

March 2019

Weaponizing Ordinary Objects: Women, Masculine Performance, and the Anxieties of Men in Medieval Iceland

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Weaponizing Ordinary Objects:
Women, Masculine Performance, and the Anxieties of Men in Medieval Iceland

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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College of Arts and Sciences
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Date of Approval:
March 18, 2019

Keywords: Material Culture, Food, Clothing, Gender, Sagas

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Acknowledgments

A historian's questions about the past arise from their own experiences in the present, and so this thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance that I have received from the professors surrounding me. The inspiration behind this thesis sprouted from an insightful discussion about stolen cheese from *Njal's Saga* with Dr. Jennifer Knight, who taught me everything I know about saga literature from both medieval Iceland and Ireland through years of coursework and independent studies. Her persistent willingness to discuss the sagas with me has led to many fascinating ideas that I have pocketed for later consideration. Likewise, it was Dr. Giovanna Benadusi who taught me the value of looking at the past through the lens of objects, which often express meaning beyond that which words alone can tell. Without such a perspective, I would have never sought a discussion with Dr. Knight about the ordinary objects recorded in the sagas of medieval Iceland, which I had once considered too mundane for study.

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Abstract

This thesis unravels the deeper meanings attributed to ordinary objects, such as clothing and food, in thirteenth-century Icelandic literature and legal records. I argue that women weaponized these ordinary objects to circumvent their social and legal disadvantages by performing acts that medieval Icelandic society deemed masculine. By comparing various literary sources, however, I show that medieval Icelandic society gradually redefined and questioned the acceptability of that behavior, especially during the thirteenth-century. This is particularly evident in the late thirteenth-century *Njal's Saga*, wherein a woman named Hallgerd has been villainized for stealing cheese from a troublesome neighbor. If Hallgerd were a man, this behavior would have been considered *rán*, which was a masculine act whereby men challenged one another to take things by force. As a woman, however, Hallgerd's clever use of ordinary objects was unsettling to men; her act, although mirroring the masculine expectations of *rán*, has been condemned by the author. Thus, by emphasizing the anxieties of men regarding such behavior, it is evident that later male authors, particularly those writing from the late thirteenth century onwards, considered this behavior as preventing society's progression away from extra-legal conflict resolution. In doing so, the author of *Njal's Saga* demonstrated that both women and men were aware of the power that these ordinary objects had in the hands of ambitious women, as well as how potentially dangerous and harmful to society they could be.

Introduction

In the medieval world, where sacred relics and prestigious heirlooms dominated as symbols of power and authority, it may seem absurd to consider ordinary objects, such as unadorned clothing and food, as a potential means for exerting influence. And yet, at least on the peripheries of that world, in medieval Iceland, women weaponized ordinary objects in order to directly influence the social world of men. As shown in various examples of literary evidence, such as the thirteenth-century *Laxdæla saga* and late thirteenth-century *Njal's Saga*, Icelandic authors and their audiences were in dialogue about women who used the objects of their domestic domains to circumvent their social and legal disadvantages. And so, in this thesis, I examine the treatment of ordinary objects in medieval Icelandic literature alongside legal material, such as the early twelfth-century law code known as the *Grágás*,¹ to unravel the deeper meanings attributed to them by Icelandic society.

As postulated by anthropologist Pierre Lemonnier, mundane objects, although less interesting at first glance, have the potential to communicate the non-verbal rules, tensions, or unspeakable aspects of social and gender relations permeating everyday life.² By looking at medieval Icelandic literature through the lens of material culture, then, it is possible to discern

¹ It is worth mentioning that this law code, although originally written in the early twelfth century, only survives now in late thirteenth-century manuscripts. As a result, this thesis often treats it as a thirteenth-century text. For more, see Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins trans., "Introduction," in *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, 1-19 (repr., 1980; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

² Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012), 13.

the social commentary that was channeled through such objects. In doing so, I argue that there was a time when women could weaponize the ordinary objects of their domestic domains to perform acts of masculinity, and thus actively participate in the feuding process as men would, without incurring animosity from the rest of society; but by the late thirteenth century, as exemplified by Hallgerd's theft of cheese in *Njal's Saga*, male authors began to depict these women as villainous figures who prevented society's progression away from extra-legal conflict resolution.

The sources available for such a study of medieval Icelandic society, however, are notoriously problematic for the historian, since literature dominates what has survived from the period. It is for this reason that this thesis, like most others dealing with medieval Iceland, relies heavily on literary evidence and scholarship. But in the words of the Icelandic historian Gunnar Karlsson, "it is impossible to write a critical history of early Iceland without referring to the sagas."³ As a whole, sagas are vernacular prose narratives written between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries that blend historical memory and contemporary attitudes into stories recounting the lives of Iceland's earliest settlers, the kings of Norway, and even the heroes of the distant past. But while there are indeed various genres of saga literature, this study focuses almost exclusively on the *Íslendingasögur*, or the Sagas of Icelanders, because this genre is the most important and most extensive source available for studying medieval Icelandic society.⁴

³ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 66. William Ian Miller also puts it nicely: "If early Icelandic social and cultural history is to be written, literary sources will have to be used." (William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 45.)

⁴ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 31. The Sturlunga compilation of sagas, also known as the Contemporary Sagas, are typically included here, as well. Unlike the Sagas of Icelanders, the Contemporary Sagas recount events that were contemporary with the time in which those text were being produced. The Sagas of Icelanders, however, are far more extensive and insightful in regards to social practices.

These sagas concentrate on the personal lives of ordinary farmers, local chieftains, and families who lived between the mid-tenth and early eleventh centuries. Yet, because these sagas were not written down until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they more accurately reflect the social reality and concerns of their own time.⁵ As such, these sagas have used the past as it was remembered in order to discuss, criticize, and reflect upon the state of their own, contemporary society. Likewise, although the stories of the women discussed in this thesis occurred in the past, their behavior, along with the social commentary directed against them, primarily reflects the social world and changing attitudes of the thirteenth century.

Fortunately, the study of medieval Icelandic women has been a lively subject in both academic and public spheres of discourse since the 1990s, when gender and women's history first began to flourish. Several scholars have discussed women's relationship with material culture in medieval Iceland alongside discussions of their roles, autonomy, and constraints within that society. In 1995, for example, Jenny Jochens published a monograph that examined the daily lives of women in medieval Icelandic society, addressing the problems and realities that surrounded women's roles in reproduction, marriage, and labor.⁶ Although her study did not focus primarily on material culture, Jochens frequently addressed the relationship that women had with the ordinary objects occupying their daily lives. According to Jochens, the most important objects associated with women were those that directly related to their crucial roles in both textile and dairy production. Jochens concluded that women's most important occupations were spinning and weaving, especially since the surplus homespun that they produced was used

⁵ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 50.

⁶ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

as the standard measure of value in the medieval Icelandic economy for centuries.⁷ Furthermore, Jochens stated that women also played a crucial role in animal husbandry, which was the primary means for sustenance in medieval Iceland.⁸ Women were in charge of milking both ewes and cattle before separating the milk into curds and producing dairy products, such as butter and cheese.⁹ Women were then expected to prepare those dairy products for consumption and preservation in storage rooms.¹⁰ Jochens not only comprehensively examined the daily lives, experiences, and social roles of women in medieval Icelandic society, but also provided the crucial foundation for understanding the material culture associated with them, as well.

In order to explore how women could use those objects to influence the world around them, however, it is also important to consider the ways that scholars have discussed how women operated within the power structures of medieval Icelandic society. According to William Ian Miller, women lacked an official independent legal status, but still managed to exercise significant unofficial power in the feuding process.¹¹ Yet, even so, Miller concluded that medieval Icelandic society was “a man’s world” that severely barred women from participating in the masculine world of feud, law, and power.¹² In 1993, however, Carol Clover put forth the interpretation that medieval Icelandic society operated on a one-sex model whereby ‘masculine’ behavior and action were always praised, regardless of one’s biological sex.¹³ In other words, the

⁷ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 141. For more about the economic value and importance of homespun in medieval Icelandic society, see *Ibid.*, 141-160.

⁸ For more on sustenance in medieval Iceland, see Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 43-62.

⁹ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 122-123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-131.

¹¹ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 305.

¹³ Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 68, No. 2 (Apr., 1993), 379-380. It is important to note that, according to Clover, this one-gender standard was “something like masculine” and thus not exclusively male.

social binary in medieval Iceland was fluid; the distinction was not necessarily between male and female, but rather between those who actively exerted their influence over others and those who could not.¹⁴ Of course, this system still favored men, but according to Clover, evidence from the sagas indicates that women “insinuated” themselves into nearly every aspect of the masculine world.¹⁵ Clover demonstrated that women were usually admired by medieval Icelandic authors for displaying masculine-like behavior, such as taking active roles to protect their family or acting when the men around them stood idle.¹⁶ As Clover puts it, gender was a sliding scale where both men and women were judged adequate or inadequate based on how masculine they behaved, with “effeminacy” or “impotence” replacing our modern sense of “femaleness”; thus, both men and exceptional women could move up and down this scale depending on their actions (or lack thereof) within society.¹⁷ Based on Clover’s interpretation, then, the gender system of medieval Iceland was much like that of the social game of power described by Miller: gender, like honor and reputation, had to be actively acquired and maintained; it was beheld in the eyes of the community, and it was always at stake.¹⁸ Taken together, Miller and Clover suggest that a woman’s biological sex did not necessarily deter her from participating in the power systems of early medieval Iceland; her limitations were not dependent upon her biological sex, but rather on how she was able to act and perform within society.¹⁹

¹⁴ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 380.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 371-372.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 379.

¹⁸ This comparison to gender is my own and not a part of Miller’s original argument. For more about the social structures of medieval Iceland, see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29.

