

## Gender Roles and Symbolic Meaning in *Njáls Saga*

By Thomas Roswell

There are many examples in *Njáls saga* of characters who fail to adhere to their assigned gender role and as a result perpetuate the chain of events that leads the saga to its grisly conclusion. The principle examples of this gender distortion are found in the central characters Njáll and Gunnarr and their wives Hallgerðr and Bergþóra. This essay will examine these sexual themes and the symbolic implications of the inversion of gender roles. The theme of sexuality is played out through sexual insults and symbolic inversion of gender roles through action and appearance. These sexual insults have parallels in the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* which connects the theme with mythological tradition.

One of the most prominent sexual insults is when Skarpheðin calls Flosi the bride of the troll of Svinafell, this implies that he is used sexually by the troll. This insult is a form of *nið*, an insult intended to imply that the object is *ragr*, a passive homosexual or is used in this way by a man, animal or supernatural creature:<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of *nið* is to terminate a period of peace or accentuate a breach of the peace and isolate an opponent from society by declaring that he is unworthy to be a member. The man attacked must show that he is fit to remain in the community, by behaving as a man in the system of Norse ethics; that is to say, he must challenge an adversary to battle, or avenge himself by blood-revenge.<sup>2</sup>

This instance of *nið* is no different and is a deliberate provocation to Flosi, calling on him to fulfil his expected gender role through violence or suffer the shame of the honour culture society. The specific form of *nið* portrayed here is enhanced as it involves a troll and the sexuality of trolls was regarded as being unrestrained:<sup>3</sup>

When a man refuses or fails to avenge a blood relative, he is accused of cowardice in general and of *niðing* in particular. This is not so much homosexuality, but ... an accusation that the man is the passive subordinate in a sexual relationship, which may variously be with men, trolls, or beasts.<sup>4</sup>

There is a parallel to this form of *nið* in *Lokasenna*, in which Loki exchanges libellous accusations with the Æsir, many of which are of a sexual nature. Óðinn makes the following accusation against Loki:

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<sup>1</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, Joan Turville-Petre, (trans), (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983). p.32.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Anderson, 'No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in *Njáls saga*' in *Philological Quarterly*, Vol: 81, Iss:4 (University of Iowa: Fall 2002), p. 5.

You spent eight winters under the earth,  
 as a milking cow and a matron,  
 and there you bore babies;  
 that signals to me a cock-craver.<sup>5</sup>

The sexual innuendo is associated with a visit to the underworld; Sørensen interprets this to mean that Loki served as a mistress to giants or trolls.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates that the symbolic aspect of *nið* extends beyond the purely sexual, to include other social taboos that are associated with sexual ones by their undesirable nature. When Njáll's sons are described as *taoskegglingar* 'dung-beards', the insult refers to two taboos, both the accusation of effeminacy on the part of their father and also an association with the taboo-laden dung itself.<sup>7</sup>

Effeminacy is the chief accusation of *nið* and with it comes an associated immoral nature.<sup>8</sup> When Njáll gives Flosi a silk garment, the feminine connotations place the responsibility of vengeance on Flosi as he is the object of *nið*, accused of *ergi* (homosexuality). The mere association with symbols that are affiliated with femininity or other taboos is enough to evoke an accusation of *ergi*.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of defending one's masculine reputation in the culture of early medieval Iceland is repeatedly demonstrated in *Njáls saga*. Hrútr Herjólfsson is cursed by his lover Gunnhildr so that his penis becomes too large for him to have sex with his wife Unnr, and so is divorced by her. This inverted extremity of impotence amounts to the same effect and may be a fitting punishment for the problematic nature of Hrútr's sexuality; he is overly sexual for pursuing multiple women and so becomes too sexualised to fulfil his duty as a husband and consummate his marriage. O'Donoghue interprets this as almost ironic and as a possible reflection of Gunnhildr's strong sexuality.<sup>10</sup> This sexual anomaly inevitably leads to accusations of unmanliness and by association, *ergi*, though communicated in the text through an unexpected source, three children playing and assuming the roles of Hrútr and Mqrðr. These children are not mentioned elsewhere in the saga and are therefore likely to serve the sole purpose of communicating what many other Icelanders were thinking but were too polite or cautious to say to Hrútr. *Nið* has serious consequences and this is why

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Orchard, *Lokasenna*, Stanza 23 in *the Elder Edda*, (Penguin Classics: 2011), p.87.

