

BEFORE THE MALE GAZE:
THE ABSENCE OF THE FEMALE BODY IN OLD NORSE¹

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As perceived in the western tradition, beauty has been a quality particularly associated with the bodies of women, although most often articulated by men who contemplated their beloveds' visual attractiveness, signaling thereby their own emotional and sexual arousal. With roots in Ovidian love poetry and fully developed in courtly love, this tradition has been at home in the West at least since the twelfth century. In our generation feminist film critics have coined the term "the male gaze" and uncovered its pervasiveness throughout all aspects of our culture.

Although the Germanic parts of early medieval Europe eventually were engrossed in this articulation of the male gaze, the perceptions of beauty that originally obtained here were less gender specific. Whereas the early Germanic evidence from the Continent and the Anglo-Saxon materials are too sparse to permit more than a rudimentary analysis, the Old Norse sources, in particular the family sagas, are sufficiently rich to allow a more thorough investigation. The purpose of this article is to examine perceptions of corporal beauty, particularly as they relate to sexuality.

BEAUTY

As elsewhere, beauty was an important human asset, and scopophilia, the pleasure of beholding, is often attested, but in Old Norse society the gratification was derived from handsome men as well as beautiful women. This is clear from the fact that both men and women were described in such terms as væn(n), fríð(r), and faqr (fagr), all denoting beauty. Hqskuldr, described as "a handsome and capable man" married Jórunn who was a "beautiful woman" Originally suggesting "promising," vænn implies both outer and inner qualities. The full meaning of the term is ascertainable from the characterization of Guðrún who was "the most beautiful woman" in Iceland at that time, "as to both her looks and her intelligence." In contrast, fríðr was firmly linked with visual beauty, which is clear from the near automatic addition of sýnum, "by sight." Thus, among many descriptions of the handsome Óláfr Hqskuldsson, one stated that he was "the most handsome man people had ever set eyes on." Less frequent than the two preceding terms, faqr was also associated with physical beauty. Not yet aware of his paternity, Helga's father declared her to be "the most beautiful girl" and nicknamed her "the beautiful." Rather than signifying beauty in general in the manner of vænn, faqr often referred to hair. In the previous passage the author continued by describing Helga's hair--so long that it "could envelop her entirely" and "as fair as beaten gold."

Although male and female beauty is identified by the same semantic range, the terms are elaborated in far greater detail for men than for women.

¹ A longer version of this article, complete with footnotes, will appear in Sex in the Middle Ages, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury, scheduled to be published by Garland Press, 1991.

Without doubt the most admired male attribute was physical strength. Almost every man credited with good looks was also said to be "a large and strong man" at some point. Old Norse heroes likewise conformed to timeless standards of male beauty. Crediting Hrútr with the usual strength, the author of Laxdæla saga added that the young man "was better built than anyone, tall and broad-shouldered, slim-waisted and straight-limbed," and concluded with the standard formula that he was "the most handsome of men to behold."

In comparison to men, the linguistic markers of feminine beauty rarely added physical traits and they are, therefore, much shorter. Only two women in the family sagas receive detailed physical portraits and even these are meager by any standard. Since these portraits concern an older woman and a young girl whom the author specifically characterized as not being beautiful, they are not animated by masculine desire and do little to identify a potential male gaze, the linguistic barometer of sexual yearning. Because of their rarity, however, these sketches are worth examining.

According to Eyrbyggja saga, a ship arrived in Iceland bringing a woman from the Hebrides named Þórgunna. She "was a large woman, both tall and broad, and getting stout. She had dark eyebrows and narrow eyes, brown and full hair....People thought she was in her fifties, but she was still a very active woman." Þórgunna was also the only woman in the narratives to appear naked, albeit as a ghost. Being Christian, she had stipulated that she be buried at Skálaholt, the future see of the bishop. When the men who were transporting her body were refused hospitality at a farm, Þórgunna herself, "stark-naked, not a stitch of clothing on her," appeared in the kitchen to prepare a meal for them. Under these circumstances--needless to say--Þórgunna's nakedness elicited only fear from her inhospitable hosts, but her age, added to her looks, may have inhibited men from desiring her during her later years. At this time, however, she herself was smitten by a young boy, attesting to a recurrent theme of an older woman's unrequited love for a young man. In other words, this rare portrait of a woman's body, rather than conveying male desire, reveals only an equally rare glimpse of female passion.

