

TRANVESTISM IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS

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In the "Festa-þáttir" section of *Grágás* (*Konungsbók*; ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852), it is specified that "Ef konor geraz sva af siða at þær ganga íkarlífötom eða hverngi carla sið er þær hafa fyrir breytne sacir oc sva carlar þeir er kuená sið hafa huernge veg er þat er. þa varðar þat fiorbavgs garð. huarom sem þat gera. þat er stefno söc scal queðla til bva v. a þingi þess er sottr er. sa á söc þa er sökla vill" (155; cf. also 254).

If one regards this official decree as descriptive, it comes as no surprise that the Sagas of Icelanders record a few people who challenge the Deuteronomic injunction of *Grágás* and don the garb of the opposite sex. I have labelled these individuals transvestites, although, obviously, the application of this modern word to Saga Age men and women necessitates a no small stretch of the term. The word "transvestite" was coined only in 1910 by Hirschfeld. The verb "transvest" has, however, existed in English for a long time, meaning "to clothe in other garments," especially in the garments of the opposite sex in order to disguise oneself (Hotchkiss 1996: 4). It is in this meaning of the word (without the connotations of fetishistic obsessions) that I employ "transvestism" in my inquiry into the use or significance of the phenomenon in the Sagas of Icelanders, although I use also the related term "cross dressing."¹ But even in this broad sense, the term needs modification: the male and female disguise depicted in the Sagas of Icelanders is often transparent, the disguise is only temporary, and virtually all of the men and women who dress across gender lines have a rational reason for doing so; as a consequence, scenes of anagnorisis either do not appear or are undramatic. Between the red lace corset, black garter belt, and stockings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show's* "sweet transvestite from Transsexual Transylvania" and the décolleté shirt of *Laxdæla saga's* Þorvaldr Halldórsson there is, to be sure, an abyss. This does not mean, however, that gender concealment was unknown to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders, at least not as a literary device, for it appears not uncommonly in both indigenous and translated Old Norse-Icelandic literature. *Þrymskviða* (ed. Neckel 1983: 111-115), for example, describes how Þórr, the epitome of masculinity, is dressed up in women's clothes as bride of the giant Þrymr in order to recover his stolen hammer. *Mdgos saga jarls* (ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1954: 2, 135-429, esp. 159), relates how Queen Ermenga disguises herself as an earl under the name Hirtingr. And the legends of Saints Marina (Martinus; ed. Gering 1882-1884: 1, 149-151) and Pelagia (Pelagius; ed. Rindal 1981: 77-79) tell how two women successfully concealed their sex and lived as monks or hermits until their deaths. Although fictional, we must assume that the motif of the transvestite, as Meulengracht Sørensen (1983) writes in regard to *níð*, "formed part of a contemporary conceptual universe which the author and his readers—or the reciter and his audience—had in common" (12). Indeed, an authentic case dating from 1158 is reported in *Surlunga saga* (*Sturlu saga*; ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al. 1946: vol. 1, pp. 63-114), in which it is related that Yngvildr Þorgilsdóttir cut her hair like a man's and wore men's clothes ("skar sér skör ok karlklæði" [ch. 9, p. 73]) in order to escape to Norway with her lover, Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson, with whom she had secretly borne a daughter, Sigríðr.²

¹Cross dressing seems to suggest a choice of lifestyle, while transvestism implies a compulsive disorder.

²It is interesting that while Yngvildr's disguise did not cause a problem, Þorvarðr's impersonation within gender did. Þórdís Leifsdóttir and Þorsteinn Þorleifsson claim parenthood of Sigríðr, but people have their suspicions. Accordingly, Einarr

I have limited the discussion to the purportedly historic narratives, the Sagas of Icelanders, the action of which is set in a realistic framework, where personal names, topography, and chronology are taken from historical records. Admittedly, charting the parameters of cultural horizons is much like marking boundaries in the desert sand—its lines continually shift and are often obscured. With regard to transvestism, the literary narrative need not reflect with anything approaching verisimilitude the circumstances of the everyday world; and its value as a reflection of historical fact is thus wanting. As an indicator of cultural attitudes, however, the topos can claim a certain legitimacy. Despite the distance that separates the Sagas of Icelanders from the events they narrate, the compositions can be assumed to embed contemporary attitudes and perceptions even as they incorporate events from history, for without a shared cultural link, it is unlikely that the presence of transvestism in a work written in one century could speak with any authority to the attitudes of another century. The injunction of *Grágás* itself reminds us of the need to check cross dressing and thus grounds transvestism—and by extension the transvestism of the Sagas of Icelanders—firmly within the sphere of contemporary cultural recognition and response.