<sup>6</sup> Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Heather O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njáls saga', in *Introductory Essays*, Hines and Slay, (eds), (Viking Society for Northern Research: 1992), p. 86.

Höskuldr hits the boy pretending to be Mörðr after he has openly mentioned Hrútr's inability to satisfy his wife.<sup>11</sup>

The masculine culture did not regard women who transgressed their gender roles in the same way as men who did so. It is this dominant masculine aesthetic that allows for the recurring theme of women in a male role in *Njáls saga* and also makes the converse breach of gender roles so problematic.<sup>12</sup> This is why the implied accusation of effeminacy, when Njáll gives Flosi a silk garment, leads to on-going conflict. A parallel can be found in the Eddic poem *Prymskviða* when Þorr, the very embodiment of the masculine aesthetic, is required to dress as a woman to retrieve his stolen hammer and expresses his concern for his reputation in the following verse:

The gods will call me a cock-craver,  
if I let myself be put in a bridal veil.<sup>13</sup>

Hallgerðr consistently transgresses her assigned role of passivity and is the source of much conflict in the saga. From her introduction as a mere child, there are literary indications that she is maladjusted. Physical attributes have cultural and symbolic significance in medieval Icelandic literature. They reveal aspects of a person's character, disposition and their future. Very often the symbolic nature of a character is identified by their lineage and their behaviour, but both of these variables can in turn be related to the physical attributes of that character.<sup>14</sup> Hrútr describes his niece as having "thieves' eyes", which is a portent to the coming events of the novel generated by Hallgerðr's masculine and dominating nature:

...perhaps Hrútr uses thief's eyes simply as a metaphor for this particular child's underhandedness and treacherousness. Hallgerðr is a thief not only in literal terms, she is also a thief of hearts, a thief of peace and a thief of lives. Whereas there are all sorts of killers, a thief is by definition cunning and sly and must not reveal his identity if he is to get away with his thieving. He is always in disguise; duplicity is his trademark. This is perhaps the essence of the child Hallgerðr: she is not the beautiful innocent she seems.<sup>15</sup>

Hallgerðr inherits thievishness from her Mother, but also has elements of her father Höskuldr, which results in the duplicitous nature depicted in the two interpretations of her as a child.<sup>16</sup> Gunnhildr's witchcraft is evil, Hallgerðr's uncle Svanr is also said to be greatly skilled in

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<sup>11</sup> Armann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children' in *Saga-Book 27* (Viking Society for Northern Research: UCL, 2003). P. 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Orchard, *Prymskviða*, Stanza 17 in *the Elder Edda*, p.99.

<sup>14</sup> Einar Ól Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, P. Schach, (trans), (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971). p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children', p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Joseph Hamer, *Njáls saga and its Christian background: a study of narrative method* (University of Groningen: 2008), p. 71.

witchcraft which Hamer interprets as a symptom of thievishness in men.<sup>17</sup> The source of her troublesome nature is therefore inherited and has sexual and mythological connotations:

In the mythology, the monster enemies of the gods which bring about their fate — Fenris the wolf and the Midgard's worm — are products of sexual deviations; and, in the world of the sagas, malice is often associated with sexual natures and the fruit of bad marriages.

Hallgerðr, the implacable enemy of Njáll, mirrors Freyja in her sexual energy.<sup>18</sup>

Hallgerðr seems to be a parallel of Freyja because of her beauty and the chain of events that is triggered by her problematic sexuality. Her physical appearance is an indication of the significance of her female sexuality; her long hair is her most apparent feature, associated with her sexuality by its proximity to her breasts and indicating an extreme by its extraordinary length.<sup>19</sup> The theme of external signifiers is continued later when Hallgerðr makes scathing comments about the appearances of Bergþóra, Njáll, and their sons; the reader is intended to interpret the sexual signifiers of the characters based on physical appearances.