The other woman earning a relatively full description is the young Þorbjörg. Encountered by Þormóðr in Fóstbrœðra saga as he paid a visit to her mother's farm, she appeared as "a well-bred and elegant woman, though not particularly beautiful, with black hair and eyebrows, wherefore she was called Kolbrún. Her face had an intelligent expression and good color. She had shapely limbs and was slender and of average height. Her toes pointed out a little when she walked." A modern reader will perhaps agree that the gait suggested by the position of her toes may not have been very becoming, but otherwise it is hard to see why Kolbrún earned the authorial comment of not being particularly pretty and it can only be explained by the fact that the author shared the Old Norse convention of considering black hair as unattractive. Kolbrún possessed other chemistry to attract Þormóðr, however, and the narrative provides a rare glimpse of two young people falling in love, a process in which scopophilia played a determining role as they let their eyes roam over each other. Despite the author's original disclaimer, Þormóðr pronounced Kolbrún beautiful at the end, and she reciprocated by finding him handsome. This episode not only illustrates the phenomenon--undoubtedly normal in any society although not necessarily articulated--that young men and women enjoyed contemplation of each other, but it also demonstrates that scopophilia could occur even when customary standards of beauty were not met.

CLOTHING

In contrast to men, the women described by the adjectives denoting beauty were not credited with attractive features of face or body. The only exception is their hair, to which we shall return. What made a woman beautiful, instead, was her clothing, but clothes were equally important for men. In their case, however, clothing supplemented their physical features whereas women's fine clothing alone constituted their beauty. The standard expression stated that the woman was "well dressed." Having been described both as "pretty to look at," "beautiful," and "the most beautiful woman to behold" Hallgerðr was further identified as "most well-dressed" among a group of women all of whom were "finely attired," when she and Gunnarr met for the first time, and her finery was described in great detail. Likewise, when Óláfr--who himself was well-dressed--arrived at Egill's booth to persuade Þorgerðr to agree to his marriage proposal, he immediately spotted her sitting on the bench as the woman who was "beautiful and distinguished and well dressed."

Since marriages were primarily based on property and politics, it is extremely rare to find references to love and beauty in the negotiations leading to marital unions between two families. When they do occur, they carry authorial disapproval, as suggested in the two episodes just mentioned. In the first case it is obvious that at Hallgerðr's and Gunnarr's first encounter they were attracted to each other through scopophilia resulting from physical and sartorial beauty as well as by the pleasure of conversation. When Gunnarr quickly asked how she would consider a marriage proposal, she referred him to her father and uncle. Because of Hallgerðr's unsavory character, however, her uncle felt obliged to advise Gunnarr against the match, but he realized with dismay that he would not be able to prevail because the two young people were obsessed by girndarráb ("mad desire").

In the second case Þorgerðr was correct to resist Óláfr's proposal of marriage because, as she pointed out, his illegitimate birth raised the obstacle that he and she were not "of equal social status" (jafnræði), the most important qualification for successfully negotiating a marriage. Þorgerðr admitted that Óláfr was "handsome" and a "showy dresser." As in all traditional societies, male beauty was most certainly never considered by fathers as they pondered marriage proposals for their daughters, and even female beauty was rarely acknowledged explicitly as a qualification for marriage. It must be conceded, of course, that certain physiological conditions had to be met if marriage was to succeed in the ultimate goal of reproduction. The woman had to be, or at least become, of reproductive age and to please the man enough to arouse him sexually. Without mention of age limits, the law code Grágás stipulated that an engagement was legal if the woman in question had no physical impediment that would have devalued her had she been a slave, but one manuscript further clarified that possible flaws should be determined only by the age of sixteen, supposedly the time of menarche.