¹⁹ As I will elaborate later in this thesis, an emphasis should be placed here on *early* medieval Iceland. As Clover adds near the end of her article, early northern Europe operated according to this one-gender model, but the medievalization of the north gradually shifted society towards the two-sex model that was backed by the ideals and norms of Christendom. For more, see Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 385-387.

This conclusion is especially insightful when put into conversation with Judith Butler's theoretical work regarding gender performance.²⁰ According to her work, the gendered body is the product of performed words, acts, gestures, and desires that collectively produce the effect of an internal essence or identity; but this effect is only produced on the surface of the body.²¹ As such, Butler suggests that gender is produced externally through sustained social performances that maintain the appearance of a constructed identity.²² When considering these conclusions alongside the scholarly works discussed above, it seems likely, at least theoretically, that women in medieval Iceland could move closer to the social masculinity argued by Clover through repeated performances that Icelandic society deemed 'masculine.' In other words, if gender in medieval Iceland was determined along the binary of active versus inactive, as Clover suggests, then a woman could perform masculinity through repeated demonstrations of active, assertive behavior. With the social realities described by Jochens, however, the most accessible way for a woman to enact such performances would have been by manipulating her social roles and subsequent material associations in a way that actively exerted her influence over others. Yet, as Jochens notes, their society was still profoundly patriarchal, meaning that even this was an opportunity primarily reserved for exceptional women, especially widows, who enjoyed the benefits of plentiful material and social assets.²³

While it is true that socially privileged women had more opportunities than those who were not, just as it was for men, there were still tools available to every woman, regardless of her social status or material assets. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir recently argued, both words and

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185-186.

²² *Ibid.*, 192.

²³ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 162.

magic offered every woman an opportunity to actively uphold her own honor, along with that of her husband and family.²⁴ In regards to weaponizing words, Jóhanna Katrín used speech act theory to demonstrate that women in medieval Iceland could manipulate power structures by goading men to advance their own agenda on their behalf.²⁵ This behavior is so prevalent in the sagas that it has become the most commonly discussed way in which these women exerted their influence over the masculine world, for better or for worse.²⁶ Likewise, when it comes to physical masculine performance, Jóhanna Katrín primarily focused on women who adopted the warlike behavior expected of warrior-kings and concluded that such women primarily functioned within literature as warnings to late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic society.²⁷ Such examples of warrior women can be found throughout the Old Norse literary corpus, and a recent archaeological reevaluation of the quintessential warrior burial at Birka, Bj.581, has even revealed that this archetypal warrior grave was, in fact, for a biologically-female occupant.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, these warrior women are the most commonly discussed examples regarding women performing masculine roles in Old Norse society, as well as the most contested; but Jóhanna Katrín's conclusion is clear: whether based on historical reality, memory, or imagination, these literary examples indicate that women who transgressed their appropriate social roles needed to be 'corrected,' at least in the eyes of these later male authors.

²⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðreksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

²⁵ Jóhanna Katrín, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 44.

²⁶ An entire book has been devoted to the subject of women goading men with their words in medieval Icelandic literature. For more, see Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson ed., *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology: a Collection of Essays* (New York : Routledge, 2002).

²⁷ Jóhanna Katrín, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 132.

²⁸ Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, Anna Kjellström, Jan Storå, Maja Krzewińska, Torsten Günther, Verónica Sobrado, Mattias Jakobsson, and Anders Götherström. "Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581." *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 181-198. doi:10.15184/aqy.2018.258.

While I agree with this conclusion, it is only part of a longer story with much more to tell; words and magic were not the only tools available to any woman hoping to activity assert her influence, nor was her masculine performance limited to the bearing of arms as a warrior. Instead, this thesis demonstrates that women frequently weaponized the ordinary objects associated with their domestic domains, such as clothing and food, to directly influence the world around them, whether by purposely cutting a shirt to emasculate a man or by aggressively stealing food from a neighbor. As objects necessary for sustenance and survival, they were deeply imbedded into the lives of women at every social level, especially since it was women who produced them for society. In other words, like the words they spoke, these objects were a woman's natural weapons; her weapons did not always need to be a sword, nor her occupation always that of a warrior. But as both Clover and Jochens have noted, Christianity gradually reshaped the gender system of medieval Iceland, meaning that the post-thirteenth-century attitude examined by Jóhanna Katrín was not always so stern.²⁹ In fact, as this thesis shows, the tumultuous thirteenth century was a time when the behavior of women in Icelandic society was actively being debated through the flourishing literary production of the period, and it was during this time that the fluid gender-system described by Clover began to change towards a more rigid, two-sex model.³⁰ The existence of such a debate, however, suggests that women could, at least prior to the thirteenth century, wield ordinary objects as weapons for performing masculine acts

²⁹ Jóhanna Katrín mentions these changes prior to her analysis of the maiden-king motif, but it is not the aim of her study to compare a late medieval motif with earlier discourse about women. Also, this gradual shift does not mean that all women were entirely free to operate as 'masculine' in society prior to such changes. What it does imply, however, is that male resistance towards such women increased as the thirteenth century progressed. For details, see Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 385-387, and Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 161-170.

³⁰ For medieval Iceland, the thirteenth century was a time of both social and political strife, but also rich with cultural and social discourse through literary production. For more on this period, see Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga saga*, translated by Haraldur Bessason (repr., 1974; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007).

in society without upsetting social norms. Whether or not her behavior was appreciated, however, became a matter of when her story was written, for post-thirteenth-century authors condemned such behavior more fervently than their predecessors.

In order to understand how women could weaponize these objects in medieval Iceland to compete with men, however, it is important to understand the symbolic potential of these objects within society as a whole; and so the first chapter of this thesis begins by broadly examining how both men and women used ordinary clothes to convey deeper meanings to the rest of society, such as expressing their emotions or creating physical representations of their status. This is then followed by a closer consideration of ordinary clothes in ‘unordinary’ places, especially cases involving cross-dressing, which reveals that women used clothing as a means for performing masculinity. More specifically, this chapter compares prominent examples of women manipulating clothing from the thirteenth-century text known as *Laxdæla saga* with other legal and literary sources, such as the legal code known as the *Grágás* and the fifteenth-century *Víglund’s Saga*, which condemns the very same behavior that is praised in *Laxdæla saga*. By comparing these various literary sources, a discourse regarding the behavior of women in medieval Icelandic society is revealed: from at least the thirteenth century onwards, Icelandic law and literature gradually redefined and questioned the acceptability of this behavior, and over time, it became less acceptable for women to use clothing to perform acts of masculinity.

Chapter two picks up on the discourse mentioned above by examining the case of a woman named Hallgerd from the late thirteenth-century *Njal’s Saga*, which could potentially be read as a

direct response to *Laxdæla saga*, at least in regards to the behavior of women.³¹ Instead of clothing, however, Hallgerd uses food, specifically cheese, for her masculine performance. Like chapter one, then, this second chapter begins by unraveling the symbolism of dairy products in medieval Icelandic society as a whole, which provides the necessary social and cultural context underlying the nuances of Hallgerd's behavior. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a detailed dissection of Hallgerd's theft of cheese from a neighbor who denied her husband's request for surplus food during a localized famine. If Hallgerd were a man, this behavior would have been considered *rán*, which was a masculine act whereby men challenged one another to take things from each other by force.³² As such, her theft was meant to be understood as an attempted masculine performance, but while it would be satisfying to conclude that Hallgerd's performance was praiseworthy, like the examples from *Laxdæla saga*, it is clear that the author of *Njal's Saga* frames Hallgerd's theft of cheese as deeply problematic. As a woman, Hallgerd's clever use of ordinary objects was unsettling to men; her act, although mirroring the masculine expectations of *rán*, has been condemned by the author, who exposed her performance as forcing her husband, Gunnar, into an extra-legal feud. Thus, this chapter concludes by emphasizing the anxieties of men who began to depict these women as villainous figures preventing society's progression away from extra-legal conflict resolution.

³¹ Such a statement requires an entire study in its own right, but it is nevertheless worth including here. The overlapping content between these two sagas is evident, for the opening chapters of *Njal's Saga* directly interact with the major characters and settings of *Laxdæla saga*. As far as I know, however, there has yet to be a study devoted to unraveling the shared thematic discourse between these two works of literature. Hallgerd, the villainous woman of *Njal's Saga*, is directly related, both through direct kinship and marriage, to the women from *Laxdæla saga* who were praised for the same behavior demonstrated by Hallgerd. This is a detail that would not have been lost on an Icelandic audience. Nevertheless, the bounds of this thesis prevent me from exploring this point further, but it is at least worth noting that these two sagas have not been used here as a study of contrast coincidentally.

³² For more on *rán*, see Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 81-101.

Following these chapters, a brief conclusion will bring everything back together, revealing that the thirteenth century was an important period of debate and transition regarding the social behavior of women in medieval Icelandic society. The presence of this debate suggests that women, at least prior to the thirteenth century, could weaponize ordinary objects to perform acts of masculinity and behave as men would without upsetting social norms; but, as exemplified by Hallgerd's *rán*-like theft of cheese in *Njal's Saga*, male authors began to depict these women as villainous figures who prevented society's progression away from extra-legal conflict resolution.

Chapter One: Ordinary Clothes in Unordinary Places

When confronted with the task of defining the Old Norse-Icelandic word *brók* (meaning ‘breeches’), Richard Cleasby only briefly mentions the “curious passage” from the thirteenth-century *Laxdæla saga*, wherein a woman named Aud wears breeches to perform an impressive act of masculinity: donning men’s clothing, specifically breeches, in order to ride a horse to her ex-husband’s farm, wound him with a sword, and leave having upheld her own honor.³³ As a philologist, however, it was not Cleasby’s mission to explain the ‘oddities’ of Old Norse-Icelandic literature; his goal was to unravel the peculiarities of its linguistic history.