Although gender issues have become a prominent theme of Old Norse-Icelandic studies, the individuals who assume the garments of the opposite sex or are accused of doing so are, at best, briefly mentioned in discussions of *nifð* or *ergi* and in studies of the medieval Icelandic heroine. The matter of transvestism has not been analyzed *per se* and in isolation, save for a cursory treatment in an article on the absence of the female body in Old Norse by Jochens (1991: 17-19), who, however, is interested primarily in details of clothing. Indeed, the examples of transvestism may have seemed too few to warrant separate study. Moreover, as they are presented in the Sagas of Icelanders, most of the incidents seem unimportant, if not at times pointless. Nonetheless, they merit attention, not only because their apparent irrelevance poses an enigma, but also because the ambiguous position of the male and female cross dressers provides an ideal site for viewing the saga authors' desire to construct, challenge, and reconstruct social gender identities within the narratives.

The preeminence of male hierarchy and the subordination of the female stand as masculine enterprises that, through the formation of socially determined roles, distinctions based on biological factors, control of cultural training, and appropriation of discourse, promote and ensure the valuing of men over women. The recognition of this hierarchy of the sexes is a prerequisite to any discussion of transvestism. The Sagas of Icelanders portray a society with clearly demarcated gender boundaries. The stereotypical view would see women in the role of care-giver charged with rearing young and maintaining domestic order within the closed confines of the home. The male, by contrast, operated outside the home and within the broader social, economic, and political spheres as farmer and landowner, lawgiver, and defender of the homestead, and any number of other roles, including carrying and, if necessary, using arms, that were a function of the male hegemony. In the portrayal of male and female transvestism in the Sagas of Icelanders, this hierarchy is given especially clear expression.

Þorgilsson makes inquiries, but Þorvarðr denies everything and the test of bearing hot iron is demanded. The iron is carried by a man named Grímr, and when his hand is freed, Þorvarðr is cleared of the charge and a fine is imposed on Einarr. However, the rumors continue after the escape to Norway, and it becomes clear that the ordeal was a fraud and that Sturla Þórðarson and Ingibjörg Þorgeirsdóttir have been in a plot to this effect with Þorvarðr. Accordingly, Einarr brings suit against Sturla. Both are sentenced to lesser outlawry, Sturla because of his involvement in the matter and Einarr because he did not pay the fine that had been stipulated for him.

It comes as no surprise that one must turn to *Laxdæla saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934) for accounts of women who don male garb. Aside from a passing reference to four unidentified women who, on Helgi Harðeinsson's orders, dress in male clothes to make the group appear larger and thus deceive the enemy,³ this saga provides the most detailed account of a woman who, dressed in men's clothing, transgresses the traditional and socially prescribed gender codes. Women's unwillingness to accept the societal constraints placed on them and their probing into the spheres typically assigned to men are one of the themes of *Laxdæla saga*, and of all the Sagas of Icelanders, it has the broadest range of and the most clearly individualized female characters. Indeed, it has been suggested that *Laxdæla saga*, if not written by a woman, was at least produced for a predominantly female audience (Jesch 1991: 193).

