GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND PAGAN MAGIC IN SNORRI STURLUSON'S *HEIMSKRINGLA*

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Snorri Sturluson's reputation as a Christian rationalist is well-deserved. Renowned for his knowledge of Norse mythology, he retells the old myths in his *Edda* as a guide to poetic diction rather than to religion, and he understands the old gods, the *Æsir*, to be euhemerized versions of "Asians" who conquered the north in antiquity (*Ynglinga saga*, ch. 2).[1] In his history of the Norse kings, *Heimskringla*, Snorri omits most of the supernatural material he found in his sources; the narrator's comment in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that he would rather write about Óláfr's Christianization of Norway than about trolls and other evil creatures (*tröll ok illar véttir*, ch. 80) is apparently original with Snorri (Whaley 92). In fact, in a comparison of Snorri's version of the saga with his primary source, Oddr Snorrason's *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, Theodore M. Andersson has pointed out that "Snorri sacrificed no fewer than twenty-five of Oddr's chapters in something like their entirety. ...the most common exclusions have to do with the magical arts, prophesies, visions, and miracles" (83-84). When Snorri does include an episode involving magic and the supernatural, therefore, we must conclude that he does not do so lightly, but rather that he has a consciously conceived, historical or literary reason for the inclusion. In this paper I will argue that in *Heimskringla* Snorri combines his knowledge of two discrete traditions regarding pagan magic--one based in gender and one in ethnicity --in order to produce a picture of sorcery and magic that not only stands in direct opposition to the Christian miracles performed by Óláfr helgi, the central figure of the cycle and the hero of the longest saga in *Heimskringla*, but that also serves to emphasize the emerging ethnic and political unity of a Christianized Norway.

Old Norse literature in general portrays magic (called *fjölkynngi* or *seiðr*)[2] and its practitioners as existing in one of two distinct traditions: in the first, magicians and sorcerers are categorized by their gender; in the second, by their ethnicity. In other words, magicians tend to be either women or ethnic outsiders, and the ethnic group associated most prominantly with witchcraft in the kings sagas is the "Finns", those people who today are called Lapps or Saami. In each tradition the distinction between those who participate in acts of magic and those who do not becomes the basis for establishing a dominant in-group identity, either ethnic or sexual, made up of those who do not practice magic, while at the same time it prescribes severe societal sanctions against those crossing the boundaries between identity categories.

It is interesting to note that scholars who discuss *seiðr* in terms of women's magic (Jochens, Pálsson, Sayers) rarely if ever discuss the question of ethnicity,[3] while studies concerned with the question of the Finns rarely concern themselves with gender (Lindow, Tillhagen). John Lindow's recent study of Finnish magic from the saga age to the present in Scandinavian folk tradition goes so far as to conclude that in this tradition gender is "apparently not much of an issue" (27). Lindow

confirms, however, that in Scandinavia the "wholesale creation and maintenance of 'other' groups, such as supernatural beings, offered a means for the 'inside' social group, i.e., that group composed of the traditional participants, to define itself" (22). The attribution of magical powers to the "Finns" (most likely based in factual reports of Saami shamanism) therefore serves to distinguish the ordinary, presumably "safe" residents of Norse communities from the possible menace of alien outsiders, thereby giving an easily recognizable shape to the unknown dangers of the outside world. Visits to the "Finns" are often interpreted as undertaken solely for the purpose of gaining supernatural knowledge or magical objects and are thus suspect or even proscribed. As Lindow's essay demonstrates, the equation of the Finns and Saami as ethnic out-groups with supernatural powers has "remained more or less the same from the Middle Ages into fairly recent times" (19). Indeed, as late as the nineteenth century sailors believed that Finns and Lapps could sell favorable winds to those willing to pay enough money for them (Moyne 5).

