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## Femininity in Medieval Scandinavia: How Paganism Forged Gender Equality

Erin M. Caffey  
Winthrop University, emyrick99@gmail.com

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May, 2023

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Erin M. Caffey entitled “Femininity in Medieval Scandinavia: How Paganism Forged Gender Equality.”

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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Gregory D. Bell, Thesis

Adviser

---

Margaret Gillikin, Committee

Member

---

Joseph E. Lee, Committee

Member

---

Takita Sumter, Dean,  
College of Arts and Sciences

---

Jack DeRochi, Dean,

Graduate School

FEMININITY IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA: HOW PAGANISM FORGED  
GENDER EQUALITY

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Arts

In History

Winthrop University

May, 2023

By

Erin M. Caffey

## Abstract

The brutality of the Vikings and the conquests of medieval Scandinavian men have often garnered the majority of interest from the media, the armchair historian, and the scholar alike, with the pursuits and lives of their female counterparts seldom discussed. Medieval Scandinavian women's lives though, when examined, are just as enthralling as those of the men. And while their stories are not necessarily as full of bloodshed or glory, the lives of women, those seen in both mythology and memory, provide an insight into the secular and religious foundations of medieval Scandinavian communities. Through an examination of various mythological texts, Church doctrines, and Scandinavian legal documents, this paper will submit that though women did not play a very public role within society, their importance and status was felt in the realms of the home and the business alike, born from a mythological reverence and later codified through law.

## Acknowledgements

I could write another eighty-odd pages in which I thank people alone for all of the support they have given me throughout not only the production of this thesis, but the six tender years that I have spent at Winthrop. I will abstain however, from rambling, as I am wont to do, and attempt to keep this brief. I would first like to thank Dr. Margaret Gillikin, least of all for being part of my thesis committee. I have no doubt that my success can be attributed in part to her constant encouragement and support. She not only taught me how to be a better historian, but a better teacher, advocate, and life-long learner. Dr. Dave Pretty, who I would also like to thank for encouraging me to be my own toughest competitor, informed me once that he had “warned” Dr. Gillikin of how “difficult” I could be. I do not deny being difficult, and so I am ever grateful for her steadfast guidance. Dr. Gregory Bell has not only been a wonderful and dedicated thesis director, but an inspiring storyteller and the driving force behind my interest in medieval history during my time at Winthrop. Each semester I looked forward to the opportunity to enroll in his courses, and his ability to deliver lectures that transported one to the past never failed to keep me engaged. I am endlessly thankful for his patience as I have navigated the production of this work, and am so very grateful for his continuous kindness and support. I have only had the pleasure of knowing Dr. Edward Lee for a short time, but I would like to thank him for believing in my abilities and vision from day one. I find myself fortunate to have had him act as a member of my thesis committee. Having spent the better part of a decade at Winthrop, there are of course several others who I would be remiss not to thank. Dr. David Vawter who taught me vulnerability and

self-empowerment, my classmates who helped challenge my worldview, the faculty at the College of Education who rekindled my love for the discovery and sharing of knowledge, and the History Department who have helped to facilitate my intellectual growth not only through the duration of this thesis, but through my years as a young adult as well. Winthrop and its community has served as my home away from home for the past six years, and so the conclusion of this project is bittersweet. To my mother, Chris, thank you for everything, but most of all thank you for the gifts of curiosity and perseverance. To my grandparents, Tommy and Mary, thank you for the gift of reading, who knew the Sunday Funnies and Little Golden Books would inspire an insatiable need to *know*. To my best friend, Shelby, we find who we need when we're not even looking. To other dear ones, my father, Rick, Robin, Vanessa, Jessica, Jennifer, Ashley, Kaedyn, Lyla, Ricky, and Grey, I am who I am because of all of you. And to Josh, oh, it's you.

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## Introduction

This thesis will explore the role religion played in the gender politics of medieval Scandinavian society. Examining the liberation Scandinavian women were subject to in Nordic mythos as well as reality, it will account for the necessity of feminine contribution present in Scandinavian sagas and how those contributions were reflected in daily life. Alongside this exploration of gender roles and expression within medieval Scandinavia, comparisons will be drawn between Christian Western Europe and pagan Northern Europe to demonstrate how differences in ideology allowed for the development of differing feminine codes and expressions.

As the correlation between religion and gender roles in medieval Scandinavia will be discussed, a number of key questions will be addressed. What role did the diversification of women in mythology play in the perception of femininity? Why, despite the existence of a gendered division of labor, were neither gender disparaged? Why was paternalism so persistent in Western Europe while remaining largely absent in Northern Europe? Did singular state-sponsored doctrine create rigid constraints on gender? Why was child rearing comparable to the role of a warrior in Scandinavia during the medieval period? And how did women involve themselves in politics? These questions work to encompass the extenuating forces that cultivated the particular and unique gender politics found in medieval Scandinavian society, asking after the significant social, religious, political, and environmental factors that contributed to a rather early iteration of gender equality.



Substantial literature on the topic of medieval Scandinavian women specifically, does not begin to appear until the early 1970s, and even then it is in short form. Roberta Frank's paper, "Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth- Century Iceland," published in 1973, discusses the role remote settlement played in the divergence from common Christian practices within Scandinavia.<sup>1</sup> Claiming that canon law had little effect on medieval Icelandic behavior, Frank sets the stage for further exploration into the deviance from broad societal norms exhibited by Viking subculture. Working in tandem with Frank's paper, Susan Stuard's book, *Women in Medieval Society*, published in 1976, provides a broader framework for the division in gender politics that occurred within Western Europe during the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Discussing the transformation of women's social positions during the period, Stuard accounts for the emergence and spread of Christianity as a divisive event in the alteration and restriction of women's rights. These two sources, when read alongside each other, create a contextual foundation in which the anomaly that was medieval Scandinavian women's rights can be better understood. Rounding out the emerging literature of the decade are works by Grethe Jacobsen, a Danish historian. Her own Master's Thesis, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period*, published in 1978, details the role of women in individual Scandinavian countries, using the sagas and legal proceedings from each to examine regional differences.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the emergence of topic specific literature in the 1970s

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1. Roberta Frank, *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press. "Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland." *Viator* 4: 473–84, (1973).

2. Susan Mosher Stuard, *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

3. Grethe Jacobsen, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period* (MA Thesis University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1978).

served to identify the hierarchical position of Viking women within their own society, examining the roles geography, religion, mythology, and law played in a unique socio-political system.

The literature of the 1980s is largely dominated by that of historians Jenny M. Jochens, Carol J. Clover, and once again, Grethe Jacobsen. With four publications in this decade alone, Jochens' focus is on sexuality and marriage, and particularly the Christian Church's attempt to indoctrinate Iceland and remote Germanic tribes into the evangelical practice of marital monogamy. Her work is distinctly important as it contrasts the historical sources of the time with literary materials made by the Church, both produced in the thirteenth century. Illuminating the Church's agenda, one that sought to cement monogamy and martial fidelity as the norm, when in actuality premarital and extramarital sex was common and well documented, Jochens highlights the autonomy women possessed within and outside of marriage when not under the thumb of Christianity.

Like Jochens, Clover began to produce work in the 1980s that examined the Christian influence, or lack thereof, on gender politics in Scandinavia. However, unlike Jochens, Clover investigates the gender ratio disparity and the concept of the "warrior maiden," accounting for the apparent gap between mythological depictions of women and their roles versus the actual societal standards of the time.<sup>4</sup> Her work, when paired with Jochens, provides a sufficient breadth of knowledge in terms of early Church involvement within Scandinavia, identifying the discrepancies found among clerical reports, mythology, and regional history. Finally, Jacobsen's publications, "Sexual

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4. Carol J. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 85 (1986).

Irregularities in Medieval Scandinavia,” and “Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North,” published in 1982 and 1984 respectively, work to examine the Scandinavian attitude towards non-marital sex and motherhood, specifically in relation to the gender ratio disparity.<sup>5</sup> Identifying the conflicting desire for sons rather than daughters versus the need for women to create sons, Jacobsen explores the unique station of Viking women, who were both respected and perceived as secondary.<sup>6</sup> Building on the 1970s identification of geography, religion, and custom as contributing factors to the unique gender politics of the region, significant publications of the 1980s investigate the particular circumstances, many based on the convergence of mythology and history, that allowed for such a dichotomous role to be ascribed to women.

Along with the major sources previously mentioned, scholars in the 1980s produced many singular works on the topic as well. Historians Birgit Strand and Ole Jorgen Benedictow both discuss the ramifications of Christian involvement in the North, particularly the effect that clerical perception and intervention had on childbirth and rearing.<sup>7</sup> Their methods differ as Strand expands her study to include a wide breadth of portrayals penned by Christian authors, comparing them to the portrayals of those found in the works of Snorri Sturluson, while Benedictow takes a more concrete approach, examining statistical increases in infant mortality as Christian influence transformed

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5. Grethe Jacobsen, "Sexual Irregularities in Medieval Scandinavia." *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*. eds. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982).

6. Grethe Jacobsen, "Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North: A Typology of Sources and a Preliminary Study," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 9:2 (1984).

7. Birgit Strand, "Women in Gesta Danorum," *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author Between Norse and Latin Culture*. ed. Kirsten Friis-Jensen, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981).

midwifery and breastfeeding practices.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, Nanna Damsholt's article, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," published in 1984, exposes the woman-centric economy of Iceland, as women solely managed the cottage industry present in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Jochens and Clover continued to publish on the role of women in medieval Scandinavian society in the 1990s, with both maintaining similar methodological approaches as displayed in their earlier works. Jochens continues her research on sexuality, this time honing in on sexual and reproductive practices along with investigating family dynamics. Her article, "Before the Male Gaze: the Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse," published in 1991, discusses the lack of the objectification of women present in Old Norse sagas and histories, identifying that Scandinavian women had an innate personhood, separate from men, which the women of greater Western Europe lacked.<sup>10</sup> Clover expands on her assertion that worth had less to do with gender and more to do with power, noting that men were perceived as valuable because they were more physically capable.<sup>11</sup> Her research into the concept that status was not defined by the male-female binary, but rather as capable versus incapable, aims to explain the disconnect between legend and law. The significance of these publications is that they make use of the existing mythology, taking note of the language used when describing

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8. Ole Jorgen Benedictow, "The Milky Way in History: Breast Feeding, Antagonism Between the Sexes, and Infant Mortality in Medieval Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 10 (1985): 19-53.

9. Nanna Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 9 (1984): 75-90.

10. Jenny M. Jochens, "Before the Male Gaze: the Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse," *Sex in the Middle Ages*. ed. Joyce E. Salisbury. (New York: Garland, 1991): 3-29.

11. Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Studying Medieval Women*. ed. Nancy F. Partner, (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1993): 61-85.

women, the competency with which women are portrayed, and the practicality of valuing strength and endurance within a partially nomadic society.

A variety of works produced in the 1990s complement the work of Jochen and Clover, but add to the overall picture of the role of women in medieval Scandinavian society. Historian L.H. Dommasnes takes a similar approach to that of Damsholt in the 1980s, but rather than focusing on industry as a means of empowerment, Dommasnes investigates kinship and community, noting the frequent absence of men as a contributing factor to prominent female involvement in business and politics.<sup>12</sup> Where men were capable, women were present. Juha Pentikäinen shares the interests of Benedictow, as his article, "Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries," published in 1990, analyzes the effect of Christian involvement on infant and child mortality rates. Like publications of the 1980s, those of the 1990s worked to further build upon and to narrow the scope of existing research.<sup>13</sup> This decade in particular is fruitful in regards to literature, as contrasts are drawn between a society without monotheism versus that of one undergoing ideological transformation, and steps are taken to further understand the mythological basis for rudimentary gender equality.

Not dissimilar to the literature of the 1990s, the early and mid-2000s produced works that largely focus on the capable versus incapable dichotomy. However, unlike the previous decade, these publications explore the concept of gender on a scale, rather than through the male-female binary. Historians Carl Phelpstead, Lena Norrman, Ole Thirup

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12. L.H. Dommasnes, "Women, kinship, and the basis of power in the Norwegian Viking Age", in Ross Samson (ed.), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*. Glasgow: Boydell & Brewer, (1991): 65-74.

13. Juha Pentikäinen, "Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries." in: *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names*. ed. Tore Ahlbäck. Åbo, (1990): 72-91.

Hansen, and Tina Lauritsen all examine the possibility of a third gender: masculine females are relegated to a category all their own. Phelpstead bases his research on the *Hrólfs saga kraka*, utilizing Queen Olof of Saxland to demonstrate the “maiden warrior” character as existing apart from typical women.<sup>14</sup> Norrman focuses her research on the “maiden warrior” trope as well, referencing Hervor specifically, presented in the *Hervarar Saga* as a viking commander that died alongside her brother in battle.<sup>15</sup> These two works, which form their basis on mythological context, can be compared to the work of Hansen and Lauritsen, in which prehistoric findings support the theory of a third gender. In their article, “Transvestite Vikings?” published in 2003, Hansen and Lauritsen discuss the implications of prehistoric graves that exhibit males buried with female clothing and affects, as well as females buried with male clothing and affects.<sup>16</sup> The works published during this period are of particular interest, as they greatly broaden the understanding of what it meant to be “female” in medieval Scandinavia, further informing the theory that gender had very little to do with power, as it was harnessed by anyone who was capable.

Unlike the existing literature, this thesis does not aim to explain how Scandinavia developed separately from greater Western Europe, how the introduction of Christianity transformed the gender hierarchy of the region, or why women’s depictions in Norse literature vary greatly from their roles in reality. Rather it seeks to answer why Norse

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14. Carl Phelpstead, "The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies* 75, (2003): 1-24.

15. Lena Norrman, "Woman or Warrior? The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth," *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000*, University of Sydney. eds. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross. Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney. (2000): 375-385.

16. Tina Lauritsen and Ole Thirup Kastholm Hansen. "Transvestite Vikings?" *Viking Heritage* 1, (2003).

paganism in particular cultivated a society in which gender was secondary to ability. Conversely, it also endeavors to examine why the British Isles fell victim to clerical paternalism where Scandinavia initially did not. Essentially, this thesis will explore the distinct conditions in which gender equality was able to prevail, explaining the significance in medieval Viking egalitarianism. As this thesis aims to consider Christian gender politics as well as female representation in Norse paganism, it best aligns with Jochens and Clover's work, agreeing with their methodological approach.