The woman in question is Auðr, also known as Bróka-Auðr, for, as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir points out, she was always "í brókum, ok setgeiri í, en vafit spjörum mjök í skúa niðr" (ch. 35, p. 95).⁴ It is because of her male breeches that she is divorced by her husband Þórðr Ingunnarson, but it is obvious that her masculine attire is only a pretext for Þórðr's actions, because Þórðr has taken a fancy to Guðrún (and *vice versa*). In fact, he claims not to have noticed Auðr's pants, when Guðrún brings the matter to his attention, and, in response to Guðrún's question as to why, then, she is called Bróka-Auðr, he responds that "Vér ætlum hana litla hríð svá hafa verit kallaða" (ch. 35, p. 95). Nor does he—although described as a very skilled lawyer—appear to be aware of the fact that female cross dressing was grounds for divorce, because one day he asks Guðrún what the penalty is for a woman who always wears breeches like a man's. Guðrún is clearly better informed:

"Slíkt víti á konum at skapa fyrir þat á sitt hóf, sem karlmanni, ef hann hefir höfuðsmátt svá mikla, at sjál geirvortur hans berar, brautgangssök hvártveggja." (ch. 35, p. 96)

His ignorance in this matter is curious, for Guðrún's words echo his own in an earlier conversation, in which Guðrún complains to Þórðr about an insult offered to her by her husband Þorvaldr Halldórsson and asks for his advice as to how to repay it:

Þórðr brosti at ok mælti: "Hér kann ek gott ráð til. Gerðu honum skyrtu ok brautgangs höfuðsmátt ok seg skilit við hann fyrir þessar sakir." (ch. 34, p. 94)⁵

³"Nú skulu konur þær, sem hér eru at selinu, snarask í karliföt ok taka hesta þá, er hér eru at selinu, ok ríða sem hvatast til vetrhúsa; kann vera, at þeir, sem nær oss sitja, þekki eigi, hvárt þar ríða karlar eða konur ...' Konurnar ríða í brott, fjórar saman" (ch. 63, p. 190). Cf. Þorleikr Bollason's comment: "Koma munu vér áðr til selsins ok vita, hvat þar sé manna; því at þat ætla ek síðr, at hér sé Helgi ok hans fylgðarmenn; sýnisk mér svá, sem þetta sé konur einar" (ch. 64, p. 191).

⁴Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir also has a nickname indicating that she wears breeches: in *Njáls saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954) she is called *langbrók* (ch. 9, p. 29), and in *Landnámabók* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1968) *snúinbrók*. (p. 143). Since her breeches did not cause problems, they were, presumably, of the female type. The same may apply to those of the female slave *Skinnbrók* in *Bárðar saga* (ed. Þórhalldur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991; ch. 3, p. 108 and ch. 4, p. 113).

⁵Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934) draws attention to the fact that it is nowhere stated in medieval Icelandic laws that cross dressing was grounds for divorce: "Að það væri skilnaðarsök að klæðast kvenklæðum, er hvergi sagt í íslenskum lögum, enda hefur sífjarétturinn forni sætt áhrifum af kirkjulögum." He refers to the prohibition against cross dressing in *Grágás* and concludes: "Má af þessu ætla, að sagan hafi

Having being informed that Þórðr has divorced her because she wears breeches (with inserted gores) like men,⁶ Auðr, rejecting female passivity and challenging her characterization as an unaccomplished woman ("ekki var hon ... górvilig" [ch. 32, p. 87]), chooses an active—and hence more traditionally male—response to her wounded pride as a rejected wife, for when her brothers fail to get support for an action against Þórðr, she waits until one evening Þórðr is alone and rides to Laugar, the narrator telling us that she was certainly wearing breeches then ("var hon þá at vísu í brókum" [ch. 35, p. 97]). She finds him asleep on his back and wakes him up, but he turns on his side when he sees that a man has come in. She then draws her short-sword—itsself a suggestive token of phallic authority—and lunges at him with it, wounding him severely; the sword catches his right arm and gashes him across both nipples.⁷ So fierce was the thrust, the saga tells us, that the sword stuck fast in the bed-boards. With that, Auðr rides home.