Within this broad definition of femaleness, however, men undoubtedly could not refrain from looking at the women they considered marrying, a fact occasionally admitted in the sources. Ófeigr questioned Gellir about the best marriage prospects in the western parts of Iceland, and was surprised to find that Gellir did not include his own daughters among the candidates, since--to flatter the father--Ófeigr argued from Gellir's own good looks, that nobody

could be "more beautiful" than his daughters, in Ófeigr's eyes apparently an important qualification. In a few other cases female beauty was also acknowledged, but associated with clothing. Suggesting marriage for his brother Hrótr, Hqskuldr proposed Unnr as a candidate. Since she was also present at the meeting of the Thing the two men were attending, he offered that Hrótr could "see her" immediately. Pointing to a group of well-dressed women the next morning, Hqskuldr singled out Unnr and asked his brother "how do you like her," using a term that indicates impression through sight.

The importance of clothing can be further detected in the Melkorka episode in Laxdæla saga. While in Norway on a business trip Hqskuldr went with some men "to amuse himself" (at skemmta sér), a frequent euphemism for sexual intercourse. Deciding to buy a "female slave," he entered a tent where twelve women were for sale. Hqskuldr's eyes were caught by one who was "poorly dressed," but whom he thought "beautiful to behold, judged by what he could see." Bedding down with her that same night did not elicit further comments about her beauty, but the next morning he gave her "a good dress," and "it was everybody's opinion that fine clothes became her well." Melkorka's physical beauty, barely noticeable in ragged clothing and earning no comment from the state of nature, was fully perceived only when she was well-dressed.

CLOTHES AS GENDER MARKERS

The identification of female beauty with clothing rendered clothes an important markers of gender. Since Old Norse society was dominated by the masculine activity of feuding, gender roles were clearly defined by necessity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the law confirmed gender distinctions by making it illegal for men and women to wear the clothing of the opposite sex. Although the saga literature furnishes few examples to substantiate this prohibition, two episodes in Laxdæla saga provide gender-specific details about clothes. Married against her will to Þorvaldr, Guðrún received with pleasure the attention of Þórðr who did not care for his own wife. When Þorvaldr slapped Guðrún, Þórðr advised her to make her husband a shirt described as having a brautgangs höfuðsmátt (literally, "neck opening that gives cause for leaving") and declare herself divorced. The saga author continued: "Guðrún raised no objections to this, and they dropped the subject. That same spring Guðrún declared herself divorced from Þorvaldr and returned home."

The exact nature of this shirt becomes clear in the next episode where Guðrún persuaded Þórðr that he should likewise use the accusation of dressing across-gender in order to get rid of his wife Auðr. Guðrún insinuated that Auðr had been wearing male pants. Later Þórðr asked Guðrún "what a woman varóaði (a legal term meaning "would receive in penalty") if she often appeared in pants like men." Guðrún replied: "The same penalty applies to women in a case like that as to a man who wears a neck-opening so wide that his nipples are exposed. Both are grounds for divorce." In other words, at Þórðr's instigation Guðrún had made a shirt for her husband cut with such a wide neck-opening that he had exposed his nipples and thereby given her sufficient reason for divorce. The rule reflects the obvious that the sight of a man's nipples demonstrates that he is not a woman. A man was not allowed to wear a shirt with a wide neck opening for fear that he, at least at a distance, might be mistaken for a woman. Does it then follow that Icelandic women wore decollete? We shall return to the problem, but for the moment we

notice that climate would hardly encourage such a practice. The few itemized descriptions of full female clothing in the family sagas do not suggest such a style. Guðrún's attire, described in some detail after the murder of her third husband, included a "tight bodice," a feature that would be sufficient to reveal her female figure.

Returning to the male pants which Guðrún accused Auðr of wearing, we encounter an equally sex-specific piece of male clothing. According to Guðrún, Auðr dressed so often in "pants equipped with inserts and with cross-garters almost down to the shoes," that she was called "Breeches-Auðr." Apparently, two features distinguished these pants; they were equipped with geiri ("insert" or "gore") and they were pulled tightly around the ankles with bands called spjarrar or vaf. Suggesting that the pants were long, the latter feature combined the pants and the stockings into a single unit.