Nevertheless, it has not been uncommon for these seemingly atypical passages involving medieval cross-dressing to pass through the hands of scholarship without careful consideration.

It was only recently (in 1995), after all, that David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras resurrected a document from medieval England containing an interrogation of a male transvestite prostitute in fourteenth-century London.³⁴ Fortunately, scholars like Boyd and Karras have begun to take more interest in these marginalized accounts, drawing more attention to the ‘unordinary,’ which, in turn, enriches our understanding of the ordinary. It is in this spirit that I begin this

³³ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (repr., 1874; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 82. It is worth mentioning that Cleasby does spend more time on other “curious” entries, such as that for *höfuð*, where he spends considerable time explaining the origin and evolving usage of the word.

³⁴ David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London,” *GLQ* 1 (1995): 459-465. In the 1920s and 1930s, A.H. Thomas published a detailed calendar of the Plea and Memoranda rolls that were found in the archive of the City of London. His entries were noted for their impeccable detail, and yet his entry pertaining to a transvestite prostitute named John Rykener (aka Eleanor) was given only a single, vague sentence: “Examination of two men charged with immorality, of whom one implicated several persons, male and female, in religious orders.” (Ibid., 460)

chapter, which aims to unravel the “curious” cases of ordinary clothes in unordinary places in medieval Iceland. In particular, I aim to demonstrate that ordinary clothes were not only symbolic objects that could convey deeper meaning, but also that they were weaponized by women as a means for performing masculinity in medieval Icelandic society.

Such a discussion begins, however, with the ordinary, and so, although it may seem painfully obvious, it is worth noting that Jenny Jochens has argued that sexual identification in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia was removed from the body and attached to clothing, since the demands of a colder climate required them to heavily cover up their bodies with cloth and fur.³⁵ As such, ordinary clothes would have played a key role in the construction of gender identities in medieval Iceland; and as Judith Butler has postulated, these identities would have also been constructed through sustained social performances. Scholars have already noted some connections between clothing and performance in medieval Icelandic literature. G. I. Hughes, for example, noticed that there is a clear connection between a character’s clothes and impending danger in the Sagas of Icelanders,³⁶ and his observations have since led other scholars to explore the literary significance of clothing in medieval Icelandic literature. In 2009, for instance, Kate D’Ettore built upon Hughes’ observations to argue that this connection between clothes and conflict in the Sagas of Icelanders was not only a possibility, but a genuine literary convention.³⁷ Within the context of this chapter, however, Hughes’ most interesting observation was that men

³⁵ Jenny Jochens, “Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages*, edited by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland Press, 1991), 22.

³⁶ G.I. Hughes, “A Possible Saga Convention,” *English Studies in Africa* 12, Iss. 2 (Sep. 1, 1969): 167-173.

³⁷ Kate D’Ettore, “Clothing and Conflict in the Icelandic Family Sagas: Literary Convention and the Discourse of Power,” In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 5, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 1-14 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009).

were often described as wearing blue or black cloaks before they committed a slaying.³⁸ The consensus among scholars regarding this convention is that there is often an association between men, dark clothing, and the masculine act of vengeance in the Sagas of Icelanders.

This connection between masculine performance and clothing in medieval Iceland, however, has only been studied within the discourse of literary conventions; it has not yet been satisfactorily extended to social practices in the medieval period. Likewise, there are only a handful of works on this topic for the early modern period or for other European countries. In 2018, however, Michèle Hayeur Smith, Gavin Lucas, and Quita Mould used archaeological evidence alongside written records to demonstrate that the religious male elite at Skálholt used clothing both as a way of asserting nationalistic preference for Icelandic homespun wool and for asserting their status within their own community of peers through the imported buttons and leather that decorated their dark, homespun garbs.³⁹ There have also been studies that reveal ways in which literary presentations of medieval clothing serve to reflect a social reality. Monica L. Wright's study of clothing in twelfth-century French romance, for example, demonstrated that French authors not only used clothing to construct their characters' identities, but also to uncover the social anxieties of the nobility concerning a changing material reality that they could no longer deny.⁴⁰ Wright also described the authors of French romance as "weaving narratives" by combining older material together with the ideals and nostalgia of the present.⁴¹ This is hardly

³⁸ Hughes, "A Possible Saga Convention," 171 and 173. For a contrasting interpretation, see also Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Wrapped in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 1, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 53-65 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005).

³⁹ Michèle Hayeur-Smith, Gavin Lucas, and Quita Mould, "Men in Black: Performing Masculinity in 17th- and 18th-century Iceland," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 0(0), (2018): 20-21.

⁴⁰ Monica L. Wright, *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

different from the authors of the Sagas of Icelanders, who used oral stories from their collective past to create new works fused with the fabric of their own time.⁴²

An examination of legal and literary material from the earlier part of the thirteenth century, however, reveals that ordinary clothes were clearly a means that women used to assert themselves and show the extent of their influence in a world where masculine values dominated. This prevalence of this behavior, although contained primarily in literary texts, reflects the social reality of medieval Icelandic society. In order to demonstrate this effectively, I primarily focus on cases where ordinary clothes are found to be in unordinary places, such as when a woman named Gudrun emasculated her husband by cutting him a shirt with a neck cut too low, or when a woman named Aud wore breeches—clearly a piece of men’s clothing—on her ride to avenge her own honor.

The Threads of Meaning Woven into Their Clothes

Scholars of gender have maintained that, throughout history, the textile industry was dominated by women and that clothing constructed gender. Acts of spinning, weaving, embroidery, knitting, quilting, and tailoring were all forms of labor that are typically associated with women.⁴³ Medieval Iceland was certainly no exception to this generalization, as Jenny Jochens has thoroughly demonstrated.⁴⁴ Icelandic literature offers many examples where clothing conveyed deeper meaning about a woman’s feelings or behavior to the audience. In *Gunnlaug’s*

⁴² Most literary production in medieval Iceland occurred during the thirteenth century, which is often referred to as the Age of the Sturlungs. It was a time of social and political strife, but also rich with cultural and social discourse through literary production. For more on this period, see Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga saga*, translated by Haraldur Bessason (repr., 1974; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007).

⁴³ Leora Auslander, “Deploying Material Culture to Write the History of Gender and Sexuality: the Example of Clothing and Textiles,” *Clio (English Edition)* 40, *Making Gender with Things* (2014): 157.

⁴⁴ For more, see Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 134-147.

Saga, for example, a woman's sense of loss and love are conveyed through the object of her gaze: her lover's cloak.⁴⁵ It is also worth mentioning the example from *Gisli's Saga* where a shirt became a meaningful object for expressing affection and love. In that saga, a woman named Asgerd asked her sister-in-law Aud to cut out a shirt for her husband Thorkel, but Aud replied by saying: "you would not have asked for my help if you had been cutting out a shirt for my brother, Vestein."⁴⁶ Shortly after that, Asgerd admitted that she had feelings for Vestein, which implies that the act of making a shirt for Vestein would have exposed her feelings of affection for him.⁴⁷ In this way, the audience would have realized the importance of clothing and its ability to convey deeper meaning in this scene. More specifically, it is clear that cutting shirts for men was a way for women to declare their love.

The story of Asgerd and Aud is not be the only example of women actively using clothing for other means, but it is also important to consider the symbolic role clothes played for men, as well. In *Njal's Saga*, for example, the attire of Njal's son Skarphedin was described with noteworthy detail before he walked into a chieftain's booth at the national assembly:

He was dressed in a black tunic and blue-striped trousers and high black boots; he had a silver belt around his waist and in his hand was the axe with which he killed Thrain—he called it Battle-hag—and a small shield, and around his head he has a silk band, with his hair combed back over his ears. He looked the complete warrior, and everybody recognized him without having seen him before.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ About this example in particular, see M.A. Jacobs, "Hon stóð ok starði: Vision, Love, and Gender in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*," *Scandinavian Studies* 86, Iss. 3 (Summer, 2014): 148-168.

⁴⁶ Martin S. Regal trans., *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, in *Gisli Sursson's Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, translated by Martin S. Regal and Judy Quinn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 14.

⁴⁷ As Jenny Jochens has noted, the act of making clothing was understood a domestic chore when within the context of marriage, but this same act was read as a token of love if within the context of courtship. For more, see Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 147.

⁴⁸ Robert Cook trans., *Njal's Saga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 203.

No one knew Skarphedin, but his dark clothing, the objects he carried, and even the style of his hair collectively served as a physical extension his reputation as an ideal warrior, which served to enhance his masculinity in the eyes of the community. Thus, it is hardly surprising that, following such a description, Skarphedin performed an aggressive act that reinforced his masculine image: he insulted and forced into submission a prominent chieftain known as Thorkel Bully. Even the saga paused to mention that “such a thing never happened to him [the chieftain] before or after” this instance.⁴⁹ In the end, this scene, and others like it, show that men often used clothing as a means for displaying their reputation to other men; and this social tendency was likely embellished by saga authors in order to convey (and foreshadow) to the audience and deeper meanings of masculinity imbedded in men’s appearance and behavior: dark clothing and aggressive performance went hand-in-hand.

In a society where both women and men understood the symbolic potential of their clothing, it is not surprising to find kinsmen and kinswomen actively using these deeper meanings to resolve family disputes and symbolically express their disapproval of inaction. In another passage from *Njal’s Saga*, for example, a woman named Hildigunn goaded her father-in-law Flosi into taking vengeance for her slain husband, Hoskuld, by placing Hoskuld’s bloody cloak over Flosi’s shoulders.⁵⁰ After that, Hildigunn gave an impassioned speech, which clarifies the intentions unlaying her behavior:

This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Hoskuld, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all good men I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ

⁴⁹ Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 204.