In addition to her beauty and sexuality, Hallgerðr's actions also parallel those of Freyja. Hallgerðr has Melkolf steal cheese which sets in motion the events which lead to Gunnarr's death; Hallgerðr refuses to give Gunnarr a strand of her hair for a bow-string because Gunnarr had slapped her as reprimand for the theft of the cheese.<sup>20</sup> Similarly in *Drymskviða*, Þrym steals Þorr's hammer in the hope of exchanging it for Freyja, she is also promised as payment to the builder in *Gylfaginning*.<sup>21</sup> In *Skáldskaparmál*, Freyja's Brísingamen necklace which contains her sexual power is stolen by Loki and Loki's theft of Andvari's ring is the catalyst which results in the curse which affects the stories of the Volsungs and Niflungrs in *Reginismál*.<sup>22</sup>

Insults launched against Hallgerðr and Freyja bear a resemblance that may have been intended to show a connection between them in the symbolic sense. Skarpheðin calls Hallgerðr, "either a cast-off hag or a whore."<sup>23</sup> This is similar to Loki's insult to Freyja in *Lokasenna*:

As for each of the Æsir and elves here inside:

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<sup>17</sup> Hamer, *Christian background*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Beekman Taylor, 'Njáll gromr: Christian morality and Norse myth in Njal's saga' in *Mediaeval Scandinavia 13*, (Odense University Press: 2000), p.174.

<sup>19</sup> William Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard, Hallgerðr's Hair and Gunnarr's Hay: Homological Patterning In Njál's Saga' *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, vol. 15.2 ,(Amsterdam: 1994), p.10.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Cook, (trans), *Njal's Saga*, (Penguin Books: 2001), Ch.77, p.128.

<sup>21</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, Ch. 42 in *The Prose Edda*, Jesse L. Byock, (trans), (Penguin Classics: 2005). p50.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, Njáll gromr, p. 174-5.

<sup>23</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, Ch.91, p.155.

At one time you've been their bitch.<sup>24</sup>

Loki then accuses her of having sex with her brother Freyr, and as Abram has observed, incest is an extreme accusation even to fertility deities.<sup>25</sup> Skarpheðin's insult is not necessarily an indication of actual sexual promiscuity on Hallgerðr's part, but an insult intended to bring her honour and virtue into question. The symbolic association with promiscuity is intended here to draw attention to her generally immoral behaviour. Symbolic sexual anomalies, whether identified physically or through insults or actions, play a major role in the saga, providing insight into the characters.

Njáll's beardlessness is mentioned from his first introduction which indicates its significance to his character and his fate:

There was a man named Njáll;...He was well off for property and handsome to look at, but there was one thing about him: no beard grew on him.<sup>26</sup>

This physical feature remains unmentioned from then on until Hallgerðr brings Njáll's sexuality into question when she has Sigmund write an offensive poem about his lack of beard. This insult leads Njáll toward his inevitable fate, just as the insults exchanged in *Lokasenna* bring the gods closer to theirs:

“Sexual anomalies, and the exchange of words and deeds they incite, accelerate both gods and heroes toward their ends. It is not surprising, then, that women who represent sexual force are involved in thefts which contribute to the doom of those associated with them.<sup>27</sup>

Both protagonists, Gunnarr and Njáll, show an aversion to the traditional violent culture of pagan Iceland and question the implications of masculine gender roles; Njáll through adoption of Christianity and Gunnarr when he questions his own manliness because he doesn't like killing.<sup>28</sup> They are both sexually anomalous, though only Njáll's anomaly manifests in the physical indicator of beardlessness; Gunnarr is contrastingly a stereotypical Nordic hero:

He was big and strong and an excellent fighter. He could swing a sword and throw a spear with either hand, if he wished, and he was so swift of a sword that there seem to be three in the air at once. He shot with a bow better than anyone else, and he always hit what he aimed at. He could jump higher than his own height, in full fighting gear, and just as far backward as forward. He swam like a seal, and there was no sport in which there was any point in competing with him and it was said that no man was a match.

He was handsome and fair of skin and had a straight nose, turned up at its tip. He was blue-eyed and keen eyed and ruddy cheeked, with thick hair, blonde and well combed.

<sup>24</sup> Orchard, *Lokasenna*, Stanza 30 in *the Elder Edda*, p.89.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, (Continuum: London, 2011), p. 145.

<sup>26</sup> Cook, *Njal's Saga*, Ch.20 p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Njáll gromr*, p. 174-5.

<sup>28</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njál's saga', p. 90 -91.

