

Women and Gender in the Sagas of Icelandic Saints

The following discussion is concerned with a topic and a question of methodology (1). The topic is the position of women in medieval Icelandic society and how this relates to their portrayal in literature; the methodological question is "How can the sagas be used as historical sources?" I do not plan a return to the old free-prose/book-prose controversy, but am concerned with the current use of sagas as evidence for social history in recent works on medieval Iceland, notably those of Byock, Karras, and Miller. Their publications have made Iceland's history more accessible to anglophone scholars than it has been in the past, and it is to be hoped that the result will be an increased interest in Icelandic history and literature. My concern is that, in the process, literature and history may be confused with each other. As has been demonstrated by Jenny Jochens (2), literary depictions of women cannot be taken at their face value even for the attitudes of thirteenth-century Icelanders. The sagas, like all great works of literature, have a message, and that message - and the aim of their authors - must be taken into consideration when evaluating their evidence. The fact that research tends to focus on the family sagas, preoccupied as they are with issues of power, prestige, and dispute-resolution, presents a one-sided vision of medieval Iceland. The picture could be rounded out by incorporating a group of sagas often ignored both by historians and literary scholars (3): the sagas of Icelandic bishops, in particular, those of the three who were venerated as saints - Thorlákr, Jón, and Gudmundr (4).

These sagas, of course, have their own agenda: to praise the individual concerned and promote his *cultus*. Their claims concerning the humility and virtues of the protagonist cannot be accepted at face value. In the process of glorifying their heroes, however, the sagas - and especially the miracles they recount - include valuable information about everyday life and attitudes, and offer a glimpse of the realities of existence for persons not of the

chieftain class. In the miracle collections, the anonymous *göngukonur* who keep the action going in *Njáls saga* and *Hrafnkátla* take on flesh and blood, and their day-to-day existence - no less harrowing than the violence of the *Sturlungaöld* - is laid bare. There are examples of families who are unable to support themselves and must be broken up, of parents who abandon their children or are suspected of infanticide, and of other parents who are deeply concerned with the well-being of their offspring. We learn of the lot of the priests who were not chieftains and who had trouble supporting themselves in their old age, or were unable to deal with disobedient hired-men.

What do these sagas and miracle collections tell us about the lot of the medieval Icelandic woman and how she was perceived by the churchmen who composed them? It is hardly possible to derive from these narratives statistics that would satisfy a modern social scientist (5), but a few general observations can be made. The sagas and miracle collections mention women from all walks of life, and it will come as no surprise that we meet with housewives and female heads of household who act independently and can dispose of valuable objects. Women were actively involved in providing for their children's futures; it was the mothers of Thorlákur Thórhallsson and Klængur Thorsteinsson who brought them to Oddi and Hólar for their educations.

There is none of the "clerical misogyny" one is told to expect from medieval sources; as I have discussed elsewhere (6), the sagas of Icelandic saints are not overly concerned with female sexuality as a threat. While chastity is among the virtues of Thorlákur and Guðmundr (and at least a possibility in the younger saga of S. Jón), sexual misbehaviour is not viewed as being of female instigation. *Thorláks saga* is more concerned with the disobedience of the chieftains who persist in upholding marriages forbidden by the Church than with the women involved.

This is not to say that these sagas are without stereotypes. One is perhaps illustrated in the following pair of miracles (7):

A man became very sick and swelled up all over and

became as fat as an ox ... and he could hardly bear the discomfort. And a wise woman who was present made a vow for him to Bishop Thorlákr of a candle that would reach around his middle, and at once he got better.

A woman made fun of that event, and said it was great nonsense to make vows for grown men as for pregnant women. Later during the night she got a bad pain in her eyes and didn't get better before the same woman made a vow for her as had made it for the man. Afterwards she didn't care to mock at vows to Bishop Thorlákr.

It should be noted at the start that scepticism is not a female monopoly; the priest Steinn who scoffs at the relics of Jón Ögmundarson is a case in point. Furthermore, eye-pains (or worse) appear to be a common form of supernatural punishment. The passage might lead us to expect that we would find more women than men making vows; in fact, the reverse is the case - women are protagonists in no more than 40% of the recorded miracles. This lower frequency could be because women were considered overly pious or superstitious, so that miracles for them counted less. Such an interpretation would appear to be supported by the early history of the *cultus* of S. Thorlákr. As this topic is being treated in another paper at this conference, I will simply note that it is striking that those involved in establishing Thorlákr's sanctity were all men (mostly with close ties to the Church). We must, however, bear in mind that this was the first concerted attempt to establish the sanctity of an Icelander, and extremely high standards of evidence would have obtained. Even with the testimony of the Bishop of Hólar, Bishop Páll appears to have been slow to act. The miracles at the *athing* demonstrate that men were not reluctant to call on the saints; they also suggest that few women attended this assembly. A year later, however, it is a woman whose miracle - and another woman whose vision - are recounted in detail, leading up to a public cure at Skálholt in the presence of Bishop Páll, after which the cured woman rode to the *athing* and was displayed to all present in a public demonstration of Thorlákr's power. (8)

In the sagas and miracles of Jón and Guðmundr, women are prominent from the start. Guðmundr has numerous female friends and supporters, and Jón's saga tells of the girl Ingunn who learns Latin at Hólar, and the anchoress Hildr. In the younger version of the saga, Hildr's story is on the verge of becoming a saint's life in its own right. Jón's first two post-mortem miracles benefit girls, and it is to a female pauper that Jón appears in a vision to suggest that his relic be formally translated (9). However, it is not until Bishop Brandr himself has been cured by a plant from Jón's grave that the translation actually takes place. The recipients of the first five miracles after the translation are female.