Before examining the feature of the insert and trying to determine what made these pants male, we must take note of the fact that women also wore trousers, at least occasionally. In spite of Þóror's disbelief of his wife's male attire, Auðr did, in fact, don pants at least once. Describing her mounting the horse before her furious ride to Þóror's hut when she intended to kill or harm her former husband, the author commented with approving sarcasm that "at that time she certainly was in pants."

The best evidence for female pants, however, comes from a scene in Njáls saga that also illustrates the mixed signals that could be conveyed by clothing. A difficult arbitration had been arranged between two feuding parties represented by Njáll and his sons on the one side and Flosi on the other over the murder of Hqskuldr, Njáll's foster son and the husband of Flosi's niece Hildgunnr. The guilty Njálssons were to pay treble indemnity to Flosi. At the dramatic moment when the enormous sum was to be handed over, Njáll added a pair of boots and a piece of clothing called a silkislaður for good measure. No objections were raised over the boots, but the latter caused problems. The word suggests a garment made of silk and so long that it trailed on the ground. This expensive piece of clothing is occasionally encountered elsewhere in the literature. On his return from England Arinbjörn gave Egill a slæður of silk, custom-made to fit his friend's ample size. In the prose narratives such garments were worn by men, but in the Edda poem Rígsþula, Móðir, the female representative of the third, aristocratic class of society, was seen in "a long cape", suggesting that it could also be worn by women.

This conclusion is confirmed by Flosi's reaction. Picking up the cape, he demanded who had donated it. Nobody answered and he continued: "you do not dare tell me," using an expression that always signals impending trouble. When Skarphéinn asked him whom he thought the donor might be, Flosi accused Njáll, "because many do not know whether he is man or a woman when they see him," --a reference to Njáll's lack of a beard. Calmly referring to Njáll's fathering of sons with his wife--the final proof of manhood, Skarphéinn snatched up the cape and threw down a pair of "blue pants" on the pile, claiming that Flosi was more in need of these. Responding to Flosi's question, Skarphéinn accused Flosi of being the lover of the Svinafell Troll who used him as a woman every ninth night, thus subjecting Flosi to the ultimate insult against a man, that of passive homosexuality.

It seems clear that the purpose of the cape was not to humiliate Flosi. It strains imagination that Njáll himself would have done anything to

jeopardize the settlement which he desired more strongly than anyone else. The cape was intended for a man, or, at most, it was sexually neutral as an androgynous piece of clothing. But Flosi thought otherwise. We shall return to an earlier scene in which Flosi's niece Hildgunnr had urged him to take revenge for her murdered husband by challenging her uncle's "courage and manhood." For the moment we notice that the implied insult in her words, suggesting that Flosi perhaps did not possess these qualities, had stung him and made him sensitive to the gift of the cape. Perceiving a new innuendo to his manhood in this garment, Flosi latched out against Njáll with a sexual insult. His self-doubt was further sharpened by Skarpheðinn's blunt accusation and reinforced by the blue pants. In other words, although nobody shared his opinion, Flosi's initial reaction indicates that in his mind femininity was attached to the cape. While the cape thus was open to different interpretations, there was no ambiguity about the pants. They were clearly understood to be female. The sexual insult intended by Skarpheðinn was perceived both by the audience and by Flosi, as he kicked apart the pile of money, refusing arbitration and swearing blood revenge.

These female trousers were not distinguished by any special style. Let us now return to the pants worn by Auðr. As we recall, Guðrún described them as having straps at the end and inserted triangular gores. It was the last feature that distinguished them as male. Following Guðrún's advice, Þórðr went immediately to the Law Rock at the Thing and divorced Auðr by using as his sole reason that "she wore pants with inserted gores" (setgeirabrækr). It has been suggested that the setgeiri was a single insert sewn into the seat of the pants, whereas women's pants were open in the crotch, both features supposedly for reasons of elimination. This assumption might be correct in case of the female trousers, and it would also fit Skarpheðinn's innuendo, enabling the wearer to be available sexually. It is difficult, however, to see why men would need an insert in the rear, especially since it was sewn and could not be easily opened. Male anatomy requires extra room in the front, not in the back. This episode in Laxdæla saga is the only saga passage to deal with the insert at any length, and since this morsel of information about tailoring is juxtaposed with a trait that designates female identity through clothing by focusing on women's most visible sexual feature, it seems likely that the setgeiri has the same function. I submit that the setgeiri was a piece of material inserted in the front of either half of the pants in order to accommodate the male genitalia. In other words, like female dresses, male clothing was also sex-specific. Women were no more allowed to wear male pants than men to appear in low necklines. An attitude of "truth in advertisement" prevailed, demanding that clothing be separated by the most obvious and visible sexual markers of differentiation for both sexes, the breasts and the penis.