The bulk of the primary research consists of the Icelandic Sagas. As mythology and history were often conflated within the region, little else exists outside of law and land documents, kings' annals, and the sagas themselves. To supplement this gap in knowledge, clerical reports that philosophize the nature of Scandinavians, from both the standpoint of religion and gender, have been implemented. While the use of such clerical documents, along with legal documents specifying marriage and divorce rights, dowries, land ownership, and political standing, are necessary to ascertain the actual implementation of gender equality within Scandinavian society, the Icelandic Sagas themselves better suit the proposed line of questioning. The sagas of *Laxdale*, *Gisli*, *Grettir*, and *Njal* are of particular significance as they provide diverse characterizations of women in both the hierarchical and moral sense. Legal documents, such as the Icelandic *Jónsbók*, prove important in relation to the sagas as they reflect the truths, or falsehoods, behind the feminine characterizations present in myth.<sup>17</sup> In all, primary sources on the topic are rather narrow in scope, however, due to the rather simple socio-

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17. Jana K. Schulman, *Jónsbók The Laws of Later Iceland; the Icelandic Text, According to MS AM 351 Fol. skálholtsbók Eldri* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verl, 2010).

economic and political models of the region, many sources can be supplemented to suit various lines of inquiry.

The first chapter of this thesis will serve as a stage for “storytelling.” Unlike most historical analyses, which root themselves in the quantitative, fact and prior interpretation, this exploration forms its foundation on literature and folklore firstly, using these mediums as conduits for the historical analysis of related documents and artifacts. Because this thesis is interdisciplinary in nature, it is important that readers are provided with a concise understanding of all relevant literature, both mythological and academic, as well as the discrepancies found between the two, thus, this chapter will consist largely of narration. While this deviation away from traditional analysis may be atypical, it is necessary if proper comprehension is to be forged.

Chapter two will attempt to account for the roles geography and socio-political factors played in the unique presence of gender equity within Scandinavian societies. A remote locale combined with a distinctly nomadic lifestyle separated Scandinavians, and in particular the tribes of Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, from their Western European counterparts culturally and ideologically. Feudalism bred paternalism, while nomadism and frequent male absence, absence that can be attributed to a largely sea-faring economy, necessitated equity and a particular respect for the feminine presence. Space for duality was able to exist within the constraints of gender, as the division of labor and community management demanded it.

Further investigating the role of paternalism, chapter three will analyze the intricacies of family dynamics in both Northern and Western Europe as well as the role



that organized, monotheistic religion played in the disparagement of feminine roles. Diverging from Scandinavian literature and mythos, this chapter will be unique in its exploration of clerical documentation, particularly that of the British Isles, using descriptions penned by clergymen to compare social hierarchies, sexuality, sexual practices, and marriage rights between the two regions. Along with identifying these differences, this chapter will also seek to examine how the Christian Church attempted to indoctrinate and influence social change within Scandinavia, and in particular the region's industry and child-rearing practices.

Chapter four will provide a more in depth analysis of the social structure, industry, marital customs, and child-rearing practices discussed in chapters two and three. Accounting once again for the lack of a constant male presence within communities, this chapter will in particular discuss the prevalence of textile production, isolated matriarchal hierarchies, oral storytelling, and infanticide. A unique demographic balance was needed to maintain both the health and prosperity of these communities as well as their distinctive egalitarian nature, and women were granted unprecedented "civil rights" to ensure the functioning of the community. This chapter will also attempt to connect relevant mythological works to the real interpersonal relationships present within the region, analyzing the religious basis for mutual respect, divorce, property ownership, and participation in occupations.

Diverging from the discussion of gender roles and cultural norms, chapter five will focus on the more recent theory of capability over gender. This concept operates on the theory that gender within Scandinavian society was not binary, but rather existed on a

spectrum. This spectrum was not qualitative, but quantitative, assigning value to individuals based on the significance of their contributions and capabilities.

Acknowledging the innate value of women's contributions to the community, this spectrum allowed for a societal framework that provided women with the opportunity to exercise their own motives, practice autonomy, own land, and express their sexuality.

Largely exploring the maiden warrior theme that is present in multiple mythological works, this chapter will also analyze the concept of a third gender, that of a biological female who is capable of performing at the same level as a biological male, and the influence this theme had on the existence of a gender equitable framework.

While both the cultures of early medieval Britain and High Medieval Scandinavia both saw mass conversions to Christianity, paternalism took hold in Britain, but not in Scandinavia. The purpose of this paper is to understand why women had a much more substantial role to play in medieval Christian Scandinavian cultures. Looking at the conditions among the egalitarian Vikings in which gender equality prevailed, it seems that social norms and Norse paganism led to a society where merit trumped gender.

## Chapter One: “Mythology & Mores”

When attempting to discern the historical significance of a rather isolated phenomenon, such as the opportunity for gender equity within medieval Scandinavian communities, it is important to first understand the basis for such a phenomenon. What is its foundation? From where do its boundaries and scaffolding derive? And how does the reality of the phenomenon differ from its ideological foundations? In the case of medieval Scandinavian gender equity, the answers to these questions can largely be found in Norse mythology and pagan practices. This is not to say that factors rooted in reality, such as geography, economics, and domestic and foreign politics, did not play a part in facilitating such an environment, but rather that folklore, literature, and religion significantly inform cultural practices and societal norms. Additionally, sexism is prominently featured in the same works that contributed to said environment, as this investigation will reveal that the two do coexist within the literature and across time and that sexism’s influence was seen in society as well. That being said, the existence of women’s authorship, along with their various expressions of autonomy and strength, showcase the ways in which cultural practices and tradition acted as a vehicle for complex gender performances and expectations.

To better understand how these factors created a far reaching societal structure that approached egalitarianism, this chapter aims to answer a question: what role did the diversification of women in mythology play in the perception of femininity? To accomplish this, this chapter will explore key figures and themes in Norse mythology that

account for the broad spectrum of gender roles, and subsequently the discrepancy found between gender and value, as well as the influential and autonomous feminine sphere. Employing Icelandic and Norwegian Sagas, Eddic poetry and prose, and Skaldic poetry, this chapter will first and foremost establish a loose thematic chronology that can be observed within the mythology and will then identify specific references to women within the mythology, accounting for the ways in which certain imagery mirrored real world practices, as well as the very real misogynistic undertones and their relationship with women's power, authority, and autonomy.

The three main primary source collections referenced in this chapter, namely the sagas and two forms of poetry, were all produced within six hundred years of each other, building upon each other as a result, as well as performing as each other's contemporaries. This progression is significant because it allows for the identification of a thematic shift in the literature. However, more significant than when these works were produced, is the period of time in which their content takes place, as this information provides context for the prevalence of certain cultural mores and an insight into the origins of unique economic and legislative practices. For this reason, it is important to note that the years in which the Icelandic and Norwegian Sagas are set, 930 - 1030, and the years in which they were written, c. 1180 - c. 1450, differ by roughly two hundred to five hundred years.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Eddas were produced in the thirteenth century, but narrated events that occurred in the ninth through eleventh centuries, and the Skaldic poems, or at least the earliest of them, predating both the Sagas and the Eddas, were

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18. Jane Smiley, *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xxvi.

written between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. And they too describe events that occurred well before their publication, deriving much of their content from oral tradition and placing a much heavier emphasis on the mythical and fantastical.<sup>19</sup> This discrepancy in time is significant as it postulates that the existence of a non-binary social structure predates the Late Middle Ages, meaning it predates the unification of England, and subsequently the expulsion of the Danes, as well as the Carolingian missionary work of the ninth century, and thus was not reactionary, but rather stimulated by a series of geographic, economic, and cultural mores.

What is particularly unique about the Icelandic Sagas is that they are histories, with only the earliest iteration identifying itself as mythical, and although later sagas do contain some narratives that deviate from reality, both the Icelandic and Norwegian Sagas were primarily produced with the intent to pass down regional and family histories, transforming a previously oral tradition into something more concrete.<sup>20</sup> As such, the sagas are categorized by theme for the purpose of a clearer, if not more linear, understanding. Divided into five subgenres, the Icelandic Saga collections are *fornaldarsögur*, the ‘legendary sagas,’ ‘sagas of ancient time,’ or ‘mythical-hero sagas,’ *riddarasögur*, the ‘sagas of knights,’ *konungasögur*, the ‘kings’ sagas,’ *íslendingasögur*, the ‘sagas of Icelanders’ or ‘family sagas,’ and *samtíðarsögur*, the ‘contemporary sagas.’ The Norwegian Saga, singular in its production, is the *heimskringla*, or the ‘sagas of the

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19. Venla Sykäri and Nigel Fabb, *Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art, Language, and Song: Edited by Venla Sykäri and Nigel Fabb* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, SKS, 2022), 78-88.

20. Smiley, *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection*, xxvi.

kings of Norway.’ For the purposes of this argument, the primary focus will be placed on *fornaldarsögur íslendingasögur*, and *heimskringla*.

*Fornaldarsögur*, the ‘sagas of ancient time,’ were written roughly between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, “often recount[ing] legendary and mythic events from the recesses of Scandinavian folk memory.”<sup>21</sup> In truth, these legendary sagas neglect to depict fully formed stories about women or their experiences, focusing largely on the pursuits of men and the glory they achieve. And when these sagas do depict women, they are often nameless, faceless entities, there for the purpose of satisfying men or moving their tales along. In a similar vein, in the rare few times that authorship of a saga is attributed to a woman, she is given a name and nothing else, her existence unable to be verified due to a lack of identifying information. This representation of women, as supportive characters in the epic adventures of men, subject to sexual fantasy and rigid expressions of gender, is of course period typical in terms of when they were written, as by the eleventh century Christian doctrine had begun to penetrate Northern Europe and the existence of a prominent feminine presence within society had begun to deplete.<sup>22</sup> Such a subscription to period typical depictions of gender roles rightfully raises the question, how exactly did the literature subvert expectations and in turn aid in the production of a more equal society? The answer lies in the existence of a nominal few figures.

One of the few sagas that depicts a woman as central to the story is *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (The Saga of Hrólf Gautreksson), in which Þornbjörg, the daughter of the

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21. Jesse Byock. “The Fornaldarsögur: Stephen Mitchell’s Contribution.” *Oral Tradition* 10/2 (1995): 451.

22. Helga Kress, “What a Woman Speaks,” *Nordic Women's Literature Online*, (February 11, 2011).

Swedish King Erik, suits the ‘warrior princess’ trope.<sup>23</sup> Uninterested in being referred to as “virginal” or “womanly,” Þornbjörg took up the masculine name, ‘Þórbergr.’<sup>24</sup> This refusal to abide by the gender binary, combined with her status as a land owner and her outright refusal to marry, initially sets Þornbjörg up to perform as a conduit for a subversive commentary on gender roles.<sup>25</sup> However, by the end of her tale, Þornbjörg has not only acquiesced and agreed to marry the man she once loathed, but she has fallen in love with him, subsequently giving way to the exact rigid gender roles she disparaged.<sup>26</sup> Still, the simple existence of such a distinctly masculine woman, one who is frequently referred to as a man and is treated as such, adequately demonstrates the existence of not only a gender spectrum within Scandinavian society, but a hierarchy that allows for a certain level of social mobility based on perceived capability.

*Íslendingasögur*, ‘the sagas of Icelanders,’ also written between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, deals mainly with the lives of migrant Icelanders during the Icelandic Age of Settlement (870 - 930).<sup>27</sup> Still written through a largely patriarchal lens, this collection of sagas deviates from *fornaldarsögur*, in that it contains works that explicitly display the power of women. Unlike the power of men, which is characterized by brute force and an almost grotesque physicality, the power associated with women in *íslendingasögur* is metaphysical, manifesting itself through song and craftsmanship. This manifestation of power is reflected in actual Scandinavian society, as women and the

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23. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., “Hrólf’s Saga Gautrekssonar,” *Stuvia*, (December 11, 2021), 1-10.

24. Pálsson and Edwards, “Hrólf’s Saga Gautrekssonar,” 1-10.

25. Pálsson and Edwards, “Hrólf’s Saga Gautrekssonar,” 1-10.

26. Pálsson and Edwards, “Hrólf’s Saga Gautrekssonar,” 1-10.

27. Smiley, *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection*, xxvi.

feminine sphere often possessed production and the material, responsible for the fabrication of cloth, food goods, medicine, and children.<sup>28</sup>

The saga that best exhibits this metaphysical power is *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, or ‘the Saga of Burnt Njál,’ in which “Darraðarljóð” (*The Lay of Dörruðr*), was sang, as women weave at their looms.<sup>29</sup> The first stanza of the song, revealing the women as valkyries, goes thus:

Blood rains  
 from the cloudy web  
 On the broad loom  
 of slaughter.  
 The web of man  
 grey as armour  
  
 Is now being woven;  
 the Valkyries  
 Will cross it  
 with a crimson weft.<sup>30</sup>

Weaving men’s destinies in battle on looms made of the heads and entrails of men, describing the death and mutilation that may befall them, this depiction of the valkyries merges the masculine and the feminine as it combines the horrors of war with the fruitful labor of the loom.<sup>31</sup> This imagery also provides a greater insight into the perceptions surrounding women’s power to create life and bring death, prompting both respect and fear, fear that then wants for limitations. Further, it presents a poetic format of song as a

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28. Nanna Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," 75-90.

29. Anonymous, "The Story of Burnt Njal", George W. DaSent, *Icelandic Saga Database*, Sveinbjörn Thordarson (ed.).

30. Anonymous, "The Story of Burnt Njal."

31. Anonymous, "The Story of Burnt Njal."



distinctly feminine practice, which is even more meaningful when etymology is taken into consideration. The word “man” originally meaning woman, is etymologically linked to “mine” in the German “minnesang,” a poetic genre whose origins are female.<sup>32</sup> A Norse equivalent can only be found in *Jóns saga helga*, as further evidence of a singularly female genre has been lost, wherein the word “mansongr” indicates a genre of song, or poem, that is exclusive to women.

Another apt example of such metaphysical power is found in *Laxdæla saga* (the Laxdale Saga), which describes several acts of rebellion by women wherein they exercise their autonomy and shirk gender norms. Two of the most prevalent descriptions are *Fóstbræðra saga* (The Saga of the Sworn Brothers) and the story of Melkorka. The first tale, *Fóstbræðra saga*, is one of the few sagas found in *islendingasögur* that features a female protagonist.<sup>33</sup> With her life spanning almost the entirety of the *Laxdæla saga*, Gudrun struggles to communicate the female experience in a male dominated genre. As she fights a metaphorical battle to be characterized as an individual with her own personhood, separate from the men in her life, so too she fights an ideological one against her fiancé, Kjartan, as he refuses to let her travel with him and assigns her to the role of caretaker.<sup>34</sup> Gudrun does not simply resign herself to his assignation however, never intending to wait around for his return, she instead goes out on her own.<sup>35</sup> This struggle for power appropriately demonstrates the contrast between the feminine and masculine

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32. Kress, “What a Woman Speaks.”

33. Anonymous, “The Laxdæla Saga,” ed. Douglas B. Killings, trans. Muriel Press, The Online Medieval and Classical Library, 1997, Chapters xxxiv, xxxv, xlii, lix, lx, lxv, lxviii.