The idea that the traditional practitioners of magic are women is based not only on saga depictions of female magicians and seeresses (*vǫlur*), such as Þorbjǫrg in the famous description of a *seiðr* seance in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4), but also on the sexual stigma that the practice of such magic is said to impose on men. This idea, of course, is spelled out most clearly in *Heimskringla* itself when Snorri tells us that Óðinn *kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir,* "knew and practised that craft which brought most power and which was called *seid* (witchcraft)," but that *[e]n þessi fjǫlkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skammlaust við at fara,* "in promoting this sorcery, lack of manliness [*ergi*] followed so much that men seemed not without shame in dealing with it" (*Ynglinga saga* ch. 7). Snorri may have been influenced here by *Lokasenna* str. 24, in which Loki accuses Óðinn of performing magic *sem vǫlor,* "like a sybil," and goes on to declare *hugða ek þat args aðal,* "I consider that to be unmanly (*args*) behavior" (Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 73). Some feminist scholars have recently speculated that *seiðr* as women's magic is not merely gender-based, but rather rooted specifically in female sexuality and possibly even in the ritual performance of an explicit sexual act (Jochens 74). Such speculation is strengthened, although not confirmed, by the reference in *Hyndluljóð* str. 33 to *seiðberendr,* "those who carry *seiðr*" as a category of the wise. Although the form of the word is masculine, it is derived from the verb *bera,* "to give birth," and is related to *berendi,* "female animal," or, more specifically, the "sexual parts of a female animal, particularly a cow" (Ström 9n). Dag Strömbäck has argued that the term *seiðberendr* was considered highly obscene and "used contemptuously as a name for someone who concerned himself with *seiðr*"(qtd. in English by Ström, 9). If nothing else, the sexual connotations of the word underscore the accusations of unmanliness or *ergi* with regard to men who practice *seiðr.*

But although Snorri asserts the unmanly character of *seiðr* in *Ynglinga saga,* his depictions of sorcerers and magicians in *Heimskringla* are based in ethnicity rather than in gender. The majority of the magicians he describes are male; nearly

all are said to be "Finns" or connected with the Finns in one way or another. Moreover, those few magicians not marginalized by their ethnicity tend to be marginalized geographically. People who live in Hálogaland in northern Norway (and thus closest to Finnmǫrk) are more likely to practice magic than those who live elsewhere, and, as Sverre Bagge points out, "Þórir hundr, the only magnate among St. Óláfr's adversaries to use magic, is the one who lives farthest north" (216). Often the witchcraft performed is the same sort of weather-magic that maritime folk tradition ascribed to the Finns and Lapps throughout later ages. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar,* for example, Rauðr inn rammi, a wealthy pagan *bóndi* from Goðey who is followed by a large retinue of "Finns" (*mikill fjǫlði Finna*), is an expert at controlling the weather: *Rauðr hafði jafnan byr, hvert er hann vildi sigla, ok var þat af fjǫlkynngi hans*, "Raud always had the wind where he wished to sail and it came by wizardry" (ch. 78). In addition, when St. Óláfr harries in Finland, he must contend with sorcerers who *gerðu um nóttina veðiveðr með fjǫlkynngi ok storm sjávar*, "during the night...by witchcraft made bad weather and storms on the sea" (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 9). But the witchcraft of the Finns and Saami does not stop there in either the folk tradition or in *Heimskringla*: they are also said to be able to cast spells, shapeshift, bewitch both objects and people, brew deadly potions, and even kill from afar (Tillhagen, Lindow).

Those who practice witchcraft in *Heimskringla* are universally condemned, a narrative perspective that differs markedly from the "morally ambiguous" (Pálsson 160)—and at times even admiring—attitude toward magic and sorcerers often found in the Icelandic family sagas. Not surprisingly, witchcraft is associated throughout the king's sagas with paganism, but Snorri is careful never to confuse the traditional worship of the old gods with the practice of magic itself. He has a certain sympathy for the Norse pagan desire to hold on to the old religion and the traditional customs associated with it; however, practitioners of witchcraft are consistently portrayed not only as pagan, but as evil. The fact that they are also categorized as ethnically distinct, i.e. as "Finns," marks them as fundamentally "other" from the pagan Norse. Pagans can be converted, but witches must be killed, and often in particularly gruesome ways. Óláfr Tryggvason's attempt to convert the sorcerer Eyvindr kinnrifa is a case in point. When Eyvindr refuses to convert voluntarily, Óláfr orders a bowl of burning cinders (*munnlaug fulla af gloðum*) to be placed on his stomach, which soon ruptures. But before Eyvindr dies, he reveals that he is unable to convert to Christianity because he owes his very existence to Finnish magic: *ek má enga skírn fá. Ek em einn andi, kviknaðr í mannslíkam með fjǫlkynngi Finna, en faðir minn ok móðir fengu áðr barn átt*, "I cannot receive baptism; I am a spirit quickened in man's body by the wizardry of the Finns, for my father and mother had no child before that was done" (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 76). Eyvindr's "otherness" is thus doubly evident, for the circumstances of his birth by the agency of the Finns make him scarcely human, if human at all.