HAIR

We have seen that hair was the one natural feature of female beauty singled out for comment. Reinforcing good looks for men, however, the male mop also received its share of attention. Men's hair was noticed far more frequently than their beards, and it exhibited more variety than women's tresses. At times a man's hair was included in an abbreviated characterization; thus, Helgi Njálsson was said to be "a handsome man with a good head of hair." More specifically, another Helgi was "a handsome man with

beautiful light blond hair." In fact, men's hair displayed the full palette of colors ranging from white to black. The change caused by aging was noticed occasionally: Ásmundr had "the best head of hair," but turning prematurely "grey," he became known as "Greylocks." In contrast to women, men cut their hair. Outside poetry the term "hair-cut" (skor) refers only to male hair styles, but, nevertheless, some men had long hair. Kjartan's "hair was long and fine as silk, falling in curls," and young Bolli's locks "fell to his shoulders . . . and were cut in bangs above his eye brows."

As in the case of men, women's hair could also be characterized in a general way, for example, when Steingerör was said to be "a woman with wonderful hair." In contrast to the masculine variety, however, ideal female hair was blond, long, and straight, and only this caught the attention of saga authors. Never shorn, it grew throughout the woman's life. In the case of Hallgerör we can follow its descent from the time she was a young girl when it reached to her belt, until as a grown woman she could wrap it entirely around herself. Its length was still evident many years later when her husband Gunnarr asked for, but was refused, "two locks from your hair" to replace his broken bowstring in his final battle.

Since the law prohibited women from cutting their hair in male style, hair became the most important gender determinant. We shall see that married women in Iceland, like their sisters elsewhere in medieval society, normally tied up their hair and hid it under a piece of cloth or a bonnet called a faldr. This meant that women only showed their hair when they were on the nuptial market, either as young girls or as marriageable widows, or on the rare occasion when they were seen in the privacy of their bed. In other words, comments about woman's hair indisputably carry overtones of sexuality.

The focus on hair for both men and women and the privileging of men's hair over their beards may be the result of a culture where men's genetic make-up--undoubtedly then as now--made them prone to baldness. Except in an unusual case like Njáll's, beards could have served as the most indisputable gender divider, but little attention was paid to facial growth. Lasting throughout life, beards were less favored than the more ephemeral masculine manes. Treasuring their own capillary splendor while it lasted, men were impressed by the quantity and permanency of women's hair.

THE HEAD-DRESS (FALDR)

For women the cultural element of clothing melded with the natural feature of hair to produce the special female head-dress known as the faldr which became the most important social indicator of female gender. Medieval writers perceived all married women, including goddesses, as having worn head-dresses in the past. Recounting the hilarious story of how Þórr retrieved his hammer, the Edda poem Þrymskviða noted that he was persuaded to go to Giantland in female disguise in pretence of marrying the giant. Included among his female paraphernalia was the head-dress, as suggested in the expression that he should be "suitably attired in the bridal head-dress."

In medieval Iceland the wearing of the head-dress was closely associated with marriage. The Norwegian princess Ingibjörg presented Kjartan with a particularly beautiful specimen, called a motr, as a parting gift, instructing him to give it to his intended wife Guðrún as the customary first bridal present. Its precious quality--it was white and woven with gold threads--would, the princess hoped, both reflect on the giver and make Guðrún

"look wonderful" as she "wrapped it around her head." When Kjartan returned, however, Guðrún was already remarried. The glimpse of her during the celebration of her fourth marriage, sitting on the bridal bench with other women all "wearing linen head-dresses," suggest that the wedding feast offered a woman the first opportunity to wear the faldr.