34. Anonymous, “The Laxdæla Saga,” Chapter xxxiv.

35. Anonymous, “The Laxdæla Saga,” Chapter xxxv.

spheres, however it also demonstrates how a niche in society existed for women who rejected traditional gender roles.

In yet another saga from *Laxdæla*, Melkorka, both an Irish princess and a slave, wields her power through deception. Appearing to be mute to her captor and husband, Melkorka speaks only to her son, secretly passing along her mother tongue so that one day he will be able to share her stories.<sup>36</sup> This portrayal is thought to be a metaphor for women's larger influence on male literature, as Robert Kellogg theorizes that it is representative of women passing on an "oral, domestic narrative tradition" to their sons.<sup>37</sup> The significance of such a metaphor can be found in its greater commentary on the influence of women in not only literature, but also society as a whole, despite the presence of misogynistic attitudes that appear with the introduction of Christianity.

When combined, these examples do not portray an equal respect for men and women in attitude, but what they do reveal is the existence of an allowance for deviation from binary gender roles, with the proximate arrival of Christianity to Scandinavia influencing the degree of deviation. With the introduction of written histories, the authority and influence women were privy to diminished, as "obtaining knowledge" and sharing it publicly became a solely male occupation. This decline in power coincides with growing rates of religious conversion, further exacerbating the regression of an equitable gender structure that extended to the public realm. And while the public realm was especially susceptible to such regression, the private realm largely remained dominantly feminine, with women controlling oral traditions, cultural practices, and generational

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36. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

37. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

knowledge. Essentially, the prevalence of misogyny in Norse literature, and in *Íslendingasögur* in particular, has much less to do with the actual treatment of women and the roles they inhabited, and much more to do with men's acute awareness that women still very much possessed extensive knowledge and power.

Meaning 'Orb of the World,' *heimskringla*, 'sagas of the kings of Norway,' was written by Snorri Sturluson in 1220 and primarily traces the descent of the Norwegian kings from the god Odin. Depicting a relatively feasible historical cause and effect, Sturluson covers the progression of Norsemen as nomadic Vikings, to Christian converts, to finally, the purveyors of a unified Norway. Identifying the origins of seidr, a prophetic magic unique to women, this collection of sagas builds on the representations of women's power found in *Íslendingasögur*, accounting for the greatest source of women's power, and also providing further insight into the ways in which such power was first feared by, and then claimed by, men. Seidr, while actually practiced in pre-Christian medieval Scandinavian society, in this instance acts as a metaphor for the existence of actual women's wisdom and ability, presenting yet another manifestation of feminine power.

The most prominent example of such a theme is found in the *Ynglinga saga*, in which Sturluson identifies the goddess, Freya, as having birthed the "magic art" of seidr.<sup>38</sup> The significance of this identification lies not in Freya herself however, but in the subsequent discussion of Odin's mastery of her art, as Sturluson transfers ownership of seidr over to Odin and attributes its spread to his influence.<sup>39</sup> This transfer of ownership

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38. Snorri Sturluson, Alison Finlay, and Anthony Faulkes, *Heimskringla* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2011), 6-47.

39. Sturluson, Finlay and Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, 6-47.

not only mirrors the transfer of the acquisition of knowledge from oral storytelling to written literature, but functions as a commentary on the seizure of women's public power in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Commentary on the male practice of the feminine seidr being associated with *argr* (homosexuality) is also present, and is significant in its dismissal of Odin's practice as such. Accepting that Odin utilizes seidr to better guard and govern his realm, Sturluson dismisses the male practice of seidr as a "weakness and anxiety," opening up a gray area for a wider discrepancy in the expectations versus realities of gender roles.<sup>40</sup> This gray area is made further in the identification of *völvas*, or sorceresses, as separate from women who do not practice seidr, not in any way equivalent to men, but masculine in a way that is not typical of a non-seidr woman.<sup>41</sup> Combined, these two deviations suggest that a third gender, if not a larger spectrum of genders, is present within Scandinavian society, lending merit to the argument that in practice gender did not necessarily equate value.

Not found in the *heimskringla*, but rather in *íslendingasögur*, *Eiríks saga rauða* (Erik the Red's saga), functions as an appropriate piece for comparison, as it provides a detailed account of the *völva*, Thorbjorg's, power and experience.<sup>42</sup> Where the general discussion of *völvas* in relation to Odin's work revolves around the concept of feminine power = homosexuality, the existence of masculine women, and a break from the gender binary, the description of Thorbjorg's experience allows for a magnified look into the role and treatment of magic practitioners. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, Thorbjorg is called upon

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40. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

41. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

42. Anonymous, "The Saga of Erik the Red", J. Sephton, *Icelandic Saga Database*, Sveinbjörn Thordarson (ed.).

to determine when a food shortage shall cease. Upon her arrival she is welcomed warmly, “as was the custom wherever a reception was accorded a woman of this kind,” given a high seat in which to perform her enchantments, and is allowed a night’s rest to better acclimate herself.<sup>43</sup> The treatment she is subject to further indicates a cultural respect for the productivity of an individual, or in other words what they are able to contribute, or their value, with no regard for gender. This particular portrayal is reminiscent of earlier descriptions found in Skaldic poetry, as sagas in which völvás are treated with respect and kindness are altogether rare, the *Vatnsdæla saga* (Saga of the People of Vatnsdal) and *Örvar-Odds saga* (Saga of Arrow-Odd) are examples of this, forming the ‘völva persecutions.’<sup>44</sup> This shift in narrative coincides with the introduction of Christianity to Iceland.

Produced concurrently with the Icelandic Sagas, the Eddas, of which there are two, are a collection of instructions on how to read, interpret, and further produce the poetry found in the early Skalds, and a collection of mythological and heroic poems composed over the course of three hundred years, respectively. The first Edda, also known as the *Younger Edda* or the *Prose Edda*, was written by the Icelandic chieftain and poet, Snorri Sturluson, in roughly 1222 - 1223. Comprised of three parts, the *Skáldskaparmál*, or “The Language of Poetry,” which clarifies the “riddle-like” poetry of the Skalds, the *Háttatal*, or “A Catalog of Meters,” which provides examples of one hundred two meters, and the *Gylfaginning*, or “The Beguiling of Gylfi,” which is a

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43. Anonymous, “The Saga of Erik the Red.”

44. Kress, “What a Woman Speaks.”

dramatic retelling of the Norse myths that account for the origins of the world, the *Prose Edda* primarily depicts women in an otherworldly sense, as goddesses and heroines, and is truly only useful in its ability to provide insight into the concept of a “warrior maiden.” The *Poetic Edda*, or the *Older Edda*, in contrast, depicts women in a much larger breadth, often in striking ways, with an emphasis on women’s wisdom and connection to the “beyond,” via the practice of seidr, or magic. A product of unknown authorship, the *Poetic Edda*, composed of a series of epic poems, was produced over a long period of time, 800 - 1100, taking on a much more “archaic” and brusque tone than the elaborate Skalds. For the purposes of this argument, it is this Edda that will be considered at length, with the *Gylfaginning* from the *Prose Edda* serving as a supplementary source.

Found in the *Poetic Edda*, “Hávamál” (The Saying of the High One) is a singular poem that itself contains much smaller poems.<sup>45</sup> These smaller poems take on the form of aphorisms, counsels, and magic charms that are attributed to Odin, depicting rules regarding social conduct, Odin’s various love affairs, and his acquisition of the runes.<sup>46</sup> Following the poem “Völuspá,” “Hávamál” is significant in its representation of how men’s literature overtook women’s voice. In “Völuspá,” Odin defeats a völva by forcing her to impart all of her wisdom on him, thus condemning her to the underworld.<sup>47</sup> Told from the völva’s point of view, she laments in verse:

I saw a man

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45. D.L. Ashlimann, ed., “Hávamál The Words of Odin the High One,” trans. Olive Bray, Hávamál, (March 28, 2003).

46. Ashlimann and Bray, “Hávamál The Words of Odin the High One.”

47. Anonymous, “Völuspá The Prophecy of the Seeress,” Völuspá - Norse and Germanic Lore Site with Old Norse/English translations of the Poetic Edda and Prose Edda, Introductory Note.

who was wounded sore  
 By an evil woman's word;  
 A lying tongue  
 his death-blow launched,  
 And no word of truth there was.<sup>48</sup>

Implying that a woman's tongue (voice) is her weapon, and should that be taken from her truth (wisdom) will no longer prevail, the *völva* reveals women's autonomy and influence as a major threat to men's power. And so, Odin silencing her represents the public silencing of women, as oral traditions were brought to an end. The "Hávamál's" succession of the "Völuspá" is important, as it completes Odin's appropriation of women's *seidr*. The last two sections of the work express that the language of sorcery is that of incantations and runes, traditionally aspects of women's work, and that to withhold them from women is to ensure that they cannot reclaim their power. Just as Odin stole the *völva*'s wisdom and voice, so too he steals her craft. An adequate metaphor, Odin's theft does explain the loss of women's public power, however, his success in completely robbing women of their culture is not mirrored in real life, as women continued to control the private, passing on oral traditions and crafting material goods.

The "Gróttasöngur" (Song of Grótti), found in the third part of the *Prose Edda*, the *Gylfaginning*, or "The Beguiling of Gylfi," is the only surviving work song of the Eddas.<sup>49</sup> Similar to the "Darraðarljóð" (*The Lay of Dörruðr*) in *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, the "Gróttasöngur" remarks on the toxicity of the patriarchy, using violence as a vehicle for commentary on men's abuse of power and women's retribution. In the song, which reads

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48. Ashlimann and Bray, "Hávamál The Words of Odin the High One," stanza 118.

49. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

more like a poem, two giant maidens have been sold to the Danish King Frodí.<sup>50</sup> Utilizing their superior strength, the king requires them to work the grinding mill nonstop, having them grind gold, peace, and prosperity for his kingdom.<sup>51</sup> In retaliation, they sang the song called “Gróttasöngur” and ground until they had created an army to kill the king.<sup>52</sup> Not necessarily a profound contribution to the deeper analysis of the silencing of women and their subsequent reclamation of private power, this song nonetheless displays the success of female rebellion, the power of voice, and women’s proclivity for exercising their autonomy; and when employed alongside more introspective poems such as “Hávamál” and “Völuspá,” it helps to illustrate women’s power with a greater depth and breadth.

Written earlier than the Icelandic and Norwegian Sagas as well as the a majority of the Eddas, the Skalds, having originated in Norway and then having been further developed in Iceland, were originally products of oral court poetry.<sup>53</sup> Unlike the Eddic poems, which were published anonymously and written in a much more objective manner, the Skaldic poems were identified by author and were much more subjective in style. Similar to the *Poetic Edda* and *fornaldarsögur*, Skaldic poetry rooted itself largely in myth and heroism, however, separate from its counterparts, its ties to women were significantly stronger. Although they place much of their emphasis on the pursuits of men, especially as the oral tradition of poetry shifted to a written format, the Skalds are

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50. Anonymous, “Gróttasöngur The Lay of Grotti, or The Mill-Song,” Völuspá - Norse and Germanic Lore Site with Old Norse/English translations of the Poetic Edda and Prose Edda, stanza 1.

51. Anonymous, “Gróttasöngur The Lay of Grotti, or The Mill-Song,” stanza 17.

52. Anonymous, “Gróttasöngur The Lay of Grotti, or The Mill-Song,” stanza 15.

53. Venla Sykäri and Nigel Fabb, *Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art, Language, and Song*, 78-88.



much more liberal in their descriptions of women and their inclusion of female authorship. Containing several feminine archetypes, and not just the Madonna, the whore, or the goddess, Skaldic poetry is much more representative of female agency than its contemporaries and successors.

Unlike its contemporaries, the Skalds are significant in their possession of female authorship. And so, perhaps more important than what Skaldic poetry had to say, is who said it. Despite its inclusion of female poets, the Skalds still contain a disappointingly few poems produced by women. Many of them are unnamed, further limiting productive discussion surrounding their work. Truly, only three women appear with any amount of regularity or emphasis, one of which is only referred to by first name: Ingunn, Þuríður Snorradóttir, and Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, Snori Sturluson's niece. Ingunn, the only female student at the episcopal residence of Hólar, is referred to fleetingly, described as "well-versed in literary knowledge, very good at Latin and gladly teaches others who want to learn."<sup>54</sup> Þuríður Snorradóttir, mentioned briefly in *Íslendingabók* by Ari Þorgilsson "the Wise," is described as "both very wise and not unreliable."<sup>55</sup> Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, perhaps the most influential of the three, is officially recorded in the *Skáldatal* catalog of court poets, and is credited for having written a stanza in *Íslendinga saga*. Each of these women, credited with having produced a single verse or stanza here or there, are significant for the simple fact that they exist, and their authorship allows for the observation that women's access to, and possession of, wisdom and knowledge did not disappear with public oral storytelling, but rather it persisted and adapted.

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54. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

55. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

Not published as a Skaldic poem, but rather as an homage to Skaldic poetry, the myth of the skaldic mead, told in the *Prose Edda*, describes how Odin obtained the gift of poetry.<sup>56</sup> The mead of poetry, created from blood of the wisest giant and honey, is given to the female giant, Gunlad, who guards it in isolation, deep in the wilderness.<sup>57</sup> When Odin hears of where the mead is located, he takes on an alias and attempts to bargain for it. Unsuccessful, he bores a hole through the mountain and takes the form of a snake to traverse the hole.<sup>58</sup> Successful in this attempt, he does not simply take the mead from Gunlad, but sleeps with her for three nights as a form of deception, and then consumes all of the mead.<sup>59</sup> Not only is this poem a metaphor for the sexual exploit of women, but the mead serves as a specific motif, in which women's nourishment of men can sustain life, but can also intoxicate, dangerous in its abilities to blur boundaries. And just as Odin stole song and runes from völvás, his theft of the mead from Gunlad further serves to represent the forceful capture of a female dominated practice.

The sagas and poems described in this chapter are by no means exhaustive, as hundreds of poems exist from this time period, and the oral history that predates the referenced literature is extensive. The pieces analyzed in this chapter purely serve as a mechanism for the further investigation of the material and political customs of the region, providing a cultural context and accounting for major thematic and theological shifts. Implemented for their ability to demonstrate the complex relationship that existed

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56. Derrick Everett, "The Mead of Poetry and Regeneration: A Story from the Prose Edda," Monsalvat, (April 11, 2022).

57. Everett, "The Mead of Poetry and Regeneration: A Story from the Prose Edda.

58. Everett, "The Mead of Poetry and Regeneration: A Story from the Prose Edda.

59. Everett, "The Mead of Poetry and Regeneration: A Story from the Prose Edda.

between men's perception of women and women's reality, these poems explore the robbery of authority and voice, the transition from feminine song-work to masculine literature, women's reclamation of power and autonomy, and the very real presence of a nuanced gender hierarchy. Establishing a solid foundation for the remainder of the investigation, this chapter aimed to account for discrepancies found between the literature and the material, while still identifying the ways in which the literature contributed to gender equity.