Yet Gunnarr is lacking the coldness and strength of will that the saga's female characters display. His emotions dictate his actions on several occasions; he falls in love with Hallgerðr at first sight which leads him to an ill-fated marriage and he refuses to set sail from Iceland when he becomes sentimental about the beauty of Hlíðarendi.<sup>29</sup> Hallgerðr never allows anything to come between her and vengeance, least of all her husbands' well-being. The portrait of Gunnarr is more balanced than that of Hallgerðr and this might reflect the fact that he is a more balanced individual.<sup>30</sup> His skill and notoriety as a warrior precede his physical description, so his appearance is not as important as his behaviour, in contrast to Hallgerðr whose appearance foreshadows her behaviour.<sup>31</sup> The tragedy of Gunnarr's death can be seen to be the direct result of his marriage to Hallgerðr, which is brought about by his vanity and ambition. It is these vices that cause him to marry her and also prevent him from leaving the country.<sup>32</sup>

While Gunnarr and Njáll conspire to avoid unnecessary conflict and exchange compensatory payments in accordance with the law, their wives pursue vengeance through blood in accordance with the Icelandic tradition and call on their menfolk to exact it. In this sense the saga uses gender roles as a way of depicting the struggle between the old ways and the new.<sup>33</sup> *Njáls saga* portrays an interlaced network of feud stories and the feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra has been described as a symbol of this chain of vengeance that was both the glue that held together and the violence that limited the development of medieval Iceland.<sup>34</sup>

Hallgerðr is the female equivalent to Gunnarr, in the sense that though externally she embodies an ideal for her prescribed gender role, the extent of her beauty indicates an excess, a problematic dimension to her sexuality and behaviour which is identified even when she is a mere child. Her behaviour shows her to be excessively masculine, just as Gunnarr's behaviour has a feminine aspect in the sense that he can be emotional and shuns the traditional masculine obligation of violent vengeance which is imposed on him by society.

Njáll and Bergþóra display the anomalous aspects of their gender identities externally; Njáll in the case of his beardlessness and Bergþóra who is introduced, like Hallgerðr, as *skaphorð* (hard-hearted) but who is not as sexually attractive. She is described as *drengr góðr* by the saga author, which is a term usually applied to men and can be translated as "a manly person", this combined with her overbearing nature and insistence that Njáll pursue vengeance, make it clear that she is not feminine in the conventional sense.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njáls saga', p. 90-91.

<sup>30</sup> Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard', p. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard', p. 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Hamer, *Christian background*, p.68-9.

<sup>33</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njáls saga', p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> Hamer, *Christian background*, p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women in Njáls saga', p. 88.

Heather O'Donoghue observes that it is the men rather than the women in *Njáls saga* who negotiate arbitration and peaceful settlement in accordance with the law and that this is most evident when looking at the feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra. The men are always absent, attending the Alþing and pursuing peace by civilised means, each time someone is killed in the violent exchanges orchestrated by these two women.<sup>36</sup>

Njáll and his wife Bergþóra seem to be analogous to Óðinn and his wife Frigg, in that each of them possesses the power of foresight. In Ch. 127, Bergþóra can see the death of her household through premonition in the same way that Frigg is able to see all human destiny, as Freyja asserts in *Lokasenna*.<sup>37</sup> Njáll's grief when lamenting the death of Hǫskuldr is reminiscent of that of Óðinn in the Prose Edda after the death of his son Baldr:

When the Æsir first tried to speak, all they could do was weep, and no one could form words to tell the others of his grief. Óðinn suffered most from this misfortune. This was because he understood most clearly how grievous was the loss, and that the death of Baldr was ruin for the Æsir.<sup>38</sup>

Both of them grieve for the death itself but also for the evil consequences that they anticipate through premonition.<sup>39</sup> Taylor asserts that another similarity between Njáll and Óðinn is their failure to act in response to their premonitions, both seem unaware of the predictable consequences of events: Njáll in the case of the marriage between Thrain and Thorgerd and Óðinn in regards to the broken oaths to the master-builder.<sup>40</sup> Njáll's foresight is a type of *seiðr* (black-magic), which though practiced by Óðinn, is normally associated with the goddesses because of its feminine connotations. The feminine nature of *seiðr* is detailed in *Heimskringla*:

Óðinn knew, and practiced himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called *seiðr*, and from it he could predict the fates of men and things that had not yet happened, and also cause men death or disaster or disease, and also take wit or strength from some and give it to others. But this magic, when it is practiced, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses.<sup>41</sup>

The shameful feminising effect of *seiðr* is evident from Loki's insult to Óðinn in *Lokasenna*:

It's said you played the witch on Sámsey,

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>37</sup> Richard North, *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings*, (Rodopi: Amsterdam: Atlanta, GA, 1991). p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Sveinsson, *A Literary Masterpiece*, p. 169.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Njáll gromr*, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla volume 1: The Beginnings to Olaf Tryggvason*, Alison Finlay, Anthony Faulkes (trans) (Viking society for Northern Research, UCL: 2011), Ch.7, p.11.