⁵⁰ Hoskuld, Hildigunn’s late husband, was also Flosi’s son, and the cloak that Hildigunn puts of Flosi’s shoulders was Flosi’s gift to Hoskuld earlier in the saga. This cloak is brimming with symbolic meaning.

and by your courage and manliness, to avenge the wounds which he received in dying—or else be an object of contempt to all men.⁵¹

This act, along with Hildigunn's impassioned speech, stirred great anger in Flosi—so much, in fact, that his face turned “as red as blood, as pale as grass, and as black as Hel itself.”⁵²

Nevertheless, Hildigunn's clever use of clothing worked. Despite his strong disapproval of Hildigunn's cold counsel, Flosi set out on a quest for blood vengeance, where before he had intended to compensate Hoskuld's death through a legal case.

This use of clothing to voice disapproval and goad men into acting on a woman's behalf was common practice. In *Laxdæla saga*, for example, a woman named Gudrun used her late husband's bloodied shirt and breeches to incite her sons into seeking blood vengeance for their slain father. Gudrun was angry that her sons had not acted to avenge their father, since Icelandic society valued those who demonstrated active, masculine action. Due to their inactivity, however, Gudrun took control. She called her sons out into the leek garden and greeted them with “spread out garments of linen, a shirt and breeches much stained with blood,” which were accompanied by the following words:⁵³

These very clothes which you see here reproach you for not avenging your father. I have few words to add, for it is hardly likely that you would let the urging of words direct you if unmoved by such displays and reminders.⁵⁴

Gudrun was aware that her sons could not be convinced through words alone, and so she used her slain husband's bloodied clothing to visually remind them of the dishonor that his death has brought their family. And after that, her sons were “great shaken” and expressed that “they had

⁵¹ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 195.

⁵² Ibid. For more on the significance of Flosi's face, see Kirsten Wolf, “Somatic Semiotics: Emotion and the Human Face in the Sagas and ‘Pættir’ of Icelanders,” *Traditio* 69 (2014): 125-145.

⁵³ Keneva Kunz trans, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason's Tale* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

been too young to seek revenge” before.⁵⁵ Shortly after that, however, her son Bolli spoke out, saying: “We brothers are mature enough now that people will begin to count it against us if we fail to take action.”⁵⁶ Thus, Gudrun’s clever use of clothing, like Hildigunn’s, successfully persuaded her male kinsmen to seek blood vengeance for their slain father (and her slain husband) on her behalf.

The examples discussed above demonstrate how women could use clothing as a means for taking a more active role in society without having to launch themselves into the fight or participate directly in masculine performances of aggressive behavior. Instead, these women used clothing as a means for goading the inactive men around them into action, knowing that active behavior was more appropriate. As such, ordinary clothes, especially those stained with the blood of their previous wearer, provided women with a natural and readily available tool for resolving their family’s disputes through the feuding process that was typically reserved for men. In doing so, these women repurposed these ordinary objects into weapons that allowed them to take a more active role in society by acting when the men around them stood idle. Women were not limited, however, to using clothes as a means for goading men into acting on their behalf, for they also used clothing to directly shame men and deprive them of their masculinity.

I have already shown that women could express their love and affection for a man by cutting him a shirt, but that same act could also be carried out in a more aggressive way. In an earlier part of *Laxdæla saga*, the same Gudrun discussed above cut an emasculating shirt for her husband Thorvald after he had dishonored her with a slap to the face. From the beginning, this marriage was far from happy. Indeed, “Gudrun cared little for Thorvald and was avid in

⁵⁵ Kunz trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and bolli Bollason’s Tale*, 135.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

demanding purchases of precious objects.”⁵⁷ One day, Gudrun met a man named Thord and, since her affection for Thorvald was hardly a factor, the two grew rather fond of one another. Thorvald was aware of this, and so when Gudrun asked for yet another treasure one day, he responded by slapping her in the face. When Thord came to her farm later that evening, “Gudrun told him of her humiliation and asked how she should repay Thorvald.”⁵⁸ At this, Thord simply smiled and offered her advice fit for a man: “I know just the thing. Make him a shirt with the neck so low-cut that it will give you grounds for divorcing him.”⁵⁹ Thord’s advice seems straightforward, but there is more to this story: the deeper meaning of a shirt with a low-cut neck. Thord’s suggestion gave Gudrun an opportunity to weaponize an ordinary object that she made for society, transforming it from an object of affection to one of aggression, and thus avenge herself for her husband’s insulting slap. In doing so, Gudrun performed an act typically reserved for men: directly insulting and emasculating another man in order to regain the honor that he had previously taken away from her. In other words, Gudrun’s act subverted their gender roles: she performed the masculine behavior of redeeming her lost honor, while Thorvald was made effeminate through cross-dressing.

Indeed, this is a case where a woman regained her own honor by emasculating a man herself, rather than indirectly goading other men into doing it for her. Thus, Gudrun was performing a masculine act, and although her weapon was a shirt rather than an axe, her behavior in this passage was hardly different from the countless men contained in saga literature who slander each other’s masculinity in order to bolster their own reputations. This type of reading is

⁵⁷ Kunz trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and bolli Bollason's Tale*, 69. [Chapter 34]

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

both complemented and encouraged by Loren Auerbach's conclusion that the author of this saga, who could have been a woman, was actively working with the concept that women could function as equals to men in medieval Icelandic society.⁶⁰ Furthermore, this interpretation of Gudrun's behavior fits rather well with Carol Clover's conclusions about gender in the medieval North, where women were often admired for their displays of masculine behavior.⁶¹ In the end, this passage about Gudrun shows that women in medieval Iceland could use clothing in order to perform acts typically reserved for men, such as reclaiming her own honor by emasculating the man who dishonored her. More importantly, her act was presented in matter-of-fact style that assumes that the audience witnessing her performance would fully understand the implications and plausibility of her behavior.

Cross-dressing: Using Clothes to Perform Masculinity, Regardless of Sex

While Gudrun's performance does emasculate a man by 'tricking' him into cross-dressing, however, not all men who cross-dressed end up dishonored—in fact, most men whose cross-dressing stories end up told in saga literature manage to avoid Thorvald's fate. While the donning of effeminate clothing was certainly understood by men as dangerous for their reputation, it was more about moving out of a potentially passive, effeminate state through active, masculine behavior. In other words, men could avoid Thorvald's fate (and cuckolded state) by asserting their masculinity through action; and unfortunately for Thorvald, he was "hardly a hero."⁶² It is for this reason that men could occasionally use effeminate clothing for

⁶⁰ Loren Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intent in *Laxdæla saga*," *Saga Book of the Viking Society* 25, Part I (1998): 52.

⁶¹ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 371.

⁶² Kunz trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and bolli Bollason's Tale*, 68.

certain masculine performances, resulting in a mixture of humor and cleverness on their part. A great example of this comes from *Njal's Saga*, when Njal's son Helgi was told to dress in women's clothing so that he could leave the burning farm with the other women and take the burners by surprise.⁶³ The saga makes sure to say that "Helgi declined at first," which suggests that he hesitated out of a fear that cross-dressing would bring him slander rather than glory in his final moments; he did not want to share in Thorvald's fate.⁶⁴ But, after Flosi's comical remark about such a "big and broad-shouldered" woman,⁶⁵ Helgi's performance saved his reputation: he threw off the woman's cloak, which had been hiding his sword, and went down fighting, cutting off part of a man's shield along with his leg—"A manly attack, that!"⁶⁶ In the end, Helgi's performance outweighed his dress.

Yet, such a conclusion is not without criticism. For instance, James Frankki agrees that Helgi's masculinity was firmly reestablished through his performance, but Frankki concluded that this example of cross-dressing is strictly a literary motif.⁶⁷ After all, Frankki argued that this passage bears striking similarity to the medieval French romances *Meraugis et Portlesquez* and *Tristian en Prose*, which both feature men cross-dressing in order to enter a space previously barred to them. Furthermore, both of those examples show men casting off their feminine garbs, pulling out their swords, and performing masculine deeds.⁶⁸ These similarities cannot be denied,

⁶³ The saga is actually fairly specific about what clothing Helgi has to put on: "Astrid wrapped a kerchief (*hofuðdúki*) around his head, and Thorhild put the [woman's] cloak (*kvenskikkju*) on him, and he walked between the two of them." (Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 220; Old Norse quoted from Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 329.)

⁶⁴ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 220.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁶⁶ To borrow the words of Kari, who praised Skarphedin, Helgi's brother, for his dramatic attack on Thrain earlier in this saga. (Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 160.)

⁶⁷ James Frankki, "Cross-Dressing in the Poetic Edda: *Mic muno Æsir argan kalla*." *Scandinavian Studies* 84, No. 4 (Winter 2012): 433.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 432.

nor should they; after all, Carol Clover has shown that the Sagas of Icelanders were not entirely isolated from the influences of continental literature.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, dismissing Helgi's cross-dressing episode as purely literary borrowing ignores another example of a man cross-dressing to cleverly perform masculine acts from *The Book of Settlements*, which is the work of Icelandic historians.⁷⁰ Part of this account is worth recounting in full:

Dressed as a woman, Hrafsi walked into the hall at Orrastead when people were feasting there. Kjallak was sitting on the dais with a shield. Hrafsi gave Asbjorn his deathblow and went out through the wall. Thord Vifilsson told Hrafsi that his oxen were bogged down in a quagmire, and brought him his shield. Hrafsi threw him over a cliff when he saw the Kjallakssons. They couldn't get at him until they'd crowded round him with boards. Eilif sat by idle when they attacked Hrafsi.⁷¹

This account lacks the literary refinement that grants the reader (or hearer) more detail: its events swirl by with haste, few (if any) judgements are overtly implied, and the aftermath is left untold. It could hardly be considered a work of literature, although impressive and invaluable as it is; and yet, this account still spends ink to mention that Hrafsi did all of these things, giving a man his deathblow and throwing another man off a cliff, while wearing women's clothing. In other words, the cross-dressing of this passage does not serve as a literary motif: it has been included as a 'fact' of the remembered past that it serves to recount.⁷² Thus, when considering this example alongside Helgi's cross-dressing episode, it is indeed possible to look beyond literary

⁶⁹ Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

⁷⁰ The earliest extant version was compiled by Sturla Thordarson in the thirteenth century (c.1275-80), but it is also worth mentioning the version compiled by Hauk Erlendsson shortly after 1300, which shows that the twelfth-century Icelandic historian Ari Thorgilsson wrote part of the original. For more, see Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards trans., *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók* (repr., 1972; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 3.