## Chapter Two: “Isolation & Absence”

Having identified the ideological and mythological foundations that first made gender equity possible within medieval Scandinavia, and that later ensured its, albeit limited, survival under Christian indoctrination, it is now equally important to identify the very real physical and social factors that produced such equity. Scandinavia’s geography is the main culprit. Further north than Continental Western Europe, the region housing Scandinavia not only has limited access to the rest of the continent via land, but possesses a climate that is naturally unsuitable for large scale agriculture. This absence of agricultural production during the medieval period, in turn, necessitated a need for the outsourcing of goods such as grains, produce, and domestic animals, which then created the widespread practice of seafaring and an absence of men.<sup>60</sup> Second to its geography, the presence of an active textile cottage industry elevated the role women held within society as well as within the economy. While agricultural goods were in short supply, sheep were numerous. Iceland in particular possessed a large population of sheep, and thus wool, and for that reason would become known for its textiles. This can be seen not only in the material historic record, but in the Icelandic Sagas as well, with women being described as crafting intricate, embellished garments as well as plain garments as part of their daily duties.<sup>61</sup> The practice of textile production would grow more prevalent with the spread of Christianity, as the practice of tithing diminished the use of silver as

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60. “Trade in the Viking Period,” National Museum of Denmark.

61. Kristen Marie Tibbs, “‘Semiotics of the Cloth’: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions” (dissertation, Theses, Dissertations, and Capstones, 2012).

currency, where soon after textiles took its place.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the absence of any sort of male dominated social organization reduced the presence of a sex-based hierarchical structure and increased the opportunity for social and economic mobility. This, like the presence of a female-run, prolific textile industry, can be attributed to the lack of large-scale agriculture. When combined with the Scandinavian ideology of “capability over life-station,” this lack of a stringent social hierarchy allowed for women to possess a greater autonomy and a more valued role within society.

As a means of contextualizing these factors and better understanding how they contributed to the lack of the gender related restrictions that the rest of medieval Europe possessed, this chapter aims to understand why, despite the existence of a gendered division of labor, neither gender was disparaged, as well as why paternalism was so persistent in Western Europe while remaining largely absent in Northern Europe. To accomplish this, this chapter will discuss the physical and material aspects of medieval Scandinavia, exploring the geography of the region, its industries and goods, gender specific tasks and spheres, and the progression of its trade, economy, and social norms over time. Largely utilizing quantitative data and artifactual evidence, this chapter will examine the quantifiable contributions women made to the economy and explore the impact of those contributions at the societal and regional levels, in turn establishing the physical presence of equality.

In order to understand the trading habits and industries of medieval Scandinavia, it is first important to become familiar with its geography and climate. First and foremost,

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62. Tibbs, “‘Semiotics of the Cloth’: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions.”

Scandinavia is geographically positioned in such a way that intercontinental commerce was fairly accessible and secure. Unlike other countries that participated in extensive trade however, Scandinavia lacked the climate needed for abundant agricultural production. When compared to the countries of mainland Europe, an obvious deficit can be seen in terms of production capabilities. Scandinavia as a general region naturally produces primarily cereal grains, with Sweden uniquely producing a high quantity of sugar beet. Compared to the agricultural yield of countries such as England, France, and Germany, each of whom produce a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, and farm stock, greater Scandinavia was barren. Largely mountainous and forested, Scandinavia has few regions in which fertile, workable earth is present. Sweden, which possesses the rich area of Skåne to the south, has the most agricultural potential, but even then it is rather limited. Norway, possessing mountains that extend to its coastline, is cut through with deep fjords, inlet-like valleys that are conducive to sea travel but not agriculture. Iceland is perhaps the least fruitful of all. Located close to the Arctic Circle, one tenth of Iceland is covered by glaciers and it houses two hundred active volcanoes. A lack of workable land combined with a liberal access to waterways created an economy that almost exclusively relied on seafaring.

Existing to the north of Western Europe via the Danish Archipelago and to the west of Eastern Europe via Finland, Scandinavia is peninsular, surrounded by water on its northern, western, and southern borders. Of the bodies of water it is encapsulated by, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, and the English Channel functioned most predominantly as passages for the transportation and trade of goods, providing Vikings access to Eastern

and Western Europe, the Mediterranean Basin, Asia Minor, and even North America. Evidence of Viking trade during the medieval period has been found as far as, what is today, Istanbul, Turkey.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, evidence of Viking expeditions and encampments has been found as far as what is today Newfoundland, Canada.<sup>64</sup> This propensity for seafaring meant that, “...Viking societies tended to be small and mobile...” which in turn made long-distance trading and raiding possible.<sup>65</sup> This mobility, or nomadic tendency, differed from medieval Scandinavia’s contemporaries, such as the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula who traveled in a seasonal trade circuit, as travel was less of a family affair and was subject to change based on foreign politics. Women were left to tend to the home and the land and oversee domestic affairs, while men conducted trade and forged relationships with foreign powers.<sup>66</sup>

This general absence of a male presence is not to say that men were never present within society, or that they never participated in domestic duties, nor does the consistent presence of women within society preclude their participation in travel. For the purpose of migration and settlement, women were also present on voyages, and as seasons and tasks demanded, men were present within the home. The concept of “shielings” most appropriately describes the role men played, at least in the physical realm, while home. This is where a clear division in labor based on sex becomes apparent, as men took on yet more migratory, physically demanding tasks. Describing a “...seasonal, task-specific production or logistic site,” shielings followed a yearly, reoccurring rhythm, facilitating

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63. “Environment and Trade: Viking Age (Article) | Khan Academy.”

64. Craig Cippola, “Vikings in Canada,” Royal Ontario Museum,( February 24, 2021).

65. “Environment and Trade: Viking Age.”

66. “Environment and Trade: Viking Age.”

the manufacturing of localized, specialized goods that were then moved to a designated point for consumption and trade.<sup>67</sup> These shielings thus worked in tandem with sea travel. For a portion of the year, Viking men contributed to the production of goods, primarily through hunting, fishing, and lumbering, and then would, for the remainder of the year, travel to sell those goods.<sup>68</sup> Describing how even men's involvement in the production of goods could involve extensive travel however, a passage on the Norðrsetr hunt, from the *Greenland Annals*, states that, "the Greenlanders regularly need to undertake northbound sea voyages to the uninhabited parts [*óbyggðum*] of the land's northern end, or peninsula, both for lumber, hunting and fishing [*aflabragða*]: it is called *Greipum* and *Króksfjarðarheiði*. It is a very long sea voyage." And so the feminine and masculine realms are more firmly cemented as "separate" through the conduit of geography.

It becomes apparent that, out of necessity, if not by design, Scandinavia's geography allowed for the presence of frequent and prolonged matriarchal societies. Even with a more liberal interpretation of gender roles and natural ability, Scandinavian society at large was still patriarchal, but it is how society functioned in men's absence that is reflective of a more nuanced structure.<sup>69</sup> Iceland is perhaps the best example of this nuance, even as men grew to be more present on the island. Farther removed from mainland Europe than its relatives and possessing a unique climate, Iceland relied most heavily on extensive sea trade. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, this trade consisted primarily of the exports "vadmál," or cloth produced from sheeps' wool,

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67. Christian Koch Madsen, "Marine Shielings in Medieval Norse Greenland," *Arctic Anthropology*, Vol. 56 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, November 23, 2019).

68. Madsen, "Marine Shielings in Medieval Norse Greenland."

69. Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," 61-85.



and marine goods - namely dried fish, fish skin leather goods, and sandpaper a la shark skin. Most everything else was imported, such as metal goods, flour, beer and salt, honey, linen and soap, and especially wooden goods as Iceland was largely devoid of trees.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Norway and Sweden, who coined silver as a form of currency, Iceland was unique yet again, in that it conducted a barter economy. This deviation is notable as Scandinavian communities often reserved the giving and receiving of goods as a practice to be carried out by friends and family.<sup>71</sup> And it was only with the adoption of Christianity that Iceland switched from a standard currency to bartering, forgoing coined payment when its silver supply dwindled due to tithing. This switch back to a barter economy is significant in that it helped Icelandic women to retain an ownership of self and an autonomous feminine sphere through textile production, even as exposure to Western ideals and Christian doctrine altered the island's relationship with gender, religion and paternalism.

While Norway also possessed a prevalent textile industry, it was unlike Iceland in that it produced several other consumer goods. Crafting metal goods and whetstones, household goods such as combs, bone needles, and buttons, leather goods such as shoes, and food goods such as cured fish and meat, Norway, while still “industrially” underdeveloped, possessed a more diversified market than Iceland. This diversification, combined with its wide-ranging trading patterns, meant that Norway was both less susceptible to Western influences and that it relied less heavily on imported goods.

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70. Natascha Mehler and Mark Gardiner, *Coinless exchange and foreign merchants in medieval Iceland (AD 900-1600)*. In: *Merchants, Measures and Money*. Wachhotz Verlag, Hamburg, (2021), 35-54.

71. Lotte Hedeager, “Warrior Economy and Trading Economy in Viking-Age Scandinavia.” *Journal of European Archaeology Archive* 2, no. 1 (1994): 130–48. doi:10.1179/096576694800719238.

Iceland primarily participated in trade with Ireland and England, sourcing goods from further south through their ports, while Norway engaged in more extensive travel, namely the Mediterranean Basin, and raiding, namely the British Isles and German principalities.<sup>72</sup> This division in production and trade patterns would ultimately act as the metric for the capacity in which women were able to exercise their autonomy. Iceland, more limited in range and locked into a predominantly male sphere due to proximity, doctrine, and frequency of a male presence, hosted a somewhat singular feminine realm through its production of textiles, while Norway, possessing a broader range and larger masculine absence, held more room for female expression and contribution, particularly in terms of governance. Such a deviation is significant as both countries' mythologies held a similar sentiment and attitude towards women, even in contemporary works, but allowed for the real world expression of that sentiment in varying degrees.

To best understand the significance of the textile industry within Scandinavian countries, specifically Iceland and Norway, and how this industry created a space for women, it is necessary that a connection between folklore and the textiles themselves be made. Prior to the commodification of woolen goods, textiles were woven with the intention of telling a story; “what you wove is how you would spend your life. The warp is what you were given and the weft is what you would do with your life. You would spin something out of nothing, like an alchemist.”<sup>73</sup> Spinning and weaving saddle blankets, tapestries, shawls and more, Scandinavian women initially used textile production as a

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72. Mehler and Gardiner, *Coinless exchange and foreign merchants in medieval Iceland (AD 900-1600)*, (2021), 35-54.

73. Marian Reid, et al., “Weaving the Story of Iceland's Textile Culture,” *THE KINDCRAFT*, (October 30, 2019).

medium for storytelling and continued the practice even as woven goods came to serve as a source of economic importance. This communication of folktales through imagery, combined with the longstanding tradition of oral history and storytelling, demonstrates how women were chiefly responsible for maintaining and passing down social values, cultural mores, and greater sets of morals. Such a responsibility in and of itself is indicative of a substantial power, even if it did not appear at the forefront of society. As textiles grew in economic importance, this power grew as well. Now extending outside of the domestic realm, women's power and their public access to it became more firmly solidified as Iceland's economy came to rely more heavily on textile production and less on pillaged resources. This change in focus resulted from a decline in Viking expeditions and an incline in Christianity, both of which put a strain on silver reserves.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, this change in focus helped to counterbalance the encroaching paternalistic sentiments of the Christian church, maintaining the elevated status Scandinavian women enjoyed compared to that of their Western peers.<sup>75</sup>

As can be seen in both medieval Norway and Iceland, although labor was divided by gender, women's contributions were not considered less significant. Not only functioning as a means of economic growth and stability, but serving as a conduit for cultural and social development, women's labor was viewed as equivalent in value to men's. It not only ensured that a certain stability was maintained domestically in regards to food production and allocation, child rearing, and the production of material goods for export, but it complimented the labor of men, functioning in a way so that the two were

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74. Tibbs, "Semiotics of the Cloth': Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions."

75. Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," 75-90.

intertwined rather than working alongside, but separate from, each other. A great emphasis is continuously placed on ability, capability, purpose, and viability within medieval Scandinavian lore and society, and the labor sector was no exception.

Having discussed the ways in which medieval Scandinavia was able to function at an almost egalitarian level, it seems prudent to explore how its contemporaries were unable to accomplish the same. Such a comparison not only serves as a means of discerning how gender roles and expectations changed across time and space, but seeks to explain how two regions were able to maintain very different hierarchies while following the same doctrine. This feels particularly crucial as Christianity, largely responsible for the subjugation of women across Continental Europe, began to envelop Scandinavia in the mid- to late-twelfth century, permanently altering many of its societal norms and cultural practices.<sup>76</sup> Acknowledging this division between the two regions as well as the impact Christianity had on Scandinavia, it feels equally important to identify the ways in which Nordic countries were able to defy widespread Christian customs and maintain connections to their own folklore, even as they adopted the foreign doctrine. The presence of a distinct labor force separate from men, is of course, of particular interest, along with the codification of marriage laws that performed in women's favor, the existence of a form of sexual liberation, and the sacredness of a woman's connection to her home and children.

Discussed at the beginning of the chapter, large scale agriculture, and thus manorialism, in which serfs were considered lesser and were tied to the land, was largely

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76. Gareth Williams, "History - Ancient History in Depth: Viking Religion," BBC (BBC, February 17, 2011), [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/religion\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/religion_01.shtml).

responsible for the disparity between the gender roles present in Western Europe versus those in Northern Europe. Where Nordic countries greatly relied on shielings and an organic, rhythmic pattern for their production of goods, mainland Europe took on a much more rigid approach to production. This rigid approach can be attributed to the region's equally rigid social hierarchy. Noble lords owned the land and serfs cultivated it, and the means of production were carefully divided and managed, with serfs essentially working to live and unable to migrate socially or economically. Conversely, although land ownership did exist within Scandinavia, allocation of resources and labor was far more communal, and pervasive nomadic tendencies made it so that social hierarchies were much less strict and based predominantly on merit.

This difference in hierarchies extended to gender, even after the Christianization of Scandinavia. As wealth and land ownership dictated class, gender dictated station in Western Europe. This hierarchy, in which the landless served, and in some ways were property to, the landed and women served, and were property to, men was not accidental, but by design of the Church. Under the Christian Church and subsequently European society in general, women had little to no autonomy, rights to property or possessions, or even rights to their children. This was not the case in Scandinavia, especially in more rural areas, even after the introduction of Christianity, as moral ties to mythology, independent markets, and the continued periodical absence of men ensured some level of equality. Additionally, Scandinavian women, unlike their peers, retained their rights to consensually enter into marriage, file for divorce, and claim their children and home. However, even still, the arrival of the Christian Church did not leave Scandinavia

unaffected, as it greatly diminished scope of travel and trade, condemned the existence of a “nonbinary” or “other” gender, in line with that of the warrior maiden archetype, and brought an end to open marriages and sexual freedom.