Despite Auðr's lack of respect for medieval Icelandic dress codes, she is portrayed and probably viewed as an exemplary character, a model for heroism that appropriates the androcentric model of the hero and challenges notions of biological differentiations, for the episode illustrates that women's way of thinking and their physical ability to circumvent impediments to their pride or social prestige are virtually identical with those of men. Indeed, Jesch (1991) comments: "It is not hard to imagine some women in the audience at a reading of the saga cheering when Auðr sinks her sword into her former husband" (199). The reason for this contradiction probably lies not only in the perceived heroism of Auðr's deeds, but also in the status accorded women in medieval Icelandic society: as a woman who imitated the superior sex, she was distancing herself from womankind. As such, Auðr, in her attempt to defy stereotypical gender roles and the effect of sex on behavior, paradoxically diminishes the liberating effect of her actions by suppressing her femaleness and using male disguise. In comparison with Auðr, Þórdís in *Gísli saga* (ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943), who attempts to carry out the vengeance for the death of her brother, would, in this context and from a feminist point of view, seem more of a heroine than Auðr, who, by assimilating maleness, accedes to male hegemony.⁸ This ambiguity or ambivalence in the

rétt að mæla, enda má ráða af sögunum, að auðvelt hafi verið um skilnað í heiðnum síð" (94, n. 3).

⁶All of the manuscripts used in Einar Ól. Sveinsson's edition have "karlar" except *Möðruvallabók* (AM 123 fol.), which has "karlkonur." Einar Ól. Sveinsson prefers this reading and explains the word as "konur, sem semja sig að síðum karla." Cf. also Krause (1926): "Recht klar ist nicht, was mit *Mannweiber* hier gemeint sein soll, zumal das Wort *karlkona* nur hier zu belegen iest. Es ist daher nicht ausgeschlossen, daß hier eine Textverderbnis in der Haupthandschrift M vorliegt, die alleins dieses Wort hat" (67). As Krause notes, the word "karlkona" is unique; the example from *Laxdæla saga* is the only occurrence listed in Fritzner (1883-1896; s.v.). In his supplement to Fritzner, Hødnebo offers the following translation of the word: "mannhaftig kvinne, kvinne som vil være mann."

⁷Jochens (1991: 25, n. 27) draws attention to an observation made by William Ian Miller (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990], 254, n. 35) that when Auðr gashes Þórðr across his nipples, Þorvaldr's low neckline reappears as a bloody seam on Þórðr's chest.

⁸The episode is related as follows: "Ok um kveldit, er hon [Þórdís] bar mat fram, fellir hon niðr spánatrogit. Eyjólfur hafði lagt sverð þat í milli stokks ok fóta sér, er Gísli hafði átt. Þórdís kennir sverðit, ok er hon lýtr niðr eptir spánunum, þreif hon meðalkafliann á sverðinu ok leggur til Eyjólfis ok vildi ieggja á honum miðjum. Gáði hon eigi, at hjaltit horfði upp ok nam við borðinu; hon lagði neðar en hon

portrayal of Auðr as a cross dresser, which points to the "darker" side of the "poetics" of transgression that often inverts in order to reaffirm societal norms (Hotchkiss 1996: 10), and which may not have been apparent to Jesch's cheering female audience, is underscored by the fact that Auðr's accomplishment is credited to her female persona as a rejected wife; she is not punished for her crime, and no moral value judgement is passed on her in the saga. The narrator tells us that although Þórðr was in bed with his injuries for a long time and never recovered the full use of his arm, he would not hear of having her punished, saying "hana slíkt hafa at gort, sem hon átti" (ch. 35, p. 98). Similarly, Auðr's failure to kill Þórðr can be viewed as a reassertion of the misogynist undercurrent that finally bars the female from the arena of male power, thus reasserting male authority and invoking the reestablishment of gender roles.

The narrator's comment when Auðr mounted her horse that she was certainly wearing breeches then has generally been considered a sarcastic authorial intervention. From the context and in light of the fact that it is noted about two other women in the sagas, Freyðís Eiríksdóttir in *Grænlandinga saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935) and Þórhildur Vaðlaekkjá in *Ljósvetninga saga* (ed. Björn Sigfússon 1940), that they put on items of male apparel before wielding weapons, it seems, however, that the comment reflects more than just the narrator's sense of sarcasm and signifies, metaphorically, that the women distance themselves from the restrictions imposed on them by their gender. The adoption of male dress thus becomes a means of liberation and empowerment, allowing the woman to participate within the dominant masculine sphere. And it is fitting, too, that only in appropriated male dress does the woman wield weapons, the totems of male authority.