From the sources it is impossible to be sure how often married women wore these bonnets thereafter, but it seems to have been frequent, if not constantly. One saga recounts the arresting story of twice-married Yngvildr whose beauty was evident from her nickname fagrkin. Aroused from her bed by an intruder during her husband's absence, she attempted to dress before she was dragged outside, but she managed only to get into her slip. "She was without her head-dress (faldlaus) and had long and beautiful hair." This story demonstrates at the same time both the sexual connotations of visible hair and the practice of married women covering their heads during the day.

During the murder of Bolli, Guðrún--who had instigated the deed--went about the everyday business of her laundry. After the crime had been accomplished Guðrún's outfit was described in detail, including her "large head-dress." Since Guðrún's attire at this moment may have been dictated by her near ritual role of inciter, this does not necessarily permit the conclusion that a woman wore her head-dress during such normal activities laundry. Several cases of cross-gender dressing--which space does not permit us to examine--suggest, nonetheless, that the faldr was part of everyday gear.

There is no doubt, however, about the festive use of the faldr. A special part of the house was reserved for women at weddings, where they "put on their head-gear." Since the infamous motr was perhaps exceptional and too precious for ordinary use, it was carried back and forth between Kjartan's and Guðrún's farms for the celebration of feasts. Although Hrefna was hesitant to wear it because of Guðrún's obvious jealousy, her mother-in-law insisted that she bring it to Bolli's and Guðrún's farm: "When are you ever going to use that wonderful treasure, if it is kept hidden in a chest whenever you go to a feast."

When a woman divorced or became a widow she appears to have discarded the faldr, because her loose hair once again signaled her reentry into the marriage market. This is the most satisfactory conclusion that can be drawn from several references to the visible and beautiful hair of heroines during times intervening between marriages. During two different periods of widowhood Hallgerðr was praised for her thick and beautiful hair as new suitors asked for her hand. From the same saga comes the arresting story of Hildigunnr, Hqskuldr's widow. We recall that her hope for revenge of her husband's murder was focused on her uncle Flosi. Preparing for his visit, she, therefore, readied her farm for a feast, ordering "the women to clean the house, put up the wall hangings and prepare a high-seat for Flosi." With such careful staging of the festivities, it seems altogether likely that Hildigunnr herself would have worn the faldr if her new status of widowhood had not enjoined it, but, she was clearly bare-headed. Appearing before Flosi when he had finished his meal, she "pushed her hair away from her eyes and wept," as she urged her uncle to take revenge. It was not likely that Hildigunnr was thinking about remarriage at this moment, but she was still young and custom required her to be maritally available, as announced by her unbound hair. And remarry she did. The final gesture of reconciliation in Njála is the union between her and Kári, the avenger of Njáll and his sons, burned in retaliation for the murder

of Hildigunnr's first husband. In this marriage, moreover, she produced children.

CONCLUSION

Although not nearly as rich and detailed as in Continental literature, physical descriptions of men and women can be found in the Old Norse sources. They separate people into blond and dark, beautiful and ugly, granting men a dominant presence in the first half of these two binary groups. This is particularly well illustrated from the first and the last chapters of Egils saga. Framing, as it were, his entire narrative with an analysis of human beauty and its contrast, the author introduces two Norwegian brothers, Þórólfr and Grímr, in the first chapter. The older, Þórólfr, was "the most handsome of men," whereas Grímr was "a dark, ugly man like his forefathers." Although Þórólfr died without progeny, his favored genes reappeared in his brother's offspring after Grímr settled in Iceland. Nicknamed Skalla-Grímr, the latter became the progenitor of a vast clan, known as the Mýramannakyn. Summarizing the qualities of this clan in the last chapter of his narrative, the author linked the offspring of Þorsteinn, Egill's youngest son, to this ancient clan. That Snorri Sturluson himself, perhaps the author of Egils saga, also belonged to this lineage adds special poignancy to the chapter as it joined the contemporary audience to the characters in the story. The people of the Mýramannakyn were praised as being good poets, strong men, good fighters, and, occasionally, wise individuals. In what seems like a conscious effort to conclude the saga in the manner it began, the author continued by describing the most remarkable feature of the clan: the Mýramann included both "the most beautiful" and "the most ugly people" in Iceland. Providing no examples of the latter, the author admitted that they were more numerous. Among the beautiful, however, four individuals were singled out: Þorsteinn Egilsson, Kjartan Ólafsson, Halir Guðmundarson, and Helga in fagra, representing the three generations succeeding Egill himself. The praise of the last three of these characters was detailed in Laxdæla and Gunnlaugs saga. Þorsteinn, the pivotal figure between the old and the new branch of the Mýramannakyn, received the following description: he was "the most handsome in appearance of all men, light blond of hair and bright of countenance." Snorri--if he indeed was the author--used the masculine plural when referring to the appearances of both groups. Among these three handsome men, however, he included only one beautiful young girl, Helga. We can hardly find a better illustration of the emphasis of males over females when the saga authors considered human beauty.