Ultimately, medieval Scandinavia’s unique societal structure can be attributed to, first and foremost, its geography. Had it not been dealt the limitations it had, particularly its inability to grow substantial agricultural goods, or the advantages it had, namely its access to aquatic trade routes, the region would have likely fallen in line with neighboring countries. And while the region’s mythos certainly facilitated an environment that was conducive to gender equity, it was no more legitimate than the pagan beliefs that had existed throughout the rest of Europe, which often held similar values. It was this mythos, combined with the harsh climate and distinctive seafaring economy, that truly allowed for such a phenomenon to arise. Having maintained its distance from Christianity, both physically and ideologically, for centuries before conversion, and having built a distinguishing cottage industry that centralized women, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Scandinavia was in a position where it could adopt Church doctrine while also preserving its specific cultural identity. Truly, what allowed Nordic countries to separate themselves from mainland Europe was their ability to maintain a character that was independent and entirely other from the Christian Church and the feudal model. Not only the mere existence of women within the public sphere, but the frequency and prevalence with which they participated in matters such as manufacturing, trade, and politics, can be attributed first, to the status women had cemented for themselves through oral tradition and domestic insurance, and second, to

the give-and-take partnership between Scandinavian men and women, facilitated by the need for a division of labor that was viable, made economic sense, and forged a strong societal foundation that was otherwise mobile in nature.

### Chapter Three: “The Home & The Church”

While ideological and physical factors played a substantial part in facilitating a unique gender-value system in their own right, more significant yet is the role that insular cultural practices played. These cultural practices were of course present because of the more overarching ideological and physical factors, as discussed in chapters one and two, but the minutiae of such practices reveal the climate that allowed for the continuation of both gender equity and a capability based value system within medieval Scandinavia. Unlike their more western counterparts, who asserted that it was a woman’s role to bear children for the sake of maintaining a patriarchal lineage, Scandinavians assigned value to a woman’s ability to bear and rear capable, contributing members of society, and in particular, hearty, able sons. A strong, knowledgeable woman brought up strong, knowledgeable children. This, accompanied by a slightly skewed sex ratio within Scandinavia due to the, although rare, practice of infanticide as a means of conserving resources and assisting in partible inheritance, ensured that women maintained an elevated position within society.<sup>77</sup> As discussed in chapter one, women were also responsible for oral storytelling and passing down cultural traditions, such as the production of textiles discussed in chapter two. All of these factors combined cemented Scandinavian women’s power and influence within their communities, as they not only

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77. Nancy L. Wicker, "Selective female infanticide as partial explanation for the dearth of women in Viking Age Scandinavia" in: *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*. ed. Guy Halsell. (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 205-221.



bore their children, but shaped the communities' foundations through the gifts of nurture, wisdom, and security.

In near direct opposition to Scandinavian women, Western European women, and for the purposes of this paper in particular, women of the British Isles and France, were assigned little to no value for their contributions to their communities outside of the home. This deviance can be attributed to the long lasting and far reaching presence of Christianity within the region. Whereas Scandinavia maintained a sense of equity even after its indoctrination, due to the inherent nature of its cultural practices, Western Europe adopted Christianity centuries prior and upheld few of its previous pagan traditions. This assimilation thus allowed for the presence of a clerical hierarchy, in which women, particularly those without wealth, fell second to last in terms of value, with only young children falling below them.

Such phenomenon can be seen in legislation decreed by several rulers. From The Laws of Edward the Confessor comes the restriction, "no woman shall be appointed as an executor or administrator of any will, nor shall she be a guardian of a minor, nor shall she have any power over her own property without the consent of her husband or next-of-kin."<sup>78</sup> Shortly thereafter, The Laws of William the Conqueror states, "she is not allowed to dispose of anything without the consent of her husband, nor can she acquire anything unless it is given to her by her husband... Nor can she bequeath anything to anyone unless her husband agrees to it."<sup>79</sup> Yet later, found in The Statute of Westminster, "if a woman

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78. Britton, "On the Rights of Women," trans. Francis Morgan Nichols, in Britton, ed. F. W. Maitland (Cambridge University Press, 1905), 119-20.

79. Dorothy Whitelock, trans., "The Laws of William the Conqueror," in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1, ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1996), 211-13.

commits a crime and is married, she is not to be hanged, but must be delivered to the custody of her husband.”<sup>80</sup> And so it can be seen that medieval English women were, by law, the custody of and a legal extension of their husbands.

This clerical hierarchy, rather paternalistic in nature, encouraged the transformation of Western Europe into a patriarchal society, largely excluding women from the possession of personal rights or freedoms, including ownership of themselves after marriage, and subsequently their children.<sup>81</sup> This absence of any real sense of broad personhood is perhaps the most telling difference between the two regions, highlighting the “privilege” Scandinavian women possessed, even as men dominated in an official capacity.

Having identified such a discrepancy between Scandinavian women and their western peers, it is important to note that there were some exceptions to the patriarchal hierarchy that was present in much of Christian Western Europe. Nuns, for example, were able to exercise some degree of autonomy and agency within the confines of religious orders. They were able to own property individually and collectively as part of their convents and they could engage in economic activities, such as farming and textile production, in order to support themselves and their communities.<sup>82</sup> In some cases, nuns even held positions of authority within their convents, and were able to exercise some degree of power and influence over their fellow nuns and the wider community. For

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80. "The Statute of Westminster the Second," The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, July 21, 1297, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/westmin2.asp>.

81. Sue Sheridan Walker, "Widow and Ward: The Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England." *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 104–116. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177730>.

82. K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 2.

instance, in the 12th century, the Benedictine monk Gerald of Wales wrote of an abbess who was able to act as a judge and dispense justice to her community.<sup>83</sup> However, such examples as this were few and far between, and did not represent the experiences of the majority of women, clergy or otherwise, in Western Europe. While nuns were exempt from some of the restrictions placed on laywomen in medieval England, they were still subject to the authority of the Church and its male hierarchy. Nuns were expected to live according to strict religious rules and were often subject to intense scrutiny and control by their male superiors. Additionally, nuns were not able to participate in public life in the same way as men, and were often excluded from greater positions of political and economic power.

The veneration of the Virgin Mary is another exception to what was otherwise a male-centric Christian society. Mary was revered as the mother of Jesus Christ and was seen as a powerful link between human beings and God, and thus she was appreciated for her femininity and status as a woman. Such veneration had a complex impact on the treatment of women within medieval Western Europe, as the cult of the Virgin Mary provided women with a powerful model of female piety and spirituality, offering a means of empowerment and agency within a patriarchal society, it is also allowed for the reinforcement of strict legal and social restrictions. Through the veneration of Mary, women were able to see themselves as potential bearers of Christ, capable of performing acts of complete devotion, submission, and intercession just as Mary did.<sup>84</sup> At the same

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83. Gerald of Wales. *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Classics, 1978. Book II, Chapter 7.

84. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mary and the Women in the Church," *Cross Currents* 29, no. 1/2 (1979): 22-40.

time, however, the cult of the Virgin Mary also reinforced certain gender norms and expectations, limiting the roles and opportunities available to women within the Church and wider society. The emphasis placed on Mary's virginity and purity, for example, placed a premium on women's chastity and sexual restraint, and the association of Mary with motherhood and domesticity reinforced traditional gender roles that confined women to the home and family.

Such an emphasis on chastity and purity partially accounts for the differences between the legal rights of English and Scandinavian women in the area of criminal law. In England, women were often subject to harsh punishments for violations of social norms and expectations, including sexual transgressions such as adultery. Such a punishment for fornication is described in *The Leges Henrici Primi*, "...let her have her hair shorn like a harlot, and let her be led through the town and whipped, and afterwards let her be shut up in a nunnery, and there let her be strictly guarded."<sup>85</sup> Scandinavian women, inversely, had greater legal protections in cases of sexual assault and rape. For example, in Iceland, a woman who was raped could choose to take her case to court and seek compensation from the perpetrator.<sup>86</sup>

To both better identify the nuances of such cultural and societal differences and to analyze how the presence of a monotheistic, organized religion facilitated the oppression of women in one region while impacting the position of women in another region very little, this chapter aims to identify how singular state-sponsored doctrine created rigid

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85. Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*, Volume II: c. 500-1042 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955), 1130.

86. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

gender constraints and why child rearing was comparable to the role of a warrior in Scandinavia during the medieval period. Discussing consensual and forced marriage contracts, dowries, childbearing and rearing, the presence of female infanticide, and Scandinavian oral storytelling versus Western recordkeeping, these questions will be answered primarily through the means of clerical documentation, particularly that composed by the clergy of the British Isles, and Norwegian and Icelandic sagas recorded both before and after the Christianization of Scandinavia. These forms of documentation draw comparisons between the two regions' social hierarchies, marriage laws, and sexual practices, revealing the Church's thoughts on not only interpersonal matters in terms of gender as an institution, but its opinion of Scandinavian cultural practices themselves, as well as Scandinavians' thoughts on the introduction of the Church along with the ways in which they adapted their secular sphere in response.

It is important to recognize that while Scandinavian cultural practices surrounding the home remained rather consistent throughout time, allowing for women to maintain power and influence, the public appearance of a woman's place within society did not. With the solidification of Christianity in roughly the tenth and eleventh centuries, the open participation of women in public matters diminished, with their presence in trade and political affairs being relegated to a more private influence, and men taking on the roles of family and community spokespersons. This is not to say however that the native laws and customs surrounding the treatment of women and their provisions lessened, only that their opinions on such matters were shared publicly much more seldom and that the Church presented obstacles that were not previously an issue.

An example of this change brought on by Christianity can be seen in the *Sverris Saga*, which describes Cecilia Sigurðardóttir's, daughter of King Sigurd II of Norway, marriage to first Fólkviðr and then Bárðr Guthormsson. In the late twelfth century, Cecilia left her first husband, Fólkviðr, on the account that she did not love him and felt as though, "...she had been given to [him] like an unwilling concubine."<sup>87</sup> Having left Sweden and returned to her native Norway, she met Bárðr Guthormsson and obtained permission to marry him from her brother and the king.<sup>88</sup> Upon hearing of the match however, Archbishop Eysteinn refused to approve it, so long as Cecilia's first husband was alive.<sup>89</sup> Calling upon her brother and other prominent chieftains to act as witnesses to her claims, Cecilia argued against the Archbishop that her marriage to Fólkviðr could not be upheld, as not only had she not consented to it, but her brother had been out of the country when it took place and had thus not sanctioned it.<sup>90</sup> Her story, having been confirmed by witnesses, compelled the Archbishop to rescind her first marriage and approve of her marriage to Bárðr.<sup>91</sup>

Cecilia's story reveals two major components in regards to the difference of women's treatment across regions and the transition of Scandinavian women's status within society. It displays that under the Christian Church, at least within Western Europe, women, while required to provide consent to enter into a marriage contract, were unable to break that contract except in the case of their husband's death or, as seen in

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87. Jenny M Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature." *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 142-176.

88. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," 142-176.

89. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," 142-176.

90. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," 142-176.

91. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," 142-176.

Cecilia's case, the absence of initial personal consent or permission from a paternal guardian.<sup>92</sup> This is in direct contrast to the Scandinavian approach to marriage, in which a contract did not require consent from both parties, although mutual consent was typical amongst common folk, but divorce initiated by the man or woman was completely legal.<sup>93</sup> By this point, permission being granted by a paternal figure, whether symbolically or literally, was standard in both regions, as the union represented not only the physical but the monetary joining of two families. Additionally, it depicts one way in which Scandinavian society had transformed so that women no longer acted as their own representatives, but had come to require men to secure their negotiations and rights for them. Where previously women could secure a divorce independently, on the grounds of many causes, and without witnesses, ecclesiastical law had determined that such a process was no longer lawful.<sup>94</sup>

The introduction of absolute female consent by the Christian Church was one of the few changes that helped to further elevate Scandinavian women's position within society. However, it simultaneously degenerated that position as over time it prompted men to deny women their inheritances, their right to divorce, and their right to consensually remarry. This can be attributed to the fact that complete mutual consent had the potential to harm financial alliances, as well as the potential to devalue dowries, and that the scarcity of women within the region made for a more competitive market. Ultimately, the relationship women had with politics and law was the most open to

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92. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," 142-176.

93. Jacobsen, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period*, 51.

94. Jacobsen, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period*, 51.

exploit from either side, as even prior to Scandinavia's Christianization and the subsequent relegation of women to a submissive public role, Scandinavian men had held jurisdiction over the political realm and the legal privileges of women. It was truly the cultural and folk realms that provided women with safety, even in the midst of Christianity, as they singlehandedly reared the futures of their communities.

While women in both medieval Scandinavia and medieval Western Europe may have been subject to secular and ecclesiastical laws that limited their autonomy, albeit in different ways, one key factor separated the two in terms of how their worth was calculated: their production and guardianship of children. Both sects were expected to provide their husbands with children, preferably with sons, but the relationship between women from either region and their children differed greatly. Under the law of the Church, children were the property of their fathers.<sup>95</sup> This ownership was primarily a result of the stationary agricultural structure that predominated much of Western Europe, in which land holdings demanded a male heir, except in the rare cases in which only women were left in the line of succession.<sup>96</sup> That established, the only ways for a woman to inherit land were through her patrilineal line or through a dower, which would consist of about one-third of her husband's estate, she otherwise was excluded from her husband's holdings, and thus should her husband die, her children were to be handed over to a feudal wardship until they were old enough to inherit the land themselves.<sup>97</sup> An

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95. Walker, "Widow and Ward," 104-116.

96. Walker, "Widow and Ward," 104-116.

97. Walker, "Widow and Ward," 104-116.



example of this can be seen in a writ by King Henry III in which he orders the delivery of a daughter turned heiress to take the place of her recently deceased brother:

To Mabel late the wife of Roger Torpell. She must well remember that the king gave the custody of the land and heirs of the said Roger de Torpell, with the marriage of the heirs to R. bishop of Chichester, the chancellor, during the minority of the heirs, whereof because William the eldest son and heir, has died, the king commands her, as she loves herself and her goods, not to eloign Acelota, sister and next heir of the said William, whom the chancellor committed to her ward to nurse, but to deliver her to the messenger to the said bishop bearing these letters with letters of the bishop testifying that he is his messenger.<sup>98</sup>

Even as her daughter is still at the age in which she needs to nurse, the king, and by extension the Church, demands that she deliver her to the bishop. Scenarios like this were not uncommon, and women continuously attempted to claim guardianship of their children on the grounds of their motherhood and their role as wife, but preference was consistently given to men in the interest of feudal land holdings.