The episode concerning Freyðís takes place in Vínland, where Freyðís has arrived with the two brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi. The mounting tensions between Freyðís's Greenlandic party and the brothers' Norwegian party culminates in Freyðís's deception of the brothers and the goading of her husband Þorvarðr under threats of divorce to avenge her alleged maltreatment by Finnbogi and his companions. The fact that Freyðís puts on her husband's cloak before going to see the brothers obviously signifies her assumption of male authority and with it stereotypical male qualities of daring, strength, and self-possession.⁹ The narrator's view on Freyðís's idea of "power dressing" is difficult to assess, however, for it is too closely linked with her crime to be dissociated from it. Although her motives were less than noble, Auðr evokes the narrator's and the audience's sympathy; she is merely fulfilling the obligation that her brothers have neglected. Besides, Auðr does not kill her ex-husband but merely inflicts on him severe wounds. As far as Freyðís's crime, her execution of five women, is concerned, the saga mentions no extenuating circumstances; her bloody massacre is in every respect an atrocious deed. Freyðís is a source of disorder and truly disrupts societal norms. It is because of her misdeed and not because of her assumption of male clothing that she has been ostracized.

hafði ætlat, ok kom í lærit, ok var þat mikit sár" (ch. 37, p. 116; cf. *Eyrbyggja saga* [ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935], ch. 13, p. 24). Jesch (1991) views not only *Laxdæla saga* but also *Gísla saga* as sagas "in which we sense that contemporary concerns about the role of women are projected onto its Viking Age characters" (193).

⁹Whereas in *Grænlandinga saga* Freyðís dons male garb, *Eiríks saga rauða* (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 1984; ch. 11, p. 430), in contrast, relates that she bares her breast in order to reveal her sex, thus vindicating her female body while claiming male heroism.

The matter of Þórhildr's male attire presents an altogether different case. Þórhildr, who is described as being a heathen in spirit ("forn í lund" [ch. 11, p. 59]), is clearly known for her abilities to predict the future, and it is because of these that Guðmundr inn ríki Eyjólfsson, who wishes to know if the killing of Þorkell hákr Þorgeirsson will be avenged, visits her. When he arrives, Þórhildr is "gyrð í brækr ok hafði hjálm á höfði ok øx í hendi" (ch. 11, p. 59). She then goes down to the fjord, where she seems to grow in stature ("gerðisk heldr þrýstilig" [ch. 11, p. 59]) and, by striking her axe into the water, she predicts the death of one of Guðmundr's sons. As Jochens (1991: 26, n. 31) observes, Þórhildr's clothing is probably ritualistic and echoes the association of transvestism with witchcraft (Ackroyd 1979: 10). Interestingly, however, Þórhildr's case, like those of Auðr or Freydís, involves the absence of a husband: Þórhildr is a widow, Auðr is divorced, and Freydís appears to be contemplating divorce. Without a husband, the woman can no longer be labeled as a wife, with all the subordinating baggage that attends the designation. Through adoption of male dress, the woman, in effect, appropriates to herself the power of the dominant stratum while also displacing her own sexual identity, with the effect that she is free to act in ways never open to her as a woman. The absence of the husband, then, removes the limitations imposed by male control and thus permits the reassignment of female identity.