⁷¹ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards trans., *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók* (repr., 1972; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 56.

⁷² I place 'fact' in parenthesis here for several reasons, but especially because, in the minds of medieval Icelanders, historical facts were surely different from ours; both contemporary society and memory played important roles in how the past was remembered and written. For more, see Pernille Hermann and Stephen Mitchell, "Constructing the Past: Introductory Remarks," *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 3 (2013): 261-66.

motifs and glimpse at social realities: cross-dressing men in medieval Icelandic society, who certainly existed, were only at risk if their behavior remained passive. After all, Eilif, who we can assume wore men's clothing, sat idly by when Hrafsi was attacked; but Hrafsi, who was dressed as a woman, died fighting several men. Who was more of a man then? Like Helgi, Hrafsi died a masculine death, regardless of the clothes that he wore during the performance.

Yet, men were not the only ones who cross-dressed to perform masculine roles in medieval Icelandic society. Indeed, like the male examples discussed above, women used clothes to cross-dress and behave as men did, thus performing acts that were typically expected of men. In fact, the same law from the *Grágás* condemning men to lesser outlawry for cross-dressing is even more concerned with women who cross-dressed:

If women become so deviant that they wear men's clothing, or whatever male fashion they adopt in order to be different, and likewise if men adopt women's fashion, whatever form it takes, then the penalty for that, whichever of them does it, is lesser outlawry.⁷³

This harsh attitude towards cross-dressing women, which has been expressed in a twelfth-century law code surviving in late thirteenth-century manuscripts, implies that such women could in fact be outlawed and thus treated, in the eyes of Icelandic law, as a man. While we do not have literary accounts showing this law in action, this harsher attitude towards cross-dressing women is especially noticeable in the early fifteenth-century *Víglund's Saga*, where a woman named Olof dressed in men's clothing in order to avoid being raped. This example, although written long after the thirteenth century, should be useful when comparing it to an early account of the same behavior from *Laxdæla saga*.

⁷³ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 69-70.

In this story, however, the man who sought to do Olof harm was named Einar. When Olof learned that he was coming to the farm, she leapt into action: “she sat her servant woman down and laid her own cloak over her and said, ‘Don’t be startled if Einar thinks you are me. I’ll see to it that he does not disgrace you.’”⁷⁴ At this point, the saga has already engaged in a well-known literary motif where a character swaps clothes with another in order to cleverly avoid capture.⁷⁵ But what happened next merits more consideration:

Einar sat down beside [the servant woman] and talked to her. At this moment a man dressed in black walked into the room; he was holding a drawn sword. The man was not particularly tall, but he was extremely angry. They asked him who he was and he said his name was Ottar. They did not know the man, yet they were somewhat afraid of him.

He began to speak: “It’s time to go out and welcome Thorgrim, for he’s riding toward his farm.”

Both of them jumped up and went out, and they saw that the farmer was approaching with a large group of men. They jumped on their horses and rode off home. What really happened is that the cattle were being driven in, and the man in black was Olof herself.⁷⁶

While it is true that this passage also interacts with certain literary motifs, such as the use of dark clothing to characterize men-of-action described by Hughes, there is an interesting twist: the ‘man’ wearing the dark clothing is actually a woman. Even though this particular example is highly literary, the author has still decided to use dark clothing as a way to depict a woman performing masculine acts in this saga. Nevertheless, the saga remains ambiguous about how this deed should be received by the audience: when the local community learns what happened, “they realized that [Einar’s] errand had ended most disgracefully,” and yet “great animosity arose toward [Olof and her household].”⁷⁷ This, along with the law contained in the *Grágás*, is likely

⁷⁴ Marianne Kalinke trans., *Víglund’s Saga*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, vol. II, edited by Viðar Hreinsson, Robert Cook, Terry Gunnell, Keneva Kunz, and Bernard Scudder, 411-441 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 419.

⁷⁵ Jochens, “Before the Male Gaze,” 19.

⁷⁶ Kalinke trans., *Víglund’s Saga*, 419.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

an example of what Clover refers to as the “medievalization” of the medieval North, wherein “femaleness became more sharply defined and contained.”⁷⁸ In other words, in the remembered past that *Viglund’s Saga* takes place in, women might have been able to dress like a man, perform masculine acts, and receive public praise and honor for the deed; but here a later author shows concern, expressing to the audience that this sort of behavior, although justified in this dire situation, was problematic.

Yet, Icelandic authors had not always found fault in such behavior, which brings us back to the early thirteenth century. Written over a hundred years prior to *Viglund’s Saga*, *Laxdæla saga* contains an example of a fierce woman named Aud who wore pants to claim her own vengeance. In this account, Aud was dishonorably divorced by a man named Thord on the grounds that “she had taken to wearing breeches with a codpiece like a masculine woman,” which was likely a rumor made up by Gudrun in order to marry Thord, who was also her lover.⁷⁹ It is worth mentioning that this passage occurs immediately after Gudrun divorced her husband Thorvald by cutting him an emasculating shirt (on Thord’s advice, no less). In this case, however, the matter does not end with Aud being shamed into submission, which is what happened to Thorvald. Instead, Aud took the active role:

The shepherd did as she asked and shortly before sundown Aud mounted her horse, dressed in breeches, to be sure. The boy followed her on the second horse, but could hardly keep up with her flying pace.⁸⁰

Then she rode to Thord’s farm:

She woke Thord, but he only turned over on his side when he saw some man had come in. She drew her short-sword and struck him a great wound on his right arm which cut

⁷⁸ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 385.

⁷⁹ Kunz trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason’s Tale*, 70-1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

across both breasts. She struck with such force that the sword lodged in the wood of the bed. Aud then returned to her horse, sprang into the saddle and rode home.⁸¹

By wearing the very clothes that gave Thord grounds to divorce her, Aud was able to turn the situation against him by using them to perform an aggressive masculine act: riding a horse with tremendous speed, dealing Thord an embarrassing wound, and striking him with frightful force. Like Hrafsi, it did not matter what clothes Aud wore, but rather how she used them; and unlike Olof's cross-dressing feat, Aud's masculine deed involving breeches did not breed animosity against her. In fact, when people told Thord to ride after her, since she "deserved punishment," he concluded that "what Aud had done was only evening the score."⁸² Moreover, when she returned home and told her brothers what she had done, they "were pleased" but thought that "Thord deserved worse."⁸³

In the end, everyone reacted as though Aud's biological sex was irrelevant, implying that her use of male clothing allowed her to perform a masculine act without facing social repercussions; both her enemies and her brother acknowledged her masculine behavior as praiseworthy. Her use of men's clothing to behave as a man remained unchallenged even when the men of Thord's household were prepared to continue their feud against her, because, as Miller argued, women were normally excluded from the feuding process, along with children and the elderly.⁸⁴ By preparing to continue their fight with Aud, however, they acknowledged her as a legitimate player in the male-dominated game of honor and feud.

⁸¹ Kunz trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason's Tale*, 72.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 27.

This communal reaction is quite different from what the author of *Víglund's Saga* wrote for Olof, who faced animosity from her neighbors after cross-dressing. In stark contrast, the author of *Laxdæla saga* used cross-dressing to present a case where women could use men's clothing to perform masculine acts without enduring social disapproval and without disrupting social order. Once more, this conclusion fits rather well with Auerbach's reading of *Laxdæla saga* as one that actively promotes the potential for strong women to function in society as equals to men.⁸⁵ In considering this example of cross-dressing, then, it is evident that some Icelandic authors were appealing to the remembered past in order to challenge the changing social norms of their own day, suggesting that women could, at least in the early thirteenth century, use ordinary objects to behave as men without necessarily facing social animosity. Thus, Aud's masculine performance using breeches may have been written in order to challenge the laws that were working to condemn women for cross-dressing as men in order to perform masculine acts.

Considering that conclusion, Aud's cross-dressing feat should not be limited to an example of a literary motif, but rather be considered as a serious commentary against a changing society. In doing so, the author of *Laxdæla saga* used ordinary clothes in 'unordinary' places as a means for delivering social criticism. This use of material culture to challenge social realities is exactly what Wright observed in twelfth-century French romance, where authors used clothing to uncover the changing material reality of the French nobility.⁸⁶ Likewise, there is no reason to deny the historical plausibility of Aud's performance, especially since an author used her story, whether embellished or not, to defend and promote such behavior in their own contemporary society. For the author writing Aud's story, there was nothing inherently wrong with women who

⁸⁵ Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intention," 40.

⁸⁶ Wright, *Weaving Narrative*, 41.

wore breeches to perform masculine tasks; Aud wore the clothes that were required and expected of the role that she intended to perform and, in doing so, used clothing to perform masculinity while also maintaining her biologically feminine identity. In the mind of Aud's author, then, gender seems to have been incredibly fluid; it was defined by what a person did, rather than their biological inheritance. Furthermore, Aud's author considered her masculine performance as socially beneficial, since she redeemed her own honor along with her family's reputation.