beat the drum like a lady-prophet;

In the guise of a wizard you wandered the world:

That signals to me a cock-craver.<sup>42</sup>

Njáll practices *seiðr* and is therefore feminised by it. Sexual perversion and witchcraft were perceived to be, in a sense, the same thing.<sup>43</sup> This makes him a parody of Oðinn in the sense that though like the god he laments a murder with the added misery of the foresight of its repercussions, he is physically an opposite of Oðinn who is identified by his beard, while Njáll is beardless. Both the physical and the super-natural aspects of Njáll show him to be a feminised man who contradicts the conventions of typically male behaviour. *Seiðr* is associated with the old pagan ways and is therefore gendered as feminine in *Njáls saga*, where the cultural shift from the traditional, personal and familial based oaths of loyalty to the formalisation of a public system of law, is itself gendered.<sup>44</sup> Sayers has argued that Njáll's foresight is actually compensation for his absence of facial hair; the external signifier of masculinity is substituted for future knowledge of the outcome of male activity.<sup>45</sup> Sayers does not read the absence of a beard as an indication of Njáll's sexual abnormality because the saga is concerned with public judgement, in a society conscious of honour and fearful of shame. For this reason the symbolic meaning of *nið* has less to do with actual sexual orientation and more to do with "public perceptions of the conventional realization of prescriptive gender roles."<sup>46</sup> Anderson identifies the gender divide of cultural transition, brought about by the conversion, as a revelation of cultural anxiety regarding the male desire to resort to violence for vengeance.<sup>47</sup> A tradition ironically portrayed through males who avoid violence and women who goad their husbands to pursue it.

*Njáls saga* can be interpreted as a struggle between sexes, in which men uphold the values of Christianity while women oppose them.<sup>48</sup> While this can be seen to derive from clerical misogyny and the negative female archetype of Eve, Grønlie argues that this perspective overlooks the diversity of cultural influences that can be found in the sagas:

It seems reductive, to label every instance of it as a regrettable consequence of clerical misogyny, especially in a country like Iceland, where the preservation of pagan myth and legend within a rich and varied secular literature bespeaks a certain freedom from

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<sup>42</sup> Orchard, *Lokasenna*, Stanza 24 in *the Elder Edda*, p.87.

<sup>43</sup> Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard', p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard', p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Siân Grønlie, 'No Longer Male and Female': Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives' in *Medium Aevum*: Vol. 75, Iss. 2, (2006), p. 2.

ecclesiastical control. A complex of cultural, literary and generic conventions mould the representation of women in Old Icelandic texts and, even when the Christian male/pagan female opposition is clearly drawn, it does not always follow that the narrative sympathy, insofar as we can discern it, lies with the Christian man.<sup>49</sup>

The interpretation of Hallgerðr as the product of Christian misogyny is supported by biblical and medieval examples of analogues to her character. Jezebel's responsibility for the moral and spiritual collapse of her husband is enhanced in the Norse translation of the bible and in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, King Redwald's pagan wife tempts him to apostasy.<sup>50</sup> The motif of the pagan woman may be influenced by the biblical Jezebel and other analogues in European literature, but Icelandic literature of the thirteenth century has a uniquely tolerant attitude toward its pagan heritage and so the presence of the motif does not necessarily imply that the author of *Njáls saga* was condemning the pagan woman.<sup>51</sup>

The gendered divide depicted between the masculine, pagan ways, maintained by women, and the feminised, Christian way being adopted by men, is most likely a literary reflection of the fact that as pagan customs became less socially acceptable, they were upheld primarily by women. The powerful figures of society were men and the new Christian customs were controlled and interpreted by men. The residual pagan practices were therefore banished to the periphery of the male community where only old women, widows and foster-mothers would practice them.<sup>52</sup> Though the cultural divide is gendered in the case of this literary motif, in *Njáls saga* as in other Norse texts, gender roles are flexible and power shifts between men and women as characters switch roles.<sup>53</sup>

When Bergþóra spurs her sons on to vengeance, assuming a masculine role, her son replies that quick rage at everything is womanly; Bergþóra then re-asserts the masculinity of vengeful rage by mentioning another man's angry reaction, and in so doing validates their future vengeance as a masculine response:

If the gender of behaviour, in this case, rage, can be shifted, and it is behaviour that makes a man, then the binary opposition of gender will not suffice.<sup>54</sup>

A woman may take an active or passive role, just as a man may, but if he takes a passive role he must take on the indignity and social scorn that comes with it. This scorn has negative effects on anyone who is affiliated by blood or by oath, to its recipient, including women. That is the practical reason why female characters in *Njáls saga* are representative of the archaic honour code, resisting the law of the Alþing in favour of blood vengeance. The male

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<sup>49</sup> Grønlie, 'No Longer Male and Female', p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, 'No Fixed Point', p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

relatives are obliged to placate their blood thirsty women through violent retribution and maintaining the reputation of their household.<sup>55</sup> Though violence is represented as male action, and failure to use violence as feminine passivity, women themselves are not entirely passive as they achieve violent vengeance through male agents.<sup>56</sup>

The theme of the woman who goads men on to violence is likely to have a historical basis. Tacitus describes the role of women in ancient Germanic tribal warfare of the first century:

Close by them, too, are their nearest and dearest, so that they can hear the shrieks of their women-folk and the wailing of their children. These are the witnesses who each man reverences most highly, whose praise he most desires. It is to their mothers and wives that they go to have their wounds treated, and the women are not afraid to count and compare the gashes. They also carry supplies of food to the combatants and encourage them. It stands on record that armies already wavering and on the point of collapse have been rallied by the women, pleading heroically with their men, thrusting forward their bared bosoms,<sup>57</sup>

This image of women pleading with their men to resist defeat is similar to that of the single woman passionately inciting men to avenge fallen kinsmen.<sup>58</sup> The women Tacitus describes attempt to remind their men of the fate that shall befall their wives, should they be defeated. The vulnerability of women is a plausible motivation for why those in *Njáls saga* seem to be so conscious of the fame and reputation of their families. The women rely on the reputation of their household for their own well-being and also protection in the event that their husbands are killed and are therefore willing to sacrifice individual members of the family.<sup>59</sup> Allen identifies a distinction between the traditional woman whose desire for vengeance is borne out of service to her family and those like Hallgerðr whose blood lust is merely an extension of their personal pride and social aspirations.<sup>60</sup> The latter functions as a variation of the same motif, that of the woman who seeks vengeance through her male agents.

The variety of breaches of conventional gender behaviours and the disruption they cause to “identity boundaries” are interpreted by Anderson as “a narrative of the incomplete and always continuing process between the imaginary and symbolic, for both men and women.”<sup>61</sup> The fluidity of gender roles can be seen as the product of the literary motif of the vengeful

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, H. Mattingly (trans) (Penguin: London, 1970), Ch. 7, p.107-8.

<sup>58</sup> Richard. F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971). p. 163.

<sup>59</sup> Allen, *Fire and Iron*, p. 164.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, ‘No Fixed Point’, p. 8.

woman, but rather than putting this down to an uncritical inclusion of a traditional archetypal character, Allen seeks to rationalise the persistence of the motif as a standard narrative component that serves a purpose for the collective psychology of society. He argues that it was a way of articulating collective concerns that could not be expressed; the vengeful woman acts as an external manifestation of the divided state within the male psyche. Though characters like Bergþóra and Hallgerðr are fully developed characters in their own right, they also function at a symbolic level as an embodiment of conflicting desires and social obligations in Icelandic culture.<sup>62</sup>

To conclude, both protagonists and their wives adhere to the theme of breaching gender roles and these breaches drive the plot toward its violent conclusion. The main stimuli for conflicts are insults and these are often of a sexual nature and cause women to abandon their gender roles and spur their men on to violence. The insults in *Njáls saga*, like those exchanged in *Lokasenna*, provide an example of how such behaviour can lead to disastrous conflict. In this sense the saga can be seen as a guide on how to behave, “when to settle a quarrel and when to seek vengeance.”<sup>63</sup> It also shows the futility of the old code of honour and promotes the new Christian ways that the women fail to adopt. Hallgerðr and Bergþóra’s quarrelsome nature aligns them with the old system of pagan values, which is further enhanced by Hallgerðr’s parallels to the goddess Freyja. Their failure to adhere to gender norms and disregard for legal process also places these women in the Christian misogynistic tradition along with Eve and Jezebel. Both Christian and pagan motifs are adopted and used to portray changing attitudes to gender, law and power.

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<sup>62</sup> Allen, *Fire and Iron*, p. 165.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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