Unlike feudalist Western Europe, communities within Scandinavia recognized the ownership women possessed over their children, as a man's jurisdiction ended at the doorstep and his wife assumed control of the home.<sup>99</sup> Prior to the introduction of Christianity, this extended to children born out of wedlock as well, with the child recognized as legitimate and its mother recognized as its guardian.<sup>100</sup> Further contrasting

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98. Walker, "Widow and Ward," 104-116.

99. "The Role of Women in Viking Society," Hurstwic.

100. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

their counterparts, Scandinavian women also inherited their husbands' land and businesses in the event of death, with their children remaining in their custody as well.<sup>101</sup> This divergence in ownership, particularly pre-Christianization, can largely be attributed to the presence of feudalism in Western Europe and the lack of such an institution in Scandinavia, however historical precedent also contributes to the phenomenon, as Norse folktales and secular law had long mapped out a series of protective measures for women within society.

The *Grágás*, a collection of Icelandic laws published in the sixteenth century, explicitly listed penalties for men who forced themselves onto women.<sup>102</sup> The *Kormáks saga* describes Kormákr bestowing four unwanted kisses onto Steingerðr which is witnessed by Þorvaldr who then draws his sword, alluding to the taboo of men providing women with unwanted attention within Norse culture.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, the *Króka-Refs saga* depicts women defending themselves against unwelcome advances, with Helga banishing Grani, who knows her husband and son are away, from her property when he informs her he wants to buy a woman.<sup>104</sup> Grabbed by Grani as a response to her refusal, Helga does not hesitate to defend herself, wrestling Grani until her husband returns home and kills him.<sup>105</sup> Law collections and folktales such as these, woven into the fabric of secular society, ensured that Scandinavian women maintained autonomy where other

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101. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

102. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

103. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

104. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

105. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

women did not, and this autonomy allowed for very personal connections and avenues of expression that were not available when under the direction of the Church.

The role that the absence of motherhood played is just as important as the role motherhood itself played when discussing the ways in which legislated autonomy allowed for Scandinavian women to possess power and mobility within their communities. Described in chapter one, the archetype of a warrior maiden was popular within Norse mythology. A woman who was not feminine, did not subscribe to motherhood, and possessed the physical prowess of a man, the warrior maiden accounted for the existence of a third, or nonbinary, gender.<sup>106</sup> This archetype and its blurred gender spectrum provided women with the opportunity to participate in society and contribute to the community in ways that were not stereotypically “womanly.” This is significant because it provided women who were unable to mother children, whether by choice or due to infertility, and women who were not attracted to men, an alternative to the widely accepted norm. In contrast, Western European women had no such figure to whom they could rely on, and thus were relegated to the role of mother or nun, unable to mobilize socially or expand their identity outside of their gender. This lack of autonomy and mobility was only heightened by the Church’s regulation of sexuality and sexual expression and disdain for scientifically supported medicine and midwifery. Scandinavian women, possessing personal rights in ways Western European women did not, were able to conduct themselves and their homes in a way that optimized the health

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106. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," 85.

of individuals and the health of the community, relying on centuries of shared knowledge to provide security and longevity, whether a mother or a maiden.

The Church provided no shortage of governances that dictated what one could and could not do with their body. The forbidding of premarital and extramarital sex are some of the most notorious, but by no means are they the most odd. Breastfeeding, the only method of supplying infants with nutrition during the time period, was also monitored by the Church, and as the Church grew its influence within Scandinavia, infant mortality rates rose.<sup>107</sup> This increase in infant death can be attributed to the Western European medical belief that colostrum, or a mother's first milk, was dangerous for the baby to consume.<sup>108</sup> This deviation away from native, female dominated midwifery practices, signaled a decline in women's power over the domestic realm. A continued vested interest in subsistence farming, textile commerce, and communal child rearing, however, ensured that women maintained a reasonable amount of control over internal affairs.

As noted in chapter two, the consistent absence of men also made it nearly impossible for Scandinavian women to be divested of their influence. Just as it curbed scientifically supported birthing and nursing practices, the introduction of Christianity also facilitated the banning of infant abandonment and elective abortions, practices that had been conducted in the region for centuries.<sup>109</sup> While the ban on such practices was beneficial in that it assisted in leveling out rising infant mortality rates, the trade off it enabled did not serve the same function as those practices. Infant abandonment was

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107. Benedictow, "The Milky Way in History," 19-53.

108. Benedictow, "The Milky Way in History," 19-53.

109. Pentikainen, "Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries, 72-91.

utilized to cull sick and weak children, particularly in times of diminished resources. Additionally, it was used to lower the volume of female infants within the community, allowing for more resources to be devoted to male children who would one day provide food, security, and means of economic growth.<sup>110</sup> Christian involvement and influence in matters of the home ultimately proved detrimental to the health and strength of Scandinavian societies, as women had to answer to a male presence in what was previously a female dominated space.

Having established that the rise of Christianity intrinsically changed the way in which gender was publicly performed, as can be seen in the changes made to marriage and divorce proceedings, the laws surrounding sexual expression, and the revisions made to medical practices, it is worth noting that these changes did not necessarily affect women's stations or their perceived value. While yes, the power they were able to wield publicly did diminish due to interference from the Church regarding matters of the home and personal relationships, their worth to the community did not decline. Continuing to perform the same duties that they always had, such as maintaining the home and land, tending to livestock, caring for children, and running cottage industries, Scandinavian women were still viewed as valuable contributors to their communities, even under a more formal patriarchal structure. Their private roles never wavered, even as clerical restrictions necessitated the assumption of a more withdrawn public presence, because at its core Scandinavian society valued capability and strength of character over a rigid gendered hierarchy. This capability can best be seen in the women's production of

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110. Carol J Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia." *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988): 147-188.

textiles, as discussed in chapter two. Not only did women produce a final product, but they harvested, carded, spun, and then weaved the wool garments that were to be exported.

The existence of cottage industries within Scandinavia, such as the textile industry, is doubly significant as they not only ensured that women were viewed as valuable economic assets, but they allowed for a space for women, and by extension their children, to congregate, consort, delegate, and share knowledge. This sharing of knowledge could be quite literal, as older women taught younger how to weave, but it could also be rooted in folk traditions, with women singing weaving songs as they worked. A stylized, but well known example of such a song, *Darraðarljóð*, can be found in the *Njáls saga*, depicting the gruesome scene of valkyries weaving a bloody loom.<sup>111</sup> Further still, a popular song that was once sung to young children remains in use today. From the *Egils saga*, the song, “My Mother Told Me,” described the Viking conquest of Ireland in the 800s:<sup>112</sup>

My mother told me  
Someday I would buy (buy)  
Galleys with good oars  
Sails to distant shores  
Stand up on the prow  
Noble barque I steer  
(Steady) Steady course to the haven  
Hew many foe-men  
Hew many foe-men<sup>113</sup>

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111. Judy Quinn, “Darraðarljóð and Njáls Saga.” *Die Faszination Des Verborgenen Und Seine Entschlüsselung: Rāði Sār Kunni. Beiträge Zur Runologie, Skandinavistischen Mediävistik Und Germanischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Ed. Jana Krüger Et Al., *Ergänzungsbände Zum Reallexikon Der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 101 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 299-313.

112. Martine Kaspersen, “My Mother Told Me,” *Scandinavian Archaeology*, (January 23, 1970).

113. Kaspersen, “My Mother Told Me.”

While the songs that were sung during weaving and caring for children acted as a storytelling medium meant to pass along knowledge, the textiles themselves performed in a similar way. Prior to their commercialization in the 1500s, the textiles produced by Scandinavian women often consisted of tapestries that depicted ornate scenes from battle and folk legends, hung to assist in oral storytelling.<sup>114</sup>

Separate from their work with the loom, women also carried out the practice of *kulning*, a form of work-song meant to call in livestock, specifically cows. *Kulning* was unique to women not only because they were the primary farm laborers, but because it required a soprano pitch to be most effective.<sup>115</sup> Although much less common than song or crafting, women also asserted their influence over society through the written word. Known for being a form of record keeping occupied by men, women, both Scandinavian and not, seldom recorded their knowledge and stories in writing. The few times they did, or are suspected to, however, scholars have noted that their prose takes on a much more emotive, contemplative tone, often depicting women as central characters that have complex motivations and experiences.<sup>116</sup> One of the most prevalent examples of this change in tone can be found in the *Laxdæla saga*, with much of it focusing on the life of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and her series of lovers.<sup>117</sup> Elaborating on her perspective, introspections, and varied emotions, the work depicts Guðrún three-dimensionally,

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114. Diane Wolfthal, "Women Who Refuse to Mother: Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood in Northern European Art, 1400-1600," *Different Visions*, (May 10, 2022).

115. Jennie Tiderman-Österberg, "Kulning: The Swedish Herding Calls of the North," *Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage*, (September 2, 2020).

116. "Role of Women," Hurstwic.

117. Anonymous, "The Laxdæla Saga," Chapter xxxiv-lxviii.

focusing on her experiences rather than the role she played in the lives of men. Such depth of character is why scholars assert that the saga was produced by a woman.

At the regional level deviation in tone of storytelling, as well as medium, allowed for women to share their experiences in an authentic and accurate way, demanding to be seen as whole people and cognizant of their own value. This is in opposition to the numerous sagas produced by Scandinavian men that portrayed women as rather flat and often in a negative light, and largely focusing on the exploits and adventures of men. At a continental level these same deviations reveal the dissonance that existed between the clergy's policies within Scandinavia and its portrayal of the region's people, and the actual secular laws and customs that shaped Scandinavian society. Literacy rates were extremely low across the entirety of Western and Northern Europe, with only the clergy and wealthy possessing the ability to read and write.<sup>118</sup> Literacy was even lower amongst women, and would remain so well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>119</sup> For this reason, and due to a lack of remaining folk traditions, record keeping and storytelling were almost completely male occupations in Western Europe, and more specifically, the occupations of clergymen. Much of what these men wrote, whether official edicts and policies or tales of people and places, alluded to God, the Bible, and morality or a lack thereof. This is true of their reflections on Scandinavian paganism and the policies they enacted in the region as well.

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118. Tyrel C. Eskelson, "States, Institutions, and Literacy Rates in Early-Modern Western Europe," *Journal of Education and Learning* 10, no. 2 (March 2021): 109, <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v10n2p109>.

119. Eskelson, "States, Institutions, and Literacy Rates in Early-Modern Western Europe," 109.



Commenting more on the myths and folk practices than the people themselves, clerics such as Adam of Bremen recounted ritual practices and documented places of worship. In his book, *Gesta*, published in the eleventh century, he describes events at a temple in Uppsala, a temple that has left no physical record.<sup>120</sup> His description reads:

It is the custom moreover every nine years for a common festival of all the provinces of Sweden to be held at Uppsala. Kings and commoners one and all send their gifts to Uppsala, and what is more cruel than any punishment, even those who have accepted Christianity have to buy immunity from these ceremonies. The sacrifice is as follows: of every living creature they offer nine head, and with the blood of those it is the custom to placate the gods, but the bodies are hanged in a grove which is near the temple; so holy is that grove to the heathens that each tree in it is presumed to be divine by reason of the victim's death and putrefaction. There also are dogs and horses hang along with men. One of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies of various kinds hanging there, but the incantations which are usually sung at this kind of sacrifice are various and disgraceful, and so we had better say nothing about them.<sup>121</sup>

When reading descriptions such as this one, it is important to note that oftentimes the men who penned them did not actually witness what they spoke of, but instead used second, and sometimes even third hand accounts, to inspire their first-person reflections. This tradition of reporting what was essentially hearsay played a significant role in the actions the Church took towards eradicating paganism in the north.

Thinking Scandinavians beastly, Christian missionaries set out to end traditional Nordic practices. This siege against “immorality” was of course successful, as the Church first converted chieftains and kings, who then enforced conversion en masse. Such conversion, however, was only successful to a degree, as sacrifices and ritual gatherings

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120. “Pagan Religious Practices of the Viking Age,” Hurstwic.

121. “Reigious Practices,” Hurstwic.

were discontinued in public, but very much remained a part of private life. The *Alþing*, or the parliament of Iceland, for example, made a law in roughly 985 that all men should be baptized and become Christian, however, they simultaneously permitted everyday pagan practices, such as singing work songs and adorning ornamental jewelry, to continue in public.<sup>122</sup> Such discrepancies in not only record keeping, but the implementation of Christianity, are significant because they demonstrate that the Church was misinformed and that Nordic countries, and their leaders, were unwilling to comply with Christian doctrine, maintaining many of their cultural traditions in private. This is where it becomes apparent that even under ecclesiastical law, women and their statuses did not inherently change, at least not culturally.

Although Scandinavia's mythology and geography may have acted as a foundation for gender equity, its deep-rooted cultural folkways are what allowed for that equity to remain even as its society was transformed by the spread and strengthening of Christianity. Truly, its unique stance on women's rights to self and property, the institutions of marriage and divorce, and reproductive rights, combined with its possession of a distinctive feminine sphere and influence, are what allowed for the continuation of equitable power and respect. In some ways it becomes clear that, while yes, a singular state-sponsored doctrine did create rigid constraints on gender, primarily through the means of control over reproductive rights and property, it was more so the absence of any substantial surviving reverence for women and their contributions or respect for the worth of both sexes and their complementary capabilities that ensured a

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122. "Religious Practices," Hurstwic.

non-equitable gendered hierarchy. Such insubstantial respect can be blamed on the duration in which Christianity was present in either region, the existence of feudalism versus nomadism, or a lack of self-sufficient, insular industry. Whatever the combination of factors, one thing is certain, both pre and post-Christianization, medieval Scandinavia possessed a culture built on the appreciation of an individual's abilities and born out of a millenia long understanding of the fluidity of gender.

## Chapter Four: “Power & Autonomy”

Having explored the ways in which femininity and female autonomy interacted with, and were represented in, the material, political, and spiritual, it is time to revisit the mythological basis in which such instances rooted themselves. Norse mythology once again plays a pivotal part in the discussion surrounding the power medieval Scandinavian women were able to wield, as it provides a framework for building observations on the real-world policies and customs that dictated the ways in which women were able to exercise self-governance and societal control. In particular, the region’s mythology and sagas provide insight into the foundations of interpersonal relationships, rights to property and financial security, and the capacities in which women were able to conduct legislation, business, and medical practice. Having exhaustively utilized the mythology for the purposes of discussing the continuation of gender equity through the changing trends of time, it will now be used to highlight specific myths that performed in parallel to real world accounts. Where the initial exploration of Norse mythology sought to establish ideological norms and their contributions to the persistence of women’s autonomy within the cultural and physical, this analysis seeks to examine exceptional cases, both factual and fictional, of female power, linking the presence of a distinct feminine strength found within the mythology to that of a similar strength found within secular society.