Other sorcerers meet similarly horrible ends. Eiríkr blóðøx burns his brother Rǫgnvaldr réttilbeini alive along with eighty other magicians (*seiðmenn*), and we are

told that *var þat verk lofat mjǫk*, "that work was much praised" (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra* ch. 34). Óláfr Tryggvason executes Rauðr inn rammi by forcing a lingworm (*lingormr*) down his throat with a red-hot iron; the worm eats its way out of Rauðr's side, killing him (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 80). Óláfr also orders the magicians (*seiðmenn*) of the region around Túnsberg to vacate the land, seemingly giving them one final chance to save themselves. He then gathers all the *seiðmenn* he can find into a single building for a feast and sets the building on fire, killing all but one (ch. 62). Eyvindr kelda escapes through a smoke-hole, only to be hunted down the following spring and captured. He and his companions are then bound and left to await drowning on a skerry which is submerged under water at high tide (ch. 63). Such large scale murder offers one reason for Snorri's primary association of magic with ethnicity rather than with gender: as an ethnic "out-group," the Finns can be marginalized within Norse society, excluded from that society altogether, or even eliminated entirely. They can therefore serve as symbols for the worst aspects of paganism without the implication that the Norse pagans--who are, after all, the ancestors of Snorri's Christian readership--must be wholly condemned. Women, however, are "others" within Norse society itself, and cannot be totally excluded or eliminated without destroying that society altogether. Condemnation of witchcraft based on the tradition that its primary practitioners are women would therefore be useless for Snorri's underlying purpose of defining the cultural and political identity of Norway in opposition to a subordinate "other," the ethnically distinct "Finns."

In fact, Snorri sometimes deliberately masculinizes the sorcerers he depicts. Jenny Jochens points out that in the story of Óláfr Tryggvason's burning of the sorcerers, both Snorri's immediate source in Oddr Snorrason's version of the saga and apparently also Oddr's source in a now lost work by Sæmundr Sigfússon specifically state that both women and men were killed in the fire. Snorri, however "excludes females indirectly by using the masculine pronoun *þeir* (they)" (*Old Norse Images*, 125). Jochens suggests that Snorri's omission of any mention of female sorcerers is part of a more general trend on the part of clerical writers to portray early practitioners of magic as male (*Old Norse Images*, 130-31; cp. "Old Norse Magic", 307). I would suggest rather that Snorri masculinizes the sorcerers in the episode because he wants both to emphasize their ethnic alterity and to play down the traditional association of magic with women. The invocation of that tradition in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 7, rather than introducing a separate category of women's magic, serves primarily to intensify Snorri's condemnation of witchcraft with the implication that the male sorcerers involved are not only pagan and damned, but "unmanly"--an implication that loses its pejorative impact when applied to women. The accusation of *ergi*, which is never specifically mentioned except in *Ynglinga saga*, hovers in the background of Snorri's portrayal of witchcraft throughout *Heimskringla*, even though his explicit castigation of magic and magicians is based on religious grounds rather than gender role or even ethnicity *per se*.

Snorri is also careful to associate any female sorcerers in *Heimskringla* with the "Finns." For a man to marry a Finnish woman, or even a woman associated with

Finns, can be dangerous. In *Ynglinga saga* the Swede Vanlandi marries a woman named Drífa while he is wintering in Finland; when he stays away from her for too long, she pays a witch (*seiðkona*) named Hulð either to bring him back through magic or to kill him. Vanlandi resists the urge to return, and Hulð's revenge is quick and terrible:

> *Þá gerðisk honum svefnhǫfugt, ok lagðisk hann til svefns. En er hann hafði lítt sofnat, kallaði hann ok sagði, at mara troð hann. Menn hans fóru til ok vildu hjálpa honum. En er þeir tóku uppi til hǫfuðsins, þá troð hon fótleggina, svá at nær brotnuðu. Þá tóku þeir til fótanna, þá kafði hon hǫfuðit, svá at þar dó hann.*
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> Then he became sleepy [and lay down to sleep. But when he had slept a little, he called and] said that the Mare was treading on him. His men sprang up and would help him, but when they came to his head she trod on his feet, so that they were nigh broken; then they resorted to the feet, but then she smothered the head, so that he died there (ch. 13).