The absence of a husband also causes Ólof getsli Þórisdóttir in *Víglundar saga* (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959) to don male attire. Like Auðr, Ólof is an example of a woman, who rises to heroism, not by imitating maleness, as in the case of Auðr and Freydís, but by simulating maleness, for in contrast to Auðr and Freydís, about whose gender identity there is never any doubt, Ólof, in self-defense, successfully conceals her sex. It is related that Jökull and Einarr Hólmkelsson decide to rape Ólof, the wife of Þorgrímr þriðji Eiríksson, who in their view has become quite arrogant, in order to put a dent in his pride. One day, when Þorgrímr is away, the brothers ride to Þorgrímr's farm. Ólof, who has been informed of their arrival by a house maid, dresses a servant woman in her own cape to receive the would-be rapist, assuring her that he will bring her no dishonor. While Einarr is speaking with the servant woman, a blue-clad man carrying a sword enters:

Maðrinn var ekki stórr vexti, en allreiðugligr var hann. Þeir spurðu hann at nafni, en hann nefndist Óttarr. Ekki þekktu þeir þenna mann, en þó stóð þeim nokkurr ótti af þessum manni. (ch. 8, p. 78)

Óttarr requests that they go outside to greet Þorgrímr, who is arriving. Seeing Þorgrímr, the brothers flee, but, we are told, "inn bláklæddi maðr var Ólof sjálf" (ch. 8, p. 78). Although no comment is offered on the episode, Ólof's trick to protect herself from Einarr's sexual advances or abuse clearly met with approval, for it is noted that when the brothers found out they felt that the trip had brought them disgrace. Indeed, in contrast to Auðr and Freydís, Ólof commits no crime and does not infringe upon male dominion. And, as in the case of Auðr and Freydís, Ólof's maleness is, from a practical point of view, essential for her success.

The tolerance that characterizes male impersonation in the Sagas of Icelanders does not apply to female impersonation. Not a single hero flouts the medieval Icelandic dress codes, not even when cross dressing is resorted to in order to escape a dangerous situation as is the case of Ólof. A well known example is Helgi Njálsson in *Njáls saga*. During the burning of Bergþórshváll, Flost Þórðarson permits, as was customary, the women, children, and servants to leave. Ástríðr of Djúparbakkir suggests to Helgi that she drape him in a woman's cloak and put a *faldr*—the most feminine item of clothing—on his head, so that he can escape the flames. Reluctant at first, Helgi eventually accedes. When he emerges between Ástríðr and Þórhildr Hrafnadóttir, Flost, adding insult to injury, orders

the very tall and broad-shouldered woman to be seized. Faced with such an accusation, Helgi throws off the cloak and exposes himself to certain death.

Helgi's embarrassment over being caught in drag is shared by Víglundur inn væni Þorgrímsson, the eponymous hero of *Víglundar saga*, who receives a wound in his forehead. His brother Trausti swathes it in a *faldr*-like bandage with a piece of cloth torn off from his shirt. When the brothers arrive home, their father, Þorgrímr, greets them as "systkin" (ch. 14, p. 89), using a neuter grammatical form of the two brothers with the implication of a feminine grammatical form to one of them. To Trausti's question "Hvárn okkar kvenkennir þú, faðir" (ch. 14, p. 89), Þorgrímr answers that surely the one who wears the *faldr* must be the woman. Víglundur promptly remarks: "Eigi er ek kona ... en vera má, at skammt sé frá" (ch. 14, p. 89). To further rid himself of the imputations of effeminacy, Víglundur avenges the injury without delay.

The sole exception is Hermundr (*alias* Brandr) Ávaldason in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934), and here the fact that he is very young may account for the lenient attitude. It is related that he has slain Galti Ottarsson. Þorkell krafla Þorgrímsson, who feels obliged to avenge the murder because of kinship ties (Galti was the son of Þorkell's wife's sister), heads straight to the booth of Hermundr's father together with his men. Hermundr's mother, who is standing in the doorway, reminds Þorkell of the fact that she once saved his life by helping him escape. In response, Þorkell brusquely orders her to get out of the booth, so as not to see her son killed before her eyes, and Hildr grasps the plan: "tók hon síðan búnaðinn af höfði sér ok bjó hann með, en settisk í rúm hans, at eigi gengi fleiri konur út en ván var" (ch. 45, p. 123). To this, *Hallfreðar saga* adds that by wearing the *faldr* he managed to escape ("Brandr var faldinn, ok komsk hann svá út, ok hittisk hann eigi" (ch. 10, p. 190).