In an attempt to account for, first the unique ideological infrastructure and second the unique political scaffolding, that medieval Scandinavian society possessed, which

allowed for a certain freedom of gender expression and personal liberty, and to assess those freedoms within the constraint of femininity, this chapter aims to further explore women's role as childbearer and rearer and compare it to that of a warrior. Further, it is important to look at how women involved themselves in politics. Broadening the argument that women's capabilities granted them the privilege to partake in what would have otherwise been masculine roles and activities, this second point serves to link the contrasting ideas that value stemmed from capability rather than gender and that women's femaleness or femininity were seen as valuable in their own right. Drawing on the more fixed topics of marriage and divorce practices, land and property ownership, and participation in business and government as well as the more fluid themes of spiritual worthiness, sexual freedom, and fertility, these questions will be answered through the analysis of prevalent mythology, primary business and medical accounts, law documentation, and artifactual evidence. Used in congruence with each other, these sources will build connections between the theological principles of the region and the temporal policies that were enacted as a result. Acting summatively to pinpoint key and substantial ways in which women's autonomy was able to outlast societal change and religious reform, this chapter will utilize previous discussions alongside new documentation to depict an overarching and complete narrative.

As in chapter one, the nature of this chapter necessitates the need for a deeper understanding of Norse myths. In particular mythological figures such as the Valkyries, Freyja, and Frigg. All three are explicitly feminine in nature and they serve as examples of striking deviations from binary gender constraints and traditional patriarchal roles.

Valkyries, meaning “Chooser of the Slain,” were recorded in countless myths, typically at the sites of battles, and less frequently serving in Odin’s, king of the gods, hall.<sup>123</sup> Warriors in their own right, it was the job of the Valkyries to select worthy men who had died honorably to take to Valhalla, surveying scenes of battle and plucking them from the field at their moment of death.<sup>124</sup> Freyja, a goddess most notably associated with love, sex, war, and seiðr, was depicted as a warrior woman as well, and due to the nature of her attributes she is theorized to likely have been one of the first figures to have appeared in Norse pagan tradition.<sup>125</sup> Unlike many other fertility goddesses, the myths in which Freyja is featured almost exclusively center around sexuality, with the theme of childbirth seemingly excluded in its entirety; an odd deviation, as in most lore it is often considered a key component of fertility. Frigg, the queen of the gods, motherhood, and marriage, like Freya, was associated with fertility.<sup>126</sup> However, unlike her counterpart, there was an emphasis placed on her involvement in childbearing and her own role as a mother. Additionally, several myths highlight her disloyalty to her husband, Odin, as well as her wisdom, frequently illustrating her ability to not only outwit her husband and peers, but her propensity for providing counsel. In many ways these women, the Valkyries, Freya, and Frigg alike, are mirrors of each other, presented as clever and astute judges of character who used their unique gifts to mold their environments and enact their own

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123. Alexander Haggerty Krappe, “The Valkyrie Episode in the Njals Saga.” *Modern Language Notes* 43, no. 7 (1928): 471–474. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2914244>.

124. Krappe, “The Valkyrie Episode in the Njals Saga,” 471–474.

125. Britt-Mari Näsström, “Freyja and Frigg – two aspects of the Great Goddess” In *Shamanism and Northern Ecology* edited by Juha Pentikäinen, Berlin. (New York: De Gruyter, 1996), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110811674.81>

126. Näsström, “Freyja and Frigg,” 81–96.

agency. Their stories, when discussed alongside historical evidence, will demonstrate the link between fact and fiction, accounting for Scandinavian women's increased autonomy and value.

In their oldest representations, Valkyries were believed to not only possess the ability to select the worthy, but also the powers to provide mortals with protection during battle, take lives against the orders of Odin, and weave the threads of fate. Much more than warrior handmaidens to the king, Valkyries were goddesses of mortality. In the *Völsunga Saga*, a part of The Eddic poems, the tale of king Helgi Hjorvardsson and a Valkyrie named Svava is told.<sup>127</sup> In this tale, Helgi and Svava become lovers, and she not only maintains her role as Valkyrie after they wed, but uses it to provide him with a sword and protect him in battle.<sup>128</sup> Svava's ability to perform as warrior and wife reflects the two realms in which medieval Scandinavian women were expected to participate. Also in the *Völsunga saga*, is the tale of Sigurd and Brynhild. In the tale, Sigurd, a hero and the only being able to pass through the enchanted fire that encircles the Valkyrie, Brynhild, rescues her from her imprisonment.<sup>129</sup> Subdued with a sleep potion, Brynhild had been placed in the fire as a consequence for her disobedience to Odin, as she had slain a mortal he had wished to live.<sup>130</sup> After her rescue, the two fall in love, however, their union is cut short as Sigurd is enchanted to forget Brynhild and then betroths

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127. Anonymous, "The Story of the Volsungs, (Volsunga Saga) with Excerpts from the Poetic Edda," ed. Douglas B. Killings and David Widger, *The Story of the Volsungs, (Volsunga Saga)*, (January 15, 2013), Chapter ix.

128. Anonymous, "The Story of the Volsungs," Chapter ix.

129. Anonymous, "The Story of the Volsungs," Chapter xx.

130. Anonymous, "The Story of the Volsungs," Chapter xx.

another. In response, Brynhild kills Sigurd first, and then herself.<sup>131</sup> Brynhild's decision to not only go against Odin, but to kill her lover for his betrayal, exemplifies the autonomy women possessed in their day to day lives, as they expressed desires and acted on impulses that may not have aligned with their roles as mothers and homemakers. The story of Skuld, found in the *Gylfaginning*, yet another part of The Eddic poems, which depicts the creation and destruction of the world, tells of a Valkyrie who crafts the fate of the realms.<sup>132</sup> Described as the “youngest of the Norns,” goddesses who wove the threads of fate beneath the tree Yggdrasil, Skuld was unique in her possession of both the roles of Valkyrie and Norn, active in plotting and deciding the fates of the slain.<sup>133</sup> Similarly to how Skuld mapped out the fates of mortals, women were responsible for crafting the fate of their community, sustaining its agriculture, manufacturing its goods, and rearing its children.

In each of these stories it can be seen that the Valkyrie possessed extraordinary power and were aware of and exercised their own agency. Capable of simultaneously acting as wives and warriors, openly defying not just men, but omnipotent, all-powerful men, and holding the lives of others in their hands, at their core Valkyries were a prime example of what it meant to perform as a woman in Scandinavian society. What is important to note however, is that as the centuries progress, there is a marked change in their depiction, beginning in roughly the thirteenth century. Transitioning from the warrior of the *Völsunga saga*, who is strong and wise, able to pass judgment and craft life

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131. Anonymous, “The Story of the Volsungs,” Chapter xx.

132. Snorri Sturluson, “Gylfaginning (the Fooling of Gylfe), from the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson,” trans. Rasmus B. Anderson, *World Mythology Volume 1 Gods and Creation*.

133. Sturluson, “Gylfaginning (the Fooling of Gylfe).”



and death, to the harpy of the *Nibelungenleid*, an epic poem written in 1200, who is jealous, scheming, and shrewish, Brynhild is a perfect example of this shift, as she is stripped of her character and nuance.<sup>134</sup>

Just as the Valkyries held the lives and deaths of others in their hands, so did the women of Scandinavia. This concept was of course not entirely uncommon in other parts of Europe, and especially not in other parts of the world, but Scandinavian women resided within a particular set of circumstances that facilitated their nearly sole involvement in the ways in which souls entered and exited the world. As medieval Scandinavian communities were largely absent of men, medical practices were carried out primarily by women.<sup>135</sup> This included pregnancy, childbirth, minor ailments, major injuries, and end of life care. Essentially, the community was entirely reliant on female physicians. Procedures such as elective abortions, wound care, bone resetting, and assisted death in old age would have fallen on women to perform. References to wound treatment can be found in the *Ólafs saga Helga*, a part of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, in which a nurse-girl binds the warrior Thormod's wounds.<sup>136</sup> They are also found in the *Njáls saga* in which Hildigunnr, the daughter of Starkaðr, is given the title Hildigunnr *læknir*, or "Hildigunnr the Healer."<sup>137</sup> Women can be seen performing as midwives in the literature as well. Called a *bjargrýgr*, or helping-woman, midwives were

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134 Virginia C. Gildersleeve, "Brynhild in Legend and Literature." *Modern Philology* 6, no. 3 (1909): 343–74.

135. Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson. 1970), 93.

136. Snorri Sturluson, "Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway," Lee M. Hollander, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press. 1964), Chapter 234.

137. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, trans. *Njal's Saga*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1960), Chapter 57.

expected to not only attend to the physical birth, but to also perform magical or otherworldly assistance, as can be seen in The Eddic poem, *Oddrúnargrátr*.<sup>138</sup> This role as physician alone proved their value to the community, but it also earned them a voice within official business matters as their contributions provided them with a certain influence. Similar to the Valkyries once more, Scandinavian women also experienced a period of transition in the mid-twelfth to early thirteenth century, as the prevalence of Christianity in the region grew, bringing with it the dominance of male physicians and a gendered imbalance in politics.

Discussed heavily in chapter two, women's hands in industry provided them with an extensive platform from which to exercise their power. Like the ability to practice medicine provided them with the social capital to verbalize and act on their opinions, so did their role in the maintenance, production, and trade of goods. In Norse literature the Valkyrie carried out the important and necessary tasks of monitoring the lives of warriors, assessing their worth, and delivering them to Valhalla at the right moment, similarly, in Scandinavian communities, women were responsible for monitoring crops and livestock, harvesting raw goods, and delivering a finished product in the form of meals and textiles. These indispensable tasks, on either side, ensured that neither could be devalued, at least until the weight of their responsibilities were diminished, as was done in the 1200s. Just as Brynhild made the autonomous decision to defy Odin, a woman may defy her husband by culling their flock. In a society devoid of men for a large portion of

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138. Britt-Mari Nääström, "Healing Hands and Magical Spells". in: *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*. Eds Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross, (Sydney, Australia: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney. 2000), 356-362.

the year, women took ownership of their communities and leveraged their capabilities to participate in the official management of society. A piece of archaeological evidence that points to such management is the Oseberg ship burial, in which two women were interred. Discovered in Vestfold, Norway in 1904, the Oseberg was covered by a monumental barrow and contained grave goods of extraordinary wealth.<sup>139</sup> Comparable to a similar ship burial, the Gokstad, excavated in 1880, also in Vestfold, Norway, accepted as the burial of a chieftain, the Oseberg too, contained all the elements that would designate it as a burial site of the same caliber.<sup>140</sup> Disagreements exist over whether the two women held positions of power, or whether they were buried in such a way for religious purposes, but it is completely within the realm of possibility that such a burial marked their positions as leaders of their community.

Frigg and Freyja, often conflated and theorized to have stemmed from one goddess, perform almost as parallels of each other. Frigg is a wife and mother, held in contempt for her extramarital affairs, yet revered for her wisdom and trusted as an advisor, and Freyja is a warrior who seats half of those slain in battle and takes various lovers, but laments over her husband's continued absence and seeks him out under aliases. Both are fertility goddesses, responsible for sex, childbirth, and seiðr, yet each woman lacks involvement in a respective category. Where Frigg resides over childbirth and motherhood, Freya occupies sex and war. Representing the duality of womanhood, these two goddesses demonstrate how women were able to simultaneously encompass the

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139. "Two Wealthy Women," Museum of Cultural History (University of Oslo, January 31, 2017).

140. "The Women in the Oseberg Burial," Museum of Cultural History (University of Oslo, July 8, 2016).

traditional role of motherhood, the personal role of sexual being, and multi-faceted societal role of caretaker.

In the *Lokasenna*, found in the *Poetic Edda*, after standing up for Frigg, Freya is accused of being promiscuous by Loki, the trickster god, engaging in a heated argument with him in front of an audience of several other gods and goddesses.<sup>141</sup> Insinuating he will leave defeated as no one in attendance cares much for him, Freya's final insult to Loki is met with fury and so he conjures up an image in which she is found to be engaging in sex with her brother.<sup>142</sup> Ending the debate, another god, Njörðr, states that there is nothing wrong with a woman having a lover outside of her husband, and that Loki is the true pervert as he has borne children.<sup>143</sup> This example of sexual promiscuity, in which Freyja is outed as having sex out of wedlock, denotes the fact that sex, for men and women, was considered a shameless, base desire. In contrast, Loki bearing children was considered perverted, indicating that motherhood was a role suited only for women. Such distinctions provide insight into the ways in which women were allowed to be masculine, but the inverse was not necessarily true.

Another example is the *Grímnismál*, also found in the *Poetic Edda*, which features Frigg as a central figure. Telling the story of two young, royal brothers who had been fostered by an elderly couple, one boy by the woman and one by the man, *Grímnismál* is in part a tale of Frigg beating Odin in a game of wits. Frigg and Odin themselves represent the elderly couple, with one responsible for each boy. After the

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141. Snorri Sturluson, "Lokasenna," trans. Henry A Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Lokasenna*, 151.

142. Sturluson, "Lokasenna," 151.

143. Sturluson, "Lokasenna," 151.

boys had spent a year with the couple, the old man brought them a ship and sent them back to their home, imparting the advice onto his ward, Geirröðr, that once he should reach land, he should jump from the boat and push his brother back to sea.<sup>144</sup> Geirröðr subsequently grows up to be king, and Odin gloats to Frigg that he raised his boy better than she.<sup>145</sup> She claims that his boy is “inhospitable” and “tortures his guests,” makes a wager with a disbelieving Odin that it is so, and then arranges a situation so that he does indeed threaten, imprison, and torture a guest.<sup>146</sup> Frigg’s ability to not only partake in intellectual games with her husband, but to best him without consequence illustrates the complex nature of interpersonal relationships in medieval Scandinavian society. While women may have only served in an official capacity on a limited basis, due to their relationships within the community and the respect given to their intellect, they were able to wield power in more indirect ways.

Yet another example can be found in the *Völsunga saga*, in which King Rerir and his wife are unable to conceive a child, and so they pray to the gods that they should become pregnant.<sup>147</sup> Frigg, hearing their prayers, sets out to fulfill them and tells Odin of what they have asked.<sup>148</sup> Again, Frigg’s relationship with Odin is telling. Upon hearing the couple's prayers, she does not ask Odin to bless them, as childbirth is her respective domain, but rather confides their struggles in him, hinting at a partnership that contains mutual respect and cooperation. The *Heimskringla* book features the *Ynglinga saga*, in

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144. Snorri Sturluson, “Grimnismol,” trans. Henry A Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Grimnismol*, 84.