By looking more closely at these examples of ordinary clothes in medieval Icelandic society, then, it is evident that they were complex, symbolic objects that could convey deeper meaning to the rest of society; but more importantly, these ordinary clothes were weaponized by women as a means for performing praiseworthy acts of masculinity in medieval Icelandic society. Using an ordinary shirt to cut an emasculating shirt for the man who slapped her and avenge her dishonorable treatment, Gudrun, as well as the author writing her tale, was well aware of the symbolic power imbedded into the clothing that she made. Likewise, the same author suggested that women like Aud could even wear breeches in order to perform the masculine acts necessary to redeem her insulted reputation without facing social repercussions.

Nevertheless, this behavior has been presented with complications. The example of Olof from the fifteenth-century *Víglund's Saga* shows that later authors had become even more concerned about these women, expressing that this sort of behavior, although justified in Olof's dire situation, was disconcerting rather than praiseworthy. In the end, the situation for medieval Iceland seems to be exactly what Clover suspected it to be: a new order radically altered the one-sex system, causing gender to become more sharply defined and contained.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 385-86.

Chapter Two: Stolen Cheese and Male Anxieties

Although the thirteenth-century *Laxdæla saga* offers colorful examples of women weaponizing ordinary clothes without social repercussions, the fifteenth-century *Víglund's Saga* reminds us of Jóhanna Katrín's conclusion: that women who performed masculinity were going against the desires of the men who were seeking to better align Icelandic society with the rest of Christendom, and therefore their out-dated behavior needed 'correcting.' In either case, both of the sagas examined in the previous chapter used the past, as it was remembered, in order to comment on the behavior of women within their own, contemporary societies. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that thirteenth-century Iceland was quite content with allowing women to continue acting as their famous ancestors were remembered as behaving. Indeed, once *Laxdæla saga* is placed in dialogue with other sagas from that same period—as these sagas ought to be, whenever possible—it is evident that the thirteenth century was a time when the behavior of women was actively being debated. Thus, *Laxdæla saga* does not represent a time when women were free to perform masculinity without contempt, but rather indicates that the thirteenth century was a time when the behavior of women, especially when it mirrored that of men, was under scrutiny; the author of *Laxdæla saga*, then, was attempting to justify and defend such behavior amid growing opposition and increasing male anxieties.

In the late thirteenth-century text known as *Njal's Saga*, for example, there is the story of a woman named Hallgerd who seized an opportunity to steal cheese from a disrespectful neighbor while her husband Gunnar was away from home. This saga was written only a few decades after *Laxdæla saga*, and yet Hallgerd's use of ordinary objects (a dairy product) to circumvent her legal disadvantages and demonstrate masculine behavior was not at all praised by the author telling her story. On the contrary, Hallgerd is, perhaps, among the most villainized of women in all of saga literature.⁸⁸ Although it may not seem as though Hallgerd's weapon, a stolen piece of cheese, has any real significance in such a discussion, the entire interpretation of Hallgerd's behavior (and her villainization) rests upon understanding the deeper meanings and implications imbedded within a woman's interaction with such an ordinary object. It is her ability to weaponize the objects of her domain, after all, that caused those anxieties among men in the first place, because it was unsurprisingly difficult for men to control the very objects that women produced, prepared, and maintained. As such, the story of her stolen cheese reveals some of the social anxieties of men in late medieval Iceland concerning women who crossed the gender boundaries that these authors sought to impose.

The importance of cheese, however, begins by acknowledging that medieval Iceland was a society of sedentary pastoral farmers living on the edge of the habitable world, wherein nearly every Icelander was engaged in agricultural pursuits.⁸⁹ From the twelfth century onwards, grain-growing was only possible in the southern and western regions of Iceland, disappearing completely in the early fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As a result, many Icelandic households

⁸⁸ Both Clover and Auerbach have noted the especially negative portrayal of Hallgerd in comparison to women in other Icelandic sagas. For more, see Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 371 and Auerbach, "Female Experience," 44.

⁸⁹ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga saga*, translated by Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), 288.

relied on milk products from their cows and ewes for sustenance, a diet that was occasionally supplemented by meat from cattle, sheep, and pigs.⁹⁰ This dairy activity centered around the milking of cows, which was typically done over the summer at dairies called *sel*, where butter and cheeses were produced.⁹¹ More importantly, as was the case for textile production discussed in chapter one, the intensive labor of milking and dairy production fell to women.⁹²

Several narrative accounts demonstrate that associating women with dairy work in medieval Iceland was a common practice, and conflict sometimes arose between husband and wife over dairy-related affairs. In *Grettir's saga*, for example, there is a woman named Gudrun who had a routine for getting up early in order to go to the cowshed and do the milking.⁹³ Of course, not all women were pleased with such a role. In *Bjarnar saga Hlítdælakappa*, a woman named Oddny became upset after she was told to stay home “to see to the milking,” an activity that her husband claimed she was prone to avoid, implying that she failed to fulfill the social expectations demanded of women.⁹⁴ There is also evidence, however, that Icelandic men took advantage of the association of dairy work with women when conjuring up emasculating insults for each other, as is shown in *Njal's saga*, when Njal's son Skarphedin insulted a man named Thorkel by saying that he had not “come to the Althing [national assembly] often or taken part in lawsuits,” and that he was “probably handier at dairy work amidst [his] little household at Oxara.”⁹⁵ In other words, despite being a chieftain, Skarphedin implied that Thorkel was more suited to dairy work with the women of his household than dealing with men at legal assemblies.

⁹⁰ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 46.

⁹¹ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 48.

⁹² Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 122.

⁹³ Jesse L. Byock trans., *Grettir's Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96.

⁹⁴ Alison Finlay trans., *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, vol. I, edited by Viðar Hreinsson, 255–304 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 269.

⁹⁵ Robert Cook trans., *Njal's Saga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 204.

Given the variety from these examples alone, Icelandic society was quite familiar with using the deeper meanings associated with dairy work for other means. Furthermore, if dairy work was considered to be the realm of women, so too were the objects associated with it.

Several narratives from medieval Iceland specifically mention cheese,⁹⁶ and when it is more than just a brief observational remark, it frequently involves women. In *Flóamanna saga*, for example, cheese appears in the dream of a man named Thorleif, who dreamt “that [his] sister Thorny gave [him] a piece of cheese with the rind taken off it.”⁹⁷ To this, his father Thorgils gives a reply that is difficult to interpret, saying: “the hardest of our luck must be over, since the rind had been removed.”⁹⁸ Being involved with an obscure dream, unravelling this example for its deeper meaning would require a lengthy digression. Nevertheless, this example demonstrates, at the very least, that the cheese associated with Thorny in Thorleif’s dream was not only connected to a woman, but also symbolically significant to the events of the unfolding saga.

Likewise, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, a man named Thorbjorn complained that a woman served him poorly, since she tried to have him eat out of a trough. In retaliation, Thorbjorn “struck her with the trough between her shoulders.”⁹⁹ After exchanging heated words with each other, she “ran off and fetched a slab of cheese which she flung down before him, then sat down on the bench opposite of him and wept.”¹⁰⁰ This moment occurs amid a variety of vague verses and foreboding dreams, which certainly impact the symbolic role of cheese within the overall

⁹⁶ A preliminary keyword search (ost*) on snerpa.is revealed that the following family sagas mention cheese specifically at least once: *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, 27; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 48-9; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 45; *Flóamanna saga*, 24; *Fóstbræða saga*, 6; *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, 15; *Heiðarvíga saga*, 26; *Kormáks saga*, 16; and *Ljósvetninga saga*, 18.

⁹⁷ Paul Acker trans., *The Saga of the People of Floi*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, vol. III, edited by Viðar Hreinsson, 271–304 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 293.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Keneva Kunz trans., *The Saga of the Slayings on the Hearth*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, vol. IV, edited by Viðar Hreinsson, 67-129 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 110.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

narrative, but it is clear nonetheless that food and hospitality are at the center of their dispute. More importantly, this case involving cheese, like the example discussed above, once again includes a woman.

Unsurprisingly, and certainly not coincidentally, the richest and longest example regarding cheese and women comes from *Njal's saga*, which provides a fascinating account where cheese ends up at the center of a conflict over food shortly after a localized famine. During this time, a man named Gunnar shared his supplies of hay and food with many people, but his generosity eventually took its toll. With his supplies dwindling away, he visited a wealthy man named Otkel and asked to purchase some of his excess supply of hay and food. Otkel, however, refused him, and the situation quickly dissolved into hostility.¹⁰¹ Feeling as though they had been dishonored, the men with Gunnar urged him to take the food by force, saying: “It would be fitting if we just took it and left behind what it was worth;” but Gunnar replied: “I will not do any robbing.”¹⁰² More specifically, however, Gunnar’s words were: “Með engi rán vil ek fara,” or “I do not want to go with (the option of) *rán*.”¹⁰³

Rán was the Old Norse term used for a particularly masculine type of theft wherein men openly challenged one another to take property from each other by force. As Miller puts it, it was a challenger’s opportunity to secure social dominance through an act of theft, but only if they were able to successfully steal the property after a public proclamation of intent.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, although Gunnar was certainly in a justifiable position to declare *rán* against Otkel, he refused to do so. Instead, he ended up peacefully buying a slave from Otkel named Melkolf and receiving

¹⁰¹ William Ian Miller has treated this scene between Otkel and Gunnar with great detail. For more, see Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 84-93.

¹⁰² Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 80.