The implication is not that Vanlandi should have avoided women, but rather that he should never have married a Finn. Likewise King Haraldr hárfagri's marriage to the beautiful Finn Snæfríðr bodes ill from the start, for Haraldr *unni svá með œrslum, at ríki sitt ok allt þat, er honum byrjaði, þá fyrir lét hann*, "loved her so witlessly that he neglected his kingdom and all that was seemly for his kingly honour" (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 25). His devotion is extended three years after her death, for her body is magically preserved intact until the king is persuaded to lift it from the bed where she lies, at which time *þá slær ýldu ok óþefani ok hvers kyns illum fnyk af líkamanum*, "there rose from the body a rotten and loathsome smell and all kinds of evil stink" (ch. 25). Marlene Ciklamini reads this episode as an allegory of Haraldr's foolhardy sexual indulgence and "inexplicable lack of concern for the preservation of the unified realm," as well as a foreshadowing of the future hatred among Haradr's sons (77). Although most of the symbolism she identifies would have remained the same had the magic been attributed solely to feminine rather than to ethnic witch-craft, Haraldr's excessive devotion to a woman who is also a "Finn" and thus a member of an ethnic out-group underscores his political negligence in a way mere uxoriousness would not. Once again Snorri is using the practice of magic to draw a boundary between groups, creating a supernaturally powerful "other" against which the soon-to-be unified nation can define itself.

The most important and powerful female sorcerer in *Heimkringla,* however, becomes and remains a member of the Norse "in-group" by virtue of marriage into the royal family. Beautiful beyond compare, Gunnhildr is a witch trained by *Finnum tveim, er hér fróðastir á mǫrkinni*, "two Finns who are the cleverest men in Finmark" (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 32). When Eiríkr blóðøx's men discover her, she is easily able betray the two Finns through trickery, allowing Eiríkr's men to kill them so that she may leave Finnmǫrk and marry Eiríkr. Once again Ciklamini reads the episode as political allegory, commenting that "[t]his type of procedure, consummate acts of treachery, are to be commonplace in Eiríkr's reign and the reign of his sons.

In both reigns [Gunnhildr] assumes a dominant role" (79). And once again Snorri is at pains to identify Gunnhildr not with women's magic, but with ethnically based witchcraft. According to the Latin *Historia Norvegiæ,* Gunnhildr was the daughter of Gormr gamli of Denmark and the sister of Haraldr blátǫnn, an unabashed Christian--facts which Jochens notes would explain her many political connections in Denmark (*Old Norse images*, 281n). Snorri's contrary assertion that Gunnhildr is the daughter of a Hálogaland chieftain named Qzurr toti, while consistent with other vernacular sources, may also have its basis in an attempt to link Gunnhildr more firmly to the far north and the "Finns" and thereby to strengthen Snorri's symbolic identification of the religious and political obstacles to a unified Norway with the uncanny powers wielded by members of a recognizable ethnic out-group that not only refuses Christian conversion but actively pursues a policy of evil.

The answer to those religious and political obstacles and to witchcraft itself comes in the person of Óláfr helgi, whose miracles stand in direct opposition to the pagan magic of the earlier sagas. Scholars have often noted that the instances of magic in *Heimskringla* decrease to almost nothing after the battle of Stiklarstaðir (Bagge 215; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 125); they are in fact replaced structurally by accounts of Christian miracles.

