be heard. . . . It is said that faltering or losing battle lines were restored by the women, by persistent entreaties, and by opposing their breast and demonstrating their immanent captivity.] [1970:142]

[20]Clover gives an excellent reading of both of these hvöt (see 1986a).

[21]Cf. Joaquín Martínez-Pizarro, who argues that the meals in *Heiðarvíga saga* should be read as fiction: "The repeated pattern of the meals can be best explained by formal considerations of unity, design and thematic balance; it is not the trace of a deep statement woven into the narrative by triplication, but a superficial order imposed on basic events of the story from without" (1986:233). For an opposing viewpoint see Miller, who asserts the "fact" of rituals (1983:181–182, n. 92). My own view is that meals should be read as both "fact"—along the lines of Gurevich, who belives that "the life of a man [in this case a woman] in traditional society consisted of an invariable repetition of actions previously performed by others" (1969:49), giving women performers some of the credit for shaping the ritual—and "fiction"—acknowledging that these episodes owe their preservation to the appeal they held for the 13th-century imagination and the need for a sense of wholeness and continuity with the past that women came to stand for.

[22]The one exception was mentioned previously: the daughter of a brotherless, sonless, fatherless man, if she was not yet married.

[23]Preben Meulengracht Sørensen contends that women maintained their honor in completely different—but complementary—ways than men did (1993:246–248). In addition, older men, according to Sørensen, have different demands on their honor than younger men. I would point out, however, that much of what Sørensen writes about the ways that older, established men maintained their honor applies to married (i.e., established) women, and vice versa. He writes, for example, "Den modne man skal vise mådehold, men ikke tilbageholdenhed" [The mature man must show restraint but not reluctance] (1993:222), and later, regarding women, he writes, "For den gifte kvinde er passivitet og tilbageholdenhet ikke en dyd" [For the married woman, passivity and reluctance are not virtues] (1993:236). A useful English summary of his views is printed at the end of his book (Sørenson 1993:333–340).

[24]The incident is interesting because it is a prophetic dream. Herdís dreams of a *völva* who appears to her and complains that the Christian habits of Herdís's grandmother are causing her great discomfort in her grave under the church. After Herdís tells her dream, the floor of the church is taken up and some bones, a brooch, and a "seiðstafr mikill" (large seiðr staff) are revealed (*Laxdœla saga* 1934:223–224).

[25]In Eliade's study of shamanism, seiðr is considered "minor magic" (1964:461–462). Female shamans are relatively rare, with a few exceptions. In Korea female shamans outnumber the men, and the male shamans dress as women. In China the women *wu* (possessed by a spirit) overwhelm the men

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(Eliade 1964:454); and in Japan shamanism is practiced almost exclusively by women (Eliade 1964:462). According to Eliade, women shamans are also found in Central and North Asia, among the Tsingala (Ostyak) (1964:221), the Chuckchee (1964:256), and the Altaians (1964:189). In South America female Araucanian shamans are called *machi* (Eliade 1964:53). There are also female shamans among the Savara tribe of India, where they, too, often outnumber the shamans (Eliade 1964:421).

[26]Strömbäck says the following about the spell: " 'Varðlokur' syftar på den speciella sång, som anvandes för att återkalla den schamanerandes själ till den i extatisk utmattning liggande kroppen" ["Varðlokur" refers to the special song used to call the shaman's soul back to its body, which is lying in ecstatic exhaustion] (1935:139). Strömbäck also relates this chant to "Urðar lokur" in stanza 7 of the Eddic poem "Gróugaldr" (Boer 1922:290).

[27]Kotkell's family, including his wife and sons, is involved in seiðr activities in chapters 35 and 37 of *Laxdœla saga* (1934:95, 105–107), as are the couple Krókur and Krekja in chapters 14–17 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (1991:162–163) and Þorgrímr nef and his sister Auðbjörg in chapters 17–19 of *Gísla saga* (1943:56–57, 60).

[28]These are in *Vatnsdœla saga* (1939), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (1960), *Norna-gests þáttr* (1943–44), *Örvar-Odds saga* (1943–44), and *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* (1991). See Strömbäck 1935 and Jochens 1996:72–75, 113–131.

[29]The name "Völsi" happens to be listed as the name of a giant in *Allra flagða þula (Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* 1964: ch. 27).

[30]Jochens opens the first chapter of her book, *Women in Old Norse Society* (1995), with this episode, which she reads as indicative of the Icelanders' desire for continuity with their mythic-heroic past. See also my reading of Guðrún in the Eddic poems "Atlakviða" and "Atlamál" (Borovsky 1998).

[31]*Sturlunga saga* was compiled in the first years of the 14th century in two versions. *Sturlu þáttr* is assumed to have been composed by the same compilers. The cornerstone of this compilation is Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga,* which he composed between 1270 and 1280.

[32]*Sagan af Huld tröllkonu enni ríku* is recorded in the 17th-century paper manuscript AM 935, 4to. It was published in 1913 and is paraphrased by Margaret Schlauch (1934:31–36). In this version of the saga—and it is impossible to say whether it reflects Sturla's version—the giantess Huld and the goddess Freyja dominate the Norse god Óðinn. Schlauch writes, "according to this saga, Óðinn is a rather passive individual, and the two women, Huld and Freyja, direct events as they please" (1934:36).

[33]Although Sturla's saga of King Hákon has been preserved, his saga of King Magnús has been lost. Sturla wrote not only about Norwegian royalty but about his own family and the Icelanders as well. He is considered to be the author or compiler of *Landnámabók (The Book of Settlements), Íslendinga saga* (a saga about 13th-century Icelandic politics, considered to be the "cornerstone" of *Sturlunga saga),* and *Kristni saga* (which describes the conversion of Iceland and the bishops who served there until 1118). Sigurður Nordal (1938) maintained that Sturla wrote a version of *Grettis saga.* Both Bishop Guðmundr and King Hákon struggled with members of the Sturlung family for control over the Icelandic church and state, so it is tempting to imagine Sturla "distancing" himself from his connection to his family's past yet maintaining the Sturlung narrative tradition by putting together the sagas of these leaders.

[34]Engilborg was staying at the Franciscan cloister in Horsens, Denmark, in 1261 when she was engaged to Magnús. See Birgit and Peter Sawyer (1993:176, 186–187, 204) on the daughters of Erik Plovpenning.

[35]This saga was not included in the original *Króksfjarðarbók* version (manuscript AM 122a fol.) of *Sturlunga saga* but was added to the slightly later and larger *Rekjarfjarðarbók* version (manuscript AM 122b fol.). See Hallberg 1993:617.

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