¹⁰³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (repr., 1954; Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1971), 121.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 83.

the supplies he needed from his close friend Njal as gifts. Although portrayed positively, and perhaps even admirably, by the author of his story, Gunnar's passiveness in this situation did not go unnoticed by his wife Hallgerd. Like the women in earlier sagas had done with clothing, Hallgerd decided to take action while her husband stood idle: she devised a plan to steal food from Otkel's farm using the very slave that he had sold to Gunnar. By stealing food from Otkel, Hallgerd took up the overlooked challenge of *rán* that Gunnar avoided; she intended to perform this deeply masculine act of theft herself, since her husband refused to. More importantly, though, Hallgerd stole dairy products, specifically "butter and cheese" ("smjör ok ost").¹⁰⁵ Like the women from earlier sagas, Hallgerd chose ordinary objects associated with her domestic domain as her weapons for striking against Otkel. By examining the way in which her stolen cheese continues to play a central role in this unfolding scene, however, it is evident that the author of this saga was questioning the acceptability of her behavior.

The Implications of a Woman Stealing Cheese

When the author of this saga first introduced Hallgerd, long before her infamous theft in the very first chapter of the saga, she was described as "tall and beautiful, with hair as fine as silk and so abundant that it came down to her waist."¹⁰⁶ Indeed, she was the ideal Icelandic woman, at least in regards to her appearance; but Hallgerd's uncle, a man named Hrut, soon voiced the author's concerns about her inner character, saying: "The girl is quite beautiful, and many will pay for that, but what I don't know is how the eyes of a thief have come into our family."¹⁰⁷ In

¹⁰⁵ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 81; Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (repr., 1954; Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1971), 123.

¹⁰⁶ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

other words, Hallgerd appeared in the very first chapter of this saga and was destined, by the author's plan, to steal that cheese from Otkel.¹⁰⁸ This distinction between Hallgerd's physical femininity and her problematic behavior as a thief, however, indicates a tension between the author's own sense of gender and the reality of women like Hallgerd, who have been praised in sagas written before this author's own work, *Njal's Saga*. As Carol Clover argued, "a physical woman could become a social man" in early medieval Iceland; but here, the late-thirteenth-century author of her story went to lengths to condemn her attempted *rán* as a contemptible theft.¹⁰⁹ This distinction between *rán* and theft is important, since medieval Icelandic law and social practice deemed theft, as opposed to *rán*, as a socially detestable act outside of the acceptable range of masculine reciprocities.¹¹⁰ In other words, the author is removing both the social and the masculine benefits that Hallgerd could reap from her theft of cheese from Otkel.

Considering the importance of her theft for the author, then, it is surprising how little attention has been given to the object linked to Hallgerd's thieving eyes. As I mentioned earlier, cheese was often mentioned in saga literature when women were involved, which is not unusual considering that women played a vital role in dairy production in Icelandic society. Thus, it is also not a coincidence that the author chose cheese as the object of Hallgerd's actions, because it embodied the symbolic potential to enrich his scene with deeper meaning.

The author's careful diction is the first indication that he intentionally linked Hallgerd's behavior with the cultural associations embodied in dairy products. Before Hallgerd revealed her plan, the objects of contention were vaguely described by the author as hay and food (*hey ok*

¹⁰⁸ As William Ian Miller puts it, Hallgerd's cheese-theft is when "the thief's eyes of the first chapter at last catch sight of something to steal." For more, see Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, 111.

¹⁰⁹ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 387.

¹¹⁰ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 89.

matr). When the famine hit their district, “menn skorti bæði *hey ok mat*” (“people lacked both hay and food”); when Gunnar sought out Otkel, he explained that he had “kominn at fala at þér *hey ok mat*” (“come to buy hay and food [from him]”); and when Njal offered to help Gunnar after all of this, he said: “hér er *hey ok matr*” (“here is hay and food”).¹¹¹ But when Hallgerd entered the scene, the author shifted the focus to dairy products (*smjör ok ostr*); she was not concerned with hay nor with general supplies of food. Instead, Hallgerd urged the slave Melkolf to steal dairy products, specifically “smjör ok ostr” (“butter and cheese”).¹¹² These terms, or rather these particular objects, stick to her and her actions specifically, as is shown by another instance. When Melkolf stole those dairy products, the author reverted to the objects sought by men earlier. Although Melkolf had been told to steal butter and cheese, the author wrote that “fór hann til útibúrs ok lauk upp ok klyfjaði þaðan tvá hesta af *mat*” (“he went to the storage shed and opened it and loaded the two horses with food”).¹¹³ Afterwards, when Hallgerd served the stolen food to Gunnar and the rest of the household, the author once again changed the nature of these objects. “Hallgerðr,” he wrote, “bar mat á borð, ok kom innar *ostr ok smjör*” (“Hallgerd brought food to the table, including cheese and butter”).¹¹⁴

Having thus attached Hallgerd to these particular objects, the rest of the scene unfolds around the meaning imbedded in them. For instance, as soon as Gunnar saw the food stolen by Hallgerd, he became suspicious of where she had obtained it. She responded by saying that “it’s not for men to busy themselves with preparing food.”¹¹⁵ Such a statement is anything but subtle. In two quick lines, Hallgerd reminded Gunnar of her authority over food-related affairs; but in

¹¹¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 123-24 (my emphasis); Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 79-80.

¹¹² Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 123; Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 81.

¹¹³ Ibid. (My emphasis)

¹¹⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 123 (my emphasis); Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 82;

¹¹⁵ Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 82.

doing so, the author also emphasized the distinctions between her realm and Gunnar's. This distinction was established as soon as she married Gunnar, when the author wrote that Hallgerd "took over the running of the household."¹¹⁶ According to the *Grágás*, if a woman owned a share in the household, "then she is to run the indoor household if she wishes."¹¹⁷ Although the saga does not clearly state that Hallgerd owned a share of the household, it was her legal right to manage its affairs. Yet, there is another part to that legal code that is worth drawing attention to. The *Grágás* not only stated that women could manage indoor household affairs, but also "the dairying."¹¹⁸

The author's selection of dairy products for this scene thus appealed to the cultural associations of women with such objects, as well as the legal justifications supporting her authority over them in particular. These dairy products acquire even more meaning, however, when it becomes clear that they served to turn Hallgerd's actions into public knowledge. Once Otkel and his household learned about this theft, they appealed to the local chieftain Mord Valgardsson to initiate an investigation. His plan to discover the thief was to have women travel around the district with gifts for housewives and see what they were given in return.¹¹⁹ There are three main points of emphasis in this plan: women, small wares (as gifts), and housewives.

Miller has aligned these gift-bearing women with the beggar-women of medieval Icelandic society who not only traded in trivial goods, but also in the small wares of information and gossip.¹²⁰ While the gifts are not specifically mentioned, it is the association of these women

¹¹⁶ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 57.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 66.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 83.

¹²⁰ Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, 113.

with this type of exchange that matters. Additionally, it is also important to note that the intended ‘targets’ were the housewives and not the husbands. Thus, according to Mord’s plan, Hallgerd’s theft of an object associated with women would be exposed through women exchanging objects with one another. This entire plan has been constructed by the author carefully, making sure to place women and the objects associated with them at the heart of this investigation.

Naturally, then, Mord’s plan to have these women exchange gifts with the housewives of his district was successful; and to Mord’s question about who had been given the most in return for their gifts, they responded that “they had been given the most at Hlidarendi and that Hallgerd had been very generous with them.”¹²¹ This was significant, since Mord has said that “people tend to get rid of stolen property first, if they have any.”¹²² Thus, since Hallgerd had been the most generous, Mord surmised that Hallgerd had stolen property that she wished to get rid of. With his suspicions heightened, he asked the women what Hallgerd had given them. They replied that “þeim væri þar *ostr* gefinn” (“they had been given cheese”) of which there were “many slices.”¹²³ But the task still remained to prove that this cheese was stolen from Otkel’s farm:

Soon after this [Mord] went to see Otkel. He asked him to bring out Thorgerd’s (Otkel’s wife) cheese mold (*ostkistu*), and he did so. Mord placed the slices into it and they matched the mold in every detail. They saw, too, that the women had been given a whole cheese (*hleifur*).

Mord said, “Now you see that Hallgerd must have stolen the cheese.”¹²⁴

By fitting Hallgerd’s stolen cheese into Thorgerd’s mold, the men of the community were able to prove that it had come from Otkel’s farm. In doing so, they were able to publicly declare her guilt and condemn her for theft.

¹²¹ Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 83.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Cook trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 83; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 125. The manuscript *Möðruvallabók* includes the butter (*ostr ok smjör*). My emphasis.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

The significance of this scene once again lies in understanding the implications of a woman stealing cheese. The author's selection of a product associated with women indicates that Hallgerd's theft was intentionally aligned with these associations. By having Hallgerd steal cheese, the author indirectly commented upon the increasing tensions regarding women who made clever use of their domain in order to perform masculine acts. Although women in earlier sagas, such as Gudrun and Aud from *Laxdæla saga*, had admirably insinuated themselves into the masculine world through similarly clever uses of ordinary clothes, and thus circumvented their legal disadvantages in order to perform socially on the same level as men, Hallgerd's case ends differently. Despite using her legal authority over dairy products to attempt the masculine act of *rán* after her husband failed to do so, Hallgerd's masculine performance—her active, independent, aggressive, and ambitious behavior that would normally be praiseworthy—resulted in her bringing herself and her family even greater dishonor. Hrut's words from the beginning of the saga now echo hauntingly over the scene: Hallgerd's eyes, the eyes of a thief, implied that she would bring the family dishonor for her socially unacceptable behavior. From the perspective of men like Hrut, and even the author who used Hrut's voice to foreshadow this contemptible theft, Hallgerd's behavior was not praiseworthy. What happened to Hallgerd—her negative portrayal in contrast with the admirable women of earlier sagas—reflects the anxieties of men.