It is where visions are concerned that women seem to have the edge on men. While the saints appear to persons of both sexes, to cure and/or chastise them, women appear to have a slight advantage when it comes to "disinterested" visions - i.e., visions pertaining to the sanctity of a saint or to the cure of a person other than themselves. They are the recipients of the longest and most detailed visions, such as those of Rannveig or Thorfinna (10), or, to take a non-native example, Elizabeth of Schönau. Women appear to be the only ones threatened in visions by demons or other supernatural beings from which the saints protect them; in addition to Rannveig and Thorfinna, there is the well-known episode concerning the anchoress Hildr and Gudrun *krjúkukerting* at Hólar (11), and that of another hermitess, Ulfrún, at Thingeyrar (12). Such visions contrast with the experiences of men like Sveinn Thorsteinsson, Dálkr Thórisson, and Snorri of Skálavík (13), who suffer from the attacks of external and very physical supernatural beings.

A similar emphasis on female visionary experience has been noticed in European saints' lives, where such experience compensates for women's lack of power as actors in political or ecclesiastical affairs. In Iceland, it might also reflect ancient Germanic ideas of the prophetic powers of women.

By August 1, I hope to develop further some of the ideas presented here. If there is a consistent discrepancy between the sagas dealing with S. Thoriákr and the bishops of Hólar, it will have

to be explained; if not, the aberrant sections of *Thorlák's saga* will have to be accounted for. Once the evidence from these sagas has been carefully analyzed, it can be compared with that of other genres, and a more rounded picture of medieval Iceland may begin to emerge.

NOTES

References are to *Biskupa Sögur*, 2 vols., hid Íslenska Bókmentafélag, Kaupmannahöfn, 1858.

1 Due to the limitations on available hardware, it has been necessary to anglicize Icelandic letters.

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

3 This striking omission from *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* has been remedied to some extent in *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia* NY 1993.

4 Equally ignored by most contemporary scholarship is the vast store of documentary material published in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*.

5 At the conference I will provide a handout giving the relative numbers of men and women in different roles and as recipients of different types of miracles; however, I suspect that in most cases the numbers will not be statistically significant.

6 Cormack, Margaret, "Fjölknuggri konu skallatu í fadmi sofa: Sex and the Supernatural in the Sagas of Icelandic Bishops," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992) 221-28.

7 To save space, I have given translations based on the summaries

in the B version of the text, in the critical edition (*Byskupa Sögur*, ed. Jón Helgason, *Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ Series A* vol. 13 Part II, B 104-105. See *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 339-40 for the longer version).

8 *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 351-2.

9 *Biskupa Sögur I* p. 184

10 *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 198-201, 451 ff.

11 *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 206-7, 256-7.

12 *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 367-8.

13 Sveinn Thorsteinsson: *Biskupa Sögur I* pp. 170-71, 243-44, Dálkr Thórisson: *Biskupa Sögur I* 605 ff., Snorri of Skálavík: *Biskupa Sögur I* p. 464.

1236: *Órækja meiddr ok heill gerr*

The title of this paper is taken from the "Flatey-annal" (*Flat.* III, 529), and refers to the infamous episode in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (pp. 395-96) that describes the castration and blinding of Órækja Snorrason at the hands of his cousin, Sturla Sighvatsson, and Órækja's subsequent miraculous recovery.¹ According to the saga, Sturla Sighvatsson, after a year abroad, returns to Iceland in 1235, only to discover that Órækja has taken up residence in the Western fjords and is terrorizing the countryside with raids and plundering. The next spring (1236), Sturla and his father, Sighvatr, demand compensation from Snorri for the damages caused by his son Órækja, but to no avail. The upshot of the disagreement is that Snorri is forced to leave for Bersastaðir, and Sturla settles at Reykjaholt and appropriates all of Snorri's property. Sturla then meets with Órækja in Dýrafjörðr, and they reach a tentative settlement, stipulating that Sighvatr should arbitrate between them; that Órækja should stay at Stafaholt; and that Sturla should retain Snorri's property and stay at Reykjaholt (*Ísl.*, pp. 392-94; cf. *Flat.* III, 110). Shortly thereafter, Órækja and his men, among them Sturla Þórðarson, join Sturla Sighvatsson in Reykjaholt, and the saga continues (*Ísl.*, pp. 395-96):

In the evening, Órækja and his men ate in the antechamber, and in the morning, when they came from mass, they went to the main room. Then Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson were summoned to the antechamber. A little later, Sturla Sighvatsson appeared in the door that leads from the antechamber, and summoned Sturla Þórðarson. They went into the attic that was there. Then Sturla Sighvatsson said: "You were aware, namesake, of our settlement in Dýrafjörðr. But now my father has failed to appear, and our agreement was that Órækja should have Stafaholt and live there, and I should stay here [at Reykjaholt]. However, it does not seem desirable that he should stay that close with such small means while I swim in Snorri's wealth. I will therefore now resort to another plan: I intend for him to go north to Skagafjörðr and leave for Norway from there. Your companionship has now come to an end." He then took the sword *Kettingr* that lay beside them and which Sturla Þórðarson had held in his hand. They went to the main room and Órækja's men met them in the door. They were all stripped of their weapons and clothes. Then they were led to the attic and men were set to guard them there. . . .

Now Sturla rode away with Órækja and *Svertingr*, as the only one of Órækja's men, up to the glaciers. They rode along *Arnarvatnsheiðr* until they reached *Hellisfitjar*. Then they went to *Surtshellir* and up to the stronghold. They seized Órækja and Sturla appointed *Þorsteinn langabeinn* to maim him. They cut off a