The examples of Helgi and Víglundur do not imply that women and female activities were held in contempt. Rather, they show that the female role was disgraceful when it was assigned to a man and called to mind notions of cowardice and effeminacy. While for women cross dressing freed them from the constraints of their sex, for men cross dressing was inhibiting, since femininity constricted freedom and involved status loss. This is clearly borne out by the episode in *Laxdæla saga* relating Guðrún's divorce of Þorvaldr Halldórsson on the grounds of his effeminate clothing. Although no details are provided, one must assume that Guðrún made the offensive shirt and that Þorvaldr wore it. Similarly, the saga is silent about the details of the divorce. It is merely stated that Guðrún declared herself divorced from him after two years of marriage, went home to Laugar, and got half of the estate, which had increased in value. Þorvaldr appears to have made no attempt to restore his honor, or at least no information about any such attempt is given in the saga; he is out of Guðrún's life and out of the saga. No comments as such are made about Þorvaldr's effeminate clothing, but in the manner in which he is portrayed, it is not difficult to detect the general attitude toward him. In introducing Þorvaldr, the narrator tells that he was a wealthy man, but no hero ("auðigr maðr ok engi hetja" [ch. 34, p. 93]). And when Þorvaldr asks for the hand of Guðrún and Ósvífr points out that the two are not of equal standing, Þorvaldr is supposed to have spoken meekly ("óharðfærliða" [ch. 34, p. 93]), saying that he was asking for a wife, not money. Moreover, the terms of the marriage contract are not in Þorvaldr's favor: Guðrún was to be in charge of their money as soon as they were sharing the same bed and be entitled to one half of the estate, regardless of how long their marriage lasted. The characterization of Þorvaldr is, perhaps, appropriately summed up in Guðrún's own words when late in life she recalls him: "Þorvalds get ek at engu" (ch. 78, p. 228).

In Guðrún's and Þorvaldr's marriage, societal hierarchy overlays sexual hierarchy: although a male, Þorvaldr is of lower standing than Guðrún. His cross dressing reflects the incongruity of their social standings, his acceptance of subordination, and their atypical relationship as husband and wife. His passivity after Guðrún's charges and their subsequent divorce further testifies to his inferiority and ineffectiveness. True, Þorvaldr's lower social status may have much to do with his portrayal as a weak individual. His effeminate clothing reinforces the portrait as an outward emblem of his inferior status, making him a "woman" to the more aggressive Guðrún. The case of Þorvaldr shows that when gender markers are obscured, inborn social status replaces sex as the defining element of character.

The only way society could justify such status loss was through attaching connotations of some type of deviant eroticism to male transvestism (Bullough 1974: 1393). Male passing finds its acceptance within the realm of male fantasy; but male transvestism was perceived as a threat, both because it placed the sexual identity of the male gazer into jeopardy and threatened to subvert the entire structure of male hegemony. The labeling of male transvestism as deviant eroticism thus seeks to minimize its treat through social and sexual ostracism: the sexual identity of the male hierarchy is thus validated and remains secure. A case in point is Flosi in *Njál's saga*. Flosi is not a transvestite, but the episode is significant in this context, because it draws attention to clothing as a means of establishing gender identity and the attachment of eroticism to female impersonation. It is related that arbitration has been arranged between Njáll and his sons on the one side and Flosi on the other over Skarpheðinn's killing of Høskuldr Hvítanessgoði, Njáll's fosterson and the husband of Flosi's niece Hildigunnr. The settlement is to be concluded at the Alþingi with six hundred ounces of silver in indemnity to Flosi. The silver is gathered together in a pile. Njáll takes a silk cloak and a pair of boots ("silkislæður ok bóta" [ch. 123, p. 312]) and places them on top of the pile. Flosi expresses his satisfaction with the money but then picks up the cloak and asks who had donated it. No one answers, and he asks again, but still nobody says anything. He then asks a third time, this time provokingly adding whether no one dares tell him. Then follows this exchange of words between Flosi and Skarpheðinn:

Skarpheðinn mælti: "Hvat ætlar þú, hvern til hafi gefit?" Flosi mælti: "Ef þú vill þat vita, þá mun ek segja þér, hvat ek ætla: þat er mín ætlan, at til hafi gefit faðir þinn, karl inn skegglauti—því at margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona." Skarpheðinn mælti: "Ílla er slíkt gort at sneiða honum afgömlum, er engi hefir áðr til orðit dugandi maðr. Meguð þér þat vita, at hann er karlmaðr, því at hann hefir sonu getit við konu sinni. Hafa fáir vórir frændr legit óbættir hjá garði, svá at vér hafim eigi hefnt." Síðan tók Skarpheðinn til sín slæðurnar, en kastaði brókum blám til Flosa ok kvað hann þeira meir þurfa. Flosi mælti: "Hví mun ek þeira meir þurfa?" Skarpheðinn mælti: "Því þá—ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níundu nótt ok geri hann þik at konu." (ch. 123, pp. 313-314)

Njáll's generous and well intended gift of a silk cloak and boots touches a sensitive chord, for in an earlier scene, which also involves a cloak—the blood-stained cloak in which Høskuldr had been killed—Hildigunnr had urged him to take vengeance by challenging his courage and manhood ("manndóm ok karlmennsku" [ch. 116, p. 291]), and Flosi obviously interprets Njáll's amicable gesture as a renewed insinuation of femininity, which causes him to reverse the insult of unmanliness which he regards as inherent in the gift.¹⁰ Skarpheðinn, who quickly perceives of Flosi's sore point,

¹⁰Jochens (1991: 11 and 26, n. 35; cf. also Falk 1919: 160-161) notes that while the cape was intended for a man, or, at most, unisex, a different case could be made for the

reinforces the insult by substituting the cape with female breeches (Falk 1919: 122), about which there was no ambiguity, and, in the guise of public opinion, bluntly accusing Flosi of passive homosexuality.¹¹ In response, Flosi renounces the silver, saying that they will take no other compensation for Hǫskuldr than blood-vengeance. Flosi, who hitherto has been a man of peace, now refuses to give or accept any pledges of peace, and the conversation marks the turning point at which the legal negotiations are abandoned and warfare ensues as a result of Flosi's need to affirm his manhood.

Although secular law condemns female transvestites as much as male transvestites, the Sagas of Icelanders reveal a hostile attitude to men wearing women's clothing and a correspondingly lenient attitude to women wearing men's clothing. Male transvestism was obviously regarded as unsettling, degrading, and, not least, immoral, because it threatened the male cultural horizon which equates male sexuality with power as mutually reinforcing attributes. Further, male transvestism placed the male gaze in jeopardy, opening the way to taboo and destruction of identity. Women dressing as men pose no real threat, for the act validates male dominance (the "club" all want to join, at least from the male perspective). Men dressing as women can be dispatched with labeling them as deviant and linking them with perverse eroticism. For women to aspire to or appropriate maleness was seen as a spiritual advancement; maleness or the manly spirit was, in medieval Icelandic society, a moral quality. However, if the examples of female cross dressing are intended to reveal liberating and revolutionary acts, they fail to do so, because they represent a repressive and ultimately confirming validation of presupposed gender identity.

Cross dressing in the Sagas of Icelanders is thus not construed from the viewpoint of validating a redistribution of gender but as *manqué* performance within traditional (albeit exchanged) gender categories. Indeed, a critique of gender is not at issue. The transvestite does not reinscribe gender along new lines but appropriates the conventions of male or female codes of behavior and response. Thus, there takes place no radical violation of stereotypical roles within the exchange. The Sagas of Icelanders may tolerate cross dressing as a part of the cultural horizon, but the final effect is an assurance that male hegemony will remain intact.

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boots. She refers to Falk (1919: 138), who believes that *bótar* refer to female footwear, while *skóar* are used about male footwear.

¹¹The allegation of being a woman every ninth night appears stereotypical and is found also in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (ed. Jón Jóhannesson 1950; ch. 3, p. 308) and *Króka-Refs saga* (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959; ch. 7, p. 134). See Almqvist (1974: 35-36).

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