The Anxieties of Men Expressed through Cheese

Word of Hallgerd's theft has spread like wildfire, and its flames cannot be stopped from reaching Gunnar. After Mord publicly exposed Hallgerd as a thief, Kolskegg brought his brother Gunnar the bad news: "everybody is saying that Hallgerd stole the cheese and caused the great

damage at [Otkel's farm],” and “you're the one who has to make amends for your wife.”¹²⁵

Kolskegg's words echoed the anxieties of men who had to deal with dire consequences whenever women acted ambitiously in their absence.

This point can be illustrated by briefly reconsidering all of these events from the perspective of Gunnar, with whom the author's sympathies lie. Despite being quite good at killing his opponents, Gunnar did not enjoy gaining honor through violence, preferring instead to better his reputation by resolving conflicts through legal settlements, which was the kind of behavior that the likely reflected the moral standards of the author.¹²⁶ Gunnar's moral standards are clearly spelled out when he sought to purchase surplus food from Otkel during the famine. As discussed earlier, when Otkel rejected Gunnar's offer with signs of hostility, the men with Gunnar had considered this as a humiliation damaging their honor. They urged Gunnar to take the food by force, which was a practice known in medieval Iceland as *rán*, but Gunnar rejected this path of violence and instead chose to abandon the matter. Hallgerd, however, saw things differently; in light of her husband's passivity, she discerned that it was now her responsibility to take action and personally win back his lost honor.¹²⁷ It was after “Gunnar rode to the Thing [legal assembly] that summer” that Hallgerd made her extra-legal move attempting *rán* for herself in his absence.¹²⁸ By contrasting Hallgerd's violent behavior with the legally-obedient Gunnar, the author of this saga stressed that Hallgerd's behavior needed to be corrected, lest good men like Gunnar wished to enter extra-legal feuds with their neighbors on behalf of their wives, who misbehaved and acted against their wishes whenever they were away from home.

¹²⁵ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 83.

¹²⁶ For more on this, see Theodore M. Andersson, “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,” *Speculum* 45, no. 4 (Oct., 1970): 575-93.

¹²⁷ Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, 112.

¹²⁸ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 81.

Thus, men's alleged anxiety regarding the behavior of women when they were not at home served as a pretext for constraining women's behavior.

Another reason that justified men's desire to bar women from performing masculine behavior is indicated in the next part of the saga. To Gunnar's surprise about the food that he found on the table upon his return, Hallgerd responded by saying that it came "from such a place that you can well enjoy eating it."¹²⁹ She clearly expected him to be glad for avenging his shame.¹³⁰ Gunnar, however, as the champion of the author's new sense of honored based on legal and 'civil' criteria, rejected the aggression of violent feuds. For Gunnar, as well as the author writing his story, masculinity no longer needed to be built upon violent acts like *rán*, but rather through the realm of law; but this was still an unsustainable position. Hallgerd demonstrated that men, as well as women, still clung to the old sense of masculinity described by Clover, where active, aggressive, and dominating behavior was socially preferred; and because Hallgerd's stolen cheese became public knowledge, along with her no-longer-desired masculine performance, Gunnar was forced into an open conflict with Otkel. Here the author expressed yet another anxiety troubling men in late thirteenth-century Iceland: the difficulty for good men to maintain their higher moral grounds and avoid extra-legal conflict.

The story of Hallgerd's theft of cheese raises several important issues. Even if the author had made an effort to emphasize the darker sides of Hallgerd's behavior, these events demonstrate the incredible versatility of women in thirteenth-century Iceland. On the one hand, the story of Hallgerd's stolen cheese reveals the potential for ambitious women to enact their agency; it can be read as a success story of a woman who found justifiable ways to navigate her

¹²⁹ Cook trans., *Njal's Saga*, 82.

¹³⁰ Miller, *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, 112.

social restrictions and thus recover her husband's honor. On the other hand, however, Hallgerd's story also reveals the impending changing position of women in late medieval Icelandic society. Men's anxieties about their wives's behavior when left alone, along with the consequences of such behavior, justified increasing constraints over women's actions. This led to a system where, to play on Clover's words, "strong woman" came to be "inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which" they could no longer rise.¹³¹

¹³¹ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 380. Clover writes in more positive terms, "... because the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall, the potential for sexual overlap in the social hierarchy was always present."

Conclusion

Although literature may not be a historian's preferred source for gleaning seeds of historical reality, the plausibility of women performing masculinity in medieval Iceland by weaponizing ordinary objects must be read through the commentary, criticism, and anxieties of the male authors who wrote their stories down. By looking more closely at the ordinary objects that women like Gudrun and Aud interacted with in such literary accounts, then, this thesis has demonstrated that women in Iceland, at least until the late thirteenth century, could weaponize ordinary objects, such as unadorned clothing and food, to perform acts of masculinity, circumvent their legal disadvantages, and actively participate in the feuding process as men would without incurring animosity from the rest of society.

When Gudrun used a shirt she made to avenge a humiliating slap from her husband Thorvald, she transformed an ordinary object into a weapon that allowed her to subvert their positions: Gudrun performed the active, masculine role of making another man effeminate, which forced her husband into a passive state and stripped him of his masculinity. In doing so, the author acknowledged that Gudrun had, through that performance, redeemed her lost honor by directly insulting and emasculating another man, which was typically behavior reserved for men. Likewise, when Aud wore breeches—a piece of men's clothing—to avenge herself after her husband Thord wrongfully (and publicly) divorced her, she repurposed the very clothes that gave

Thord legal grounds for divorcing her into a weapon that enabled her to avenge her humiliated honor. More importantly, the author voiced approval through the reactions of Aud's brothers and even Thord himself, who acknowledged Aud's masculine performance not only as socially acceptable, but even expected: she did what any man would do in her situation.

By the late thirteenth century, however, male authors retaliated against the earlier, positive portrayals of women like Gudrun and Aud by depicting their behavior as villainous, outdated, and problematic. Hallgerd's story is among the most vivid and memorable examples from saga literature of a woman whose masculine performance faces heavy criticism from the author spinning her tale. Scholars such as Clover and Auerbach have noted her particularly negative portrayal, and even classrooms full of eagerly (and vaguely) listening students generally fall into the author's carefully constructed web: Hallgerd is not a 'good' woman.¹³² Yet, oddly enough, the first step to understanding her negative characterization in *Njal's Saga* came from looking at her story through the perspective of stolen cheese. Like Gudrun and Aud, Hallgerd turned an ordinary object associated with her domestic domain and weaponized it for a masculine performance: mirroring the masculine act known as *rán*, Hallgerd sought to redeem her husband's humiliated honor by taking dairy products from their neighbor Otkel by force. Instead of praising Hallgerd for having redeemed the family's honor, however, the author of this later saga blamed Hallgerd—and women like her—for disrupting the social order and preventing

¹³² Although I lack the years of teaching experience needed to support such a statement, I recently gave a guest lecture about *Njal's Saga* to a Viking History class that proved this point true. During this lecture, the students and I held an 'assembly' wherein we judged the characters of the saga. When it came to deciding which character from the saga should be outlawed for their atrocious behavior, the majority of class declared Hallgerd as the most villainous even over the clearly corrupt chieftain, Mord Valgardsson. In my discussion with Dr. Jennifer Knight following this lecture, we both agreed that the students had fallen for the author's incredible literary talent to portray Hallgerd in the worst possible light.

society's progression away from extra-legal conflict resolution. Thus, Hallgerd's masculine performance had brought her family greater dishonor.

As I have argued, it was the anxieties of men about these women's appropriation of masculine behavior that led scholars like Clover to argue that saga authors started challenging the one-sex system of medieval Icelandic society. The increased constraints placed over women's behavior were the result of changing ideas about gender roles taking place during the late thirteenth century. The disruptive behavior of women who acted against their husband's wishes, especially whenever they were left home alone, prevented their virtuous husbands from avoiding feud violence. By the early fifteenth century, as exemplified by the story of Olof from *Viglund's Saga*, gender distinctions were deeply entrenched in Icelandic society as the notion of femininity became more sharply defined and contained.¹³³ Thus, even though Olof's cross-dressing was justified in her attempt to avoid being raped, the community expressed great animosity because she had crossed a gender boundary that was no longer as fluid as it once was.

By placing these literary works—*Laxdæla saga*, *Njal's Saga*, and *Viglund's Saga*—in dialogue with one another and contextualizing them, whenever possible, in the social and cultural changes of their times, this thesis has shown that the thirteenth century was a pivotal time for women in medieval Icelandic society. In that century alone, literary texts imagined two alternate visions of society for women: one where women could use the ordinary objects of their domestic domains to participate in feuding practices alongside men with admiration, and another where such behavior was contemptible and dangerous. In the end, however, it was the latter vision of society, put forth by the author of Hallgerd's story, that won out.

¹³³ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 385.

The literary debate that accompanied these changes yields fascinating conclusions about a peripheral medieval society. In examining this debate, this thesis has singled out the powerful role that ordinary objects had in the lives of women. Words and magic were not the only tools available for women to assert their influence, nor were their masculine performances limited to the bearing of arms as warriors. Instead, the ordinary objects that women made became a powerful language that women of all classes used to articulate their participation in a deeply masculine world. Yet, ordinary objects were also an important language that men used to communicate their disapproval of women's behavior. It was, after all, a piece of cheese made by women that allowed Hallgerd to retaliate against a wealthy man's dishonorable behavior towards her husband, but that also permitted the male author of her story, her husband, and the local chieftain to condemn her publicly as a dishonorable thief. In doing so, the author of *Njal's Saga* demonstrated that both women and men were aware of the power that these ordinary objects had in the hands of ambitious women, as well as how potentially dangerous and harmful to society they could be.

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