145. Sturluson, “Grimnismol,” 84.

146. Sturluson, “Grimnismol,” 84.

147. Anonymous, “The Story of the Volsungs,” Chapter ii.

148. Anonymous, “The Story of the Volsungs,” Chapter ii.

which Freyja is noted as having introduced seiðr to the Æsir gods and to have become the priestess of sacrificial offerings alongside her father and brother who became the priests of sacrifice.<sup>149</sup> Already of note due to her cleverness and her introduction of seiðr, Freyja becomes famous after the death of her father and brother, as she maintains the practice of sacrifice in their stead.<sup>150</sup> Her fame makes her known to all ladies, and her name becomes synonymous with the titles for a mistress of a property, *freyja*, and a woman who owns her own estate, *húsfreyja*.<sup>151</sup> The existence of such titles and her notoriety as goddess for women speaks to the presence of an active practice of female property and land ownership, as well as a certain independence, in which women work within and represent their own realm.

These tales demonstrate that both Frigg and Freyja wielded power in their own right, and while both married, they frequently acted independently and even in the place of the male figures in their lives. It can be seen that Frigg is more often described as working in partnership with Odin, however such behavior aligns with her propensity for overseeing marriage and motherhood, in contrast, Freyja is seldom described as conspiring with her husband and is depicted as a lonesome entity more often than not, which suits her characterization as a warrior. This duality, in which women conspire with their husbands and provide them with counsel, as well as act of their own accord and maintain the community, was as directly present within Scandinavian society as it was in the literature. Cyclical in nature, ebbing and flowing with the seasons and the presence of

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149. Sturluson, "Heimskringla," Chapter 234.

150. Sturluson, "Heimskringla," Chapter 234.

151. Sturluson, "Heimskringla," Chapter 234.

men, this duality would persist well into the Christianization of the region, dimming only as seafaring and raiding dwindled in practice.

As Frigg and Freya commanded respect and demonstrated multiplicity in character, so did Scandinavian women. Privy to liberal marriage and divorce laws, Scandinavian women maintained much of their own personhood and autonomy. Unlike their Christian counterparts, Scandinavians prior to conversion did not necessarily view marriage as a means of limiting promiscuity, but rather as a means of forging family bonds and alliances. Reflecting the mythological belief that it was not uncommon to take a lover, as can be seen in Freyja's confrontation with Loki, extramarital sex only truly became a problem if it resulted in an illegitimate child. As the law covered sexual activity in detail, protecting women who conceived outside of marriage, destigmatizing women who had been raped or assaulted, and requiring men to pay a fine if they slept with a woman who was not their wife, consensual extramarital sex was by definition lawful, although it affected inheritance, children's birthrights, and political alliances.<sup>152</sup> If caught having an extramarital affair, women would no longer inherit the property of their husbands, and should they conceive a child out of wedlock, women and their blood families alone were responsible for the child.<sup>153</sup> Even as extramarital sex was lawful, with such consequences it was more favorable to abstain.

Essentially, marriage was seen as an alliance, particularly for women and their families, and so taking the precautions to maintain and uphold such alliances was rather important. If a woman married into an influential family, she and her family possessed

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152. Jacobsen, "Sexual Irregularities in Medieval Scandinavia," 72-85.

153. Jacobsen, "Sexual Irregularities in Medieval Scandinavia," 72-85.

more sway. If two feuding families joined through marriage, communal peace could be achieved.<sup>154</sup> Forced marriage was not customary, however it was used as a political tool, with advantageous matches being encouraged on either end. Just as their positions as community physicians granted them authority, so did women's marriages. In the same way that Frigg counseled Odin, and even outwitted him, women counseled their husbands, working through them to achieve their ends. Perceived as intellectually equal, the opinions of women were considered, and marital unions provided women with a conduit for their aims, as they did not hold the explicit power to pass legislation and enact laws themselves.

While marriages themselves provided women with a medium to enact change, the privilege to file for divorce of their own volition and with few restrictions also presented women with an element of power. Where marriage was advantageous in its ability to provide a platform for influence, divorce was advantageous in its ability to provide women with an escape from an unwanted or poorly suited union. The Icelandic *Grágás* lays out the conditions for divorce in a way that would be recognizable today, identifying domestic violence from either party as the main grounds for separation.<sup>155</sup> Divorce was also achievable because it did not have to mean financial ruin for the wife either. Given the *morgen-giful*, or morning gift, the day after her wedding, a bride was essentially compensated for her sexual availability.<sup>156</sup> While this may sound misogynistic upfront, and no doubt it is, the morning gift did in fact benefit a woman greatly, as she owned the

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154. Jenny M. Jochens, "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?" *Viator* 17 (1986): 35-50.

155. Jacobsen, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period*, 51.

156. Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, 113.



sum upfront and could rely on it should her marriage dissolve. This morning gift, combined with a woman's *heiman fylgia*, or dowry, a portion of her father's estate gifted to the couple at the time of marriage that could be repossessed by the woman should she divorce or become a widow, ensured that she, as a separate entity from her husband, was financially secure. These measures put into place, in regard to marriage and divorce, acted as a safeguard for women in what was, while comparatively equal, still a male dominated society. And while such safeguards would slowly be altered as Christian doctrine transformed the purpose and contracts of marriage, constricted the laws surrounding sexual practice and sexuality, and essentially dismantled divorce, a cultural would remain that prioritized women's safety, value, and agency.

At its core, the Scandinavian propensity for gender equity is firmly rooted in its mythology. While its physical and material culture are certainly responsible for the continuation and longevity of such equity and attitudes, it is the millennium old ideology that allows for such a unique characteristic. The myths as they exist in their most identifiable original form account for the framework within which society was able to function, alluding to a gender system that did not operate exclusively on the binary, a certain sexual freedom, nuanced characterizations of women, and interpersonal, romantic relationships that functioned with respect and collaboration. Certainly, these myths did still exist within and depicted a male dominated society, but the female figures within the myths acted as autonomous, complete beings, frequently disregarding their male counterparts in favor of carrying out their own wishes. Such complexity can be seen as

having translated over to society, as marriage and divorce policies reflected a woman's right to choice, safety, and financial security and secular law protected women's rights to protection against sexual assault, extortion, and kidnapping.<sup>157</sup> These protections, paired with women's sole ownership of the domestic domain, including medicine and the production of goods, equated to a society that on precedent and out of necessity valued women and provided them with influence, as it recognized the importance of their capabilities and contributions rather than the perceived weakness of their physical sex.

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157. Jacobsen, *The Position of Women in Scandinavia During the Viking Period*, 51.

## Conclusion

Having taken into consideration the mythology, geography, material culture, and secular policies of Scandinavia during the medieval period, this paper has attempted to account for the divergence in gender politics and representation that separated the region from its counterparts. Examining the above factors, it can be seen that, having been subject to a unique set of ideological and physical circumstances, Scandinavian countries were able to establish and maintain social and political environments that were conducive to facilitating, if rudimentary, gender equality. In particular, the presence of a value via capability philosophy made such equality possible, as women were not reduced to a second class on the basis of their gender, but rather could elevate themselves through merit.<sup>158</sup> This philosophy is owed to the mythology of the region that both predates, and was produced within, the time period on which this work focuses, as the literature possessed several key characteristics that implied a certain respect for women and an acknowledgement of their inherent worth, even as the larger subject matter was frequently male-dominated. When combined with physical and social elements that necessitated the presence of strong women and their subsequent influence, such ideologies ensured the continuation of gender equity, even as outside factors threatened its existence.

The key characteristics found in Norse mythology, which dates back as far as 500 AD, that can be identified as having influenced the egalitarian nature of medieval

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158. Pálsson and Edwards, "Hrólf's Saga Gautrekssonar," 1-10.

Scandinavia are, simply put, the characterization of the warrior-maiden, the centralization of women and their issues, and the three-dimensionality of female figures.<sup>159</sup> More specifically, these key characteristics worked to broaden the understanding of what it meant to be feminine, and by extension what it meant to function as a valuable member of society. Chapter one of this work focused heavily on analyzing the prevalent bodies of work in which the stories that encapsulate the above characteristics and their functions, are found. This analysis was conducted with the intent of answering the question: what role did the diversification of women in mythology play in the perception of femininity? Throughout the course of the chapter such analysis revealed that on several occasions women are depicted as masculine, assertive, and wise. The exploration of the Icelandic and Norwegian sagas did not so much discern that a great breadth of material featured women, as most literature still revolved around the pursuits of men, but rather that when they were featured as distinct characters, they acted of their own accord and with few limitations. And it is such examples of agency that accounts for Scandinavian society's perception of femininity, as an innate respect for women and a recognition of their personhood persists in their religious texts. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* reveals the theme of alternative gender expression, describing a princess who identifies, if not as a man, then as masculine.<sup>160</sup> *Laxdæla* provides the example of Melkorka, a girl who defies her husband, feinting as mute so that she can secretly educate her child in her mother tongue.<sup>161</sup> *Brennu-Njáls Saga* recites the bloody weaving song of the Valkyries as they

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159. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," 85.

160. Pálsson and Edwards, "Hrólfs Saga Gautrekssonar," 1-10.

161. Kress, "What a Woman Speaks."

bind the strings of fate, lending insight into how women were viewed as powerful even when tied to the confines of the home.<sup>162</sup> Whether abiding by the constraints of their gender or otherwise, the mythology tells of a society who recognized women as an integral part of the community and perceived their value as stemming from multiple means.

While the mythology, especially that that predates the period, serves as a paramount ideological foundation for the egalitarian nature of the region, the region's geography itself is arguably the literal and essential foundation. Isolated due to its peninsular nature and possessing an alpine tundra climate, Scandinavia is poorly suited for large scale agriculture and historically conducts the majority of its trade via seafaring. Alone, neither of these factors necessarily equate to egalitarianism, but when combined together and existing alongside a persistent ideology, they allowed for the correct conditions. Deviating from doctrine and having rooted itself more firmly in the material, chapter two assessed the physical features of the region and how they facilitated an environment and industry that uplifted women and granted them measurable worth. Such assessment was conducted as a means of answering the question: why, despite the existence of a gendered division of labor, were neither gender disparaged? And to partially answer: why was paternalism so persistent in Western Europe while remaining largely absent in Northern Europe? As the chapter progressed, it became apparent that, unsuitable for a large-scale production of produce goods and with limited connection to Continental Europe via land, Scandinavians utilized sea travel and trade as a mainstay in

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162. Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," 75-90.

their society. The prevalence of such sea travel necessitated not only a nomadic lifestyle, which in turn ensured that feudalism was absent, but also that women took on traditionally masculine roles in the frequent absence of men. Feudalism's absence accounts for the lack of a dominating paternalistic structure and the presence of women in the fields of agriculture and industry accounts for the widespread communal respect given to women. While first and foremost women were viewed as keepers of the home, out of necessity they maintained and preserved their communities at large, more than capable of taking on men's tasks in their absence.

Building on the scaffolding that the mythology provided and accounting for the gap left by the geography, insular and intimate cultural practices provided insight into the minutiae of society and how ideology compared to religious and secular policies. The gendered duties women were expected to perform and the ways those duties elevated their value is of particular interest, as the roles they played in childbirth and rearing, the manufacturing of textiles, and oral record keeping all set them apart from their continental counterparts. Even as Christianity promoted changes in policy, both religious and secular, women were not devalued on the basis of gender, custom and environment requiring they retain a certain degree of influence and power. Focusing on continuity and change, particularly in relation to the introduction of Christian doctrine, chapter three answered the question: did singular state-sponsored doctrine create rigid constraints on gender? And partially answered the question: why was child rearing comparable to the role of a warrior in Scandinavia during the medieval period? Analyzing the progression of marriage contracts and midwifery practices in particular, this chapter revealed that,

prior to the widespread adoption of Christianity, marriage and childbirth both provided women with a fair amount of leverage, financial and otherwise. Women's ability to bring life into the world and subsequently remove it, alongside their primary role of caretaker, garnered them the same reverence given to warriors. Additionally, the institution of marriage functioned in such a way that their finances were their own as well as their children. Such attitudes were warped only under Christian doctrine, as it instilled feudal practices and took control of reproductive responsibilities away from women.<sup>163</sup> Such changes did impact the ways in which women were able to participate in public life and the way in which they came to be associated with their husbands, but secular legislation still allowed for a comparably greater autonomy and women's economic presence guaranteed their higher station.

Revisiting the mythology thematically, chapter four explored the concept of autonomy in relation to femininity more deeply. Seeking to understand how Scandinavian women's unique relationship with autonomy impacted every aspect of their lives, comparisons were drawn between examples found in literature and ones found in real life. Using evidence discussed in previous chapters along with new mythological examples, chapter four answered the question: how did women involve themselves in politics? And expanded upon the question: how was a woman's role of childrearer and rearer comparable to that of a warrior? The themes of fate, wisdom, fidelity, and authority acted as the primary conduits for discussion, allowing for the comparison of specific goddesses and their plights against real world women and theirs. The lore

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163. Benedictow, "The Milky Way in History," 19-53.

surrounding Valkyries served as perhaps the most potent evidence, as the exploration of the concept of fate, both seen and unseen benefitted from their characterization. Within society, women, both real and fictional, were viewed as possessing a certain level of control over the direction and wellbeing of their families and communities. Responsible for providing medical care, rearing children, and maintaining the homestead, women had a rather substantial control over the functioning of everyday life. The Valkyries were described as spinning fate itself, and similarly Frigg and Freya could look into the future with minute detail.<sup>164</sup> It does not seem a coincidence that women in both lore and reality bore the responsibility of fate, and it was their perceived wisdom and insight that granted them equitable access to power and influence.

While this work in its entirety contributes to the existing literature in a defining way, it is fair to assert that the research is somewhat limited in scope and that the concepts in each chapter are deserving of their own lengthy analysis. Several limitations have made it so that this paper serves as a satisfactory introductory source to the topics explored within, but not necessarily a comprehensive read, particularly a significant lack of sources in the English language. That being said, this work set out to identify the factors that allowed for a unique societal structure in which gender did not define worth and equity among the sexes was possible, and it did just that. Interdisciplinary in nature, this paper sets a nice groundwork for further exploration into the topic, particularly exploration into women's involvement in midwifery and medicine and the historical significance of textiles within Northern Europe. Additionally, it works to facilitate further

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164. Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and the Production of Homespun Cloth," 75-90.



conversation on the egalitarian nature of Scandinavia in the modern day, setting the groundwork for the analysis of the progression of industry, politics, and organized religion. Ultimately, this thesis has endeavored to function as a crossroads for arguments that ran in parallel. Synthesizing literary and archaeological evidence to answer how paganism forged gender equality in medieval Scandinavia, this work has come to the conclusion that a deep rooted ideology intent on personifying women, aided by a geographical demand for capability, was responsible for the persistent continuation of a non-traditional gender structure across Northern Europe.

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