Although admitting to the importance of human attractiveness in general, the sources are, as we have seen, reticent about founding beauty on specific bodily or facial features. This is especially true for women. We recall that the physical descriptions of women are exceedingly few and short. By culling all references to female beauty extant in the literature we learn only that beautiful women were characterized by a single adjective or identified by brief references to hair or clothing.

The use of the family sagas invariably raises the vexing problem of their historical context, also when the subject is corporal beauty. Written in Iceland during the Christian era of the thirteenth century, their stories are set in the pagan tenth and eleventh centuries. Those themes we have been pursuing--perceptions of the body and beauty--do not lie on the surface of the narratives but must be distilled by paying close attention to inadvertent

details. It would of course be too much to find in these scattered phrases attitudes or traits attributable to the characters of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Rather, they articulate the tastes and opinions of the thirteenth-century society that inscribed the narratives.

This should not lead to the conclusion, however, that Christianity in medieval Iceland imposed ascetic restraints which prevented writers from revealing the female body. The absent female body in the Norse literature is the result neither of modesty nor of morality but, most likely, of meteorology. In Mediterranean cultures both sexes wore togas. The thinness and suppleness of the fabric and the looseness of the fit permitted by the mild climate revealed the body underneath and identified its sex more readily than in the North, particularly in Iceland, where people of both sexes needed heavy cloth and fur to keep warm. Multiple layers of coarse wool in the shape of a toga would effectively have hidden the body and made gender identification virtually impossible. Germanic people, therefore, did not wear togas. The process of sexual identification was removed from the body and attached to clothing. The need to distinguish between male and female clothes directed the focus to the most apparent sexual distinctions between men's and women's bodies. Allowing room for the penis, tailored pants--the Germanic gift to the world of fashion--were worn by men. Following the contours of the body, women's clothes acknowledged their breasts. While it would seem doubtful that women in Iceland indulged in décolleté outside the house, they may have worn an inner shirt of this shape that permitted the nipples to be perceived through the fitted outer covering. At least it is clear that female clothes clung closely enough to the upper torso to reveal the female body. As Icelanders came in contact with the larger world of Western Europe they became progressively susceptible to foreign fashions. If, however, we accept the premise that gender differentiations in clothing were originally dictated by climatic conditions, the basic traits of body and beauty we have identified in the sources may be applicable to pagan Iceland of the tenth and the eleventh centuries, the purported context of the sagas, as well as to the authors' own age.

Regardless of time, however, the greater attention to male than female beauty would suggest that Old Norse culture had not yet constructed a fully developed male gaze, even by the thirteenth century. When men did take a look, climate forced them to notice female clothing rather than the body. We have also seen that male attire elicited more comment than female. The shadowy existence of the female body masked beneath layers of clothing caused its presence to be understated in literature. The attention devoted to female hair and its head-dress, however, does suggest that these attributes became the primary focus of Nordic men as they looked at women. Perhaps masculine awareness that men might lose their own manes sharpened their consciousness of female "otherness" as women's locks kept growing. The identification of female beauty with abundant hair--still an important feature in perceptions of female beauty--may have constituted the first step toward a male gaze in the North.