Even before Stiklarstaðir, of course, the power of Christianity is represented as efficacious against pagan magic. It is the prayers of Sigurðr byskup that allow Óláfr Tryggvason to prevail against Rauðr's weather magic: his prayers open up a passage through the storm, so that *kenndu þeir engan vind á sér, er á því skipi røru, ok svá stóð toptin eptir í varrsímanum, at þar var logn, en svá lauss sjárokan brot frá hvárntveggja veg, at hvergi sá fjǫllun fyrir.* "the men who rowed the ship felt no wind against them, and in the wake of the ship the sea was calm, but on both sides the sea foam rose so high that the fells on the side of the fjord could not be seen" (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 80).

Nonetheless, Snorri refrains from placing too much emphasis on miracles until after Óláfr helgi's death, which is portrayed as the turning point between a Norway divided by religious and political infighting and a unified, Christian Norway: after Stiklarstaðir, despite political conflicts and occasional setbacks, there is simply no going back. The change is symbolized by the miraculous conversion from pagan magic to Christianity by Þórir hundr.[4] Þórir, as mentioned above, is the only one of Óláfr helgi's opponents at Stiklarstaðir to use magic against him: he is wearing one of twelve reindeer cloaks made for him by the "Finns" *með svá mikilli fjǫlkunngi, at ekki vápn festi á ok síðr miklu en á hringabrynju*, "with such wizardry that no weapon could pierce them; they were stronger than a ring-byrnie" (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 193). When Óláfr strikes at Þórir, his sword fails to bite, *en svá sýndisk sem dyst ryki ór hreinbjálbanum*, "but it looked as if smoke came out of the reindeer skin coat" (ch. 228); the incident precipitates Óláfr's defeat. But after Óláfr's death, it is Þórir hundr who tends to his body:

> *Þá kom blóð konungsins á hond Þóri ok rann upp á greipina, þar er hann hafði áðr sár fengit, ok þurfti um þat sár eigi umband þaðan í frá,*

> *svá grøri þat skjótt. Váttaði Þórir sjálfr þenna atburð, þá er helgi Óláfs konungs kom upp, fyrir alþýðu. Varð Þórir hundr fyrst til þess at halda upp helgi konungsins þeira ríkismanna, er þar hǫfðu verit í mótstǫðuflokki hans.*
>
> The king's blood came on Tore's hand and trickled to the palm where he had been wounded, and from that moment there was no need to bind up the wound, so quickly did it heal. About this happening Tore himself bore witness to each and all when the holiness of King Olav was known. Tore the Hound was the first to uphold the holiness of King Olav of all the great men who had been in the host which withstood him (ch. 230).

More than anything else in the saga, it is this episode which proclaims the ultimate end of Norse paganism and the inevitable Christianization of the entire Norwegian people.

Snorri Sturluson seems disinclined by nature to place much stock in reports of magic or the supernatural; however, he uses witchcraft in *Heimskringla* as a kind of poetic trope that enables him to condemn the evils of paganism without condemning the pagan Norse population as a whole. Magic is thus attributed in the sagas to the "Finns," an ethnically marginal out-group against which Norse Christianity and rationalism can define itself on the way to achieving national unity and religious conformity. Although the evidence of *Ynglinga saga* shows that Snorri was aware of a parallel tradition attributing the magic called *seiðr* primarily to women because of the unmanliness it entailed, he deliberately downplays the association of magic with gender throughout the king's sagas. By doing so, he can oppose the harmful effects of pagan magic as it is practiced by a treacherous and deceitful out-group to the healing miracles of Óláfr helgi, who becomes not only Norway's most important saint, but also a symbol of Norwegian national unity.

NOTES:

1. All quotations from *Heimskringla* are cited from Bjarni Aðalbjarnson's three-volume edition; translations are from Monsen.
2. I have not distinguished *seiðr* from its more respectable cousin *galdr,* since Snorri uses the term *seiðr* throughout *Heimskringla*.
3. One reason for these authors' omission of the tradition of Finnish magic is, of course, that they are working specifically with the Icelandic family sagas, in which the question of ethnicity is not as apparent, although Pálsson does suggest that ethnicity plays a role in some portraits of male sorcerers (160).
4. Although I was unable to make use of it in this study, a detailed and thorough discussion of Þórir hundr may be found in Ingebjørg Sogge's *Vegar til eit Bilete: Snorre Sturluson og Tore Hund*, Trondheim, 1976.

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