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MILK, MASCULINITY, AND HUMOR-LESS VIKINGS - GENDER IN THE OLD NORSE POLYSYSTEM

A concrete perception of masculinity in the sagas is hard to trace. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has recently pointed at the multiplicity of gender systems present in saga literature, either within or across generic boundaries¹. One reason for this, as Ármann Jakobsson shows, is a multiplicity of voices: the represented time's perceptions, those of the author's time, and those of the saga itself²; to this one can add also the perceptions of the post-medieval period when the saga was copied down into paper manuscripts, as well as variations within the medieval period itself. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir points out, different genres also offer different voices and perceptions. Most recently, Gareth Evans has suggested to approach the research into Old Norse masculinity through the concept of hegemonic masculinity; this acknowledges a multiplicity of gender perceptions operating within a society, while work is done to define the most prominent ones³.

One way to work with and even reconcile opposing gender perceptions could be found in what has been dubbed 'polysystem theory', developed by Itamar Even-Zohar. Polysystem theory suggests that within each literary system more than one set of repertoires operate, each representing different forces in society, and each with its own inner logic and intratextual connections, in addition to ex-

¹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Gender*, [in:] *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Sverrir Jakobsson, New York 2017, p. 227.

² Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics in Njáls Saga*, "Viator" 38:1 (2007), p. 195.

³ G.L. Evans. *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, First ed. Oxford English Monographs, Oxford 2019, pp. 15–26.

isting intertextual connections⁴. This theory is based on the often misrepresented diachronic approach to genre suggested by Russian Formalism⁵. Scholars such as Massimiliano Bampi, Torfi Tulinius and Stefka Georgieva Eriksen have noted the benefits of applying polysystem theory to the Old Norse corpus, especially (but not exclusively) in the context of the influence that translations and Latin had on the local Icelandic literary products⁶. Looking at the issue of genre through polysystem theory allows for a synchronic and diachronic understanding of their hierarchy, struggles and development. Like with genres, different gender perceptions also represent different forces within society. Polysystem theory can thus be used both to trace these individual forces, and also to understand how and when these forces intersect. In the following pages, three – intersecting and yet separate – attitudes towards gender and sex differences will be traced: The saga mind, which represents an elusive congregate of local traditions that may or may not be influenced by other perceptions; the Christian mind, which represents Christian notions of gender; and the scientific mind, which represents influences from continental medical writing that made their way into the Icelandic sagas. This separation is, of course, in many ways unnatural. For example, as will become apparent in the discussion below, most of the examples that exhibit a Christian mind-frame could also be seen as representing older gender concerns in a new suit. Yet, the benefit of this method is in the fact that it sheds a light on perceptions that can only be discussed if they are first examined in their own right before we see how they are incorporated into the larger gender framework.

The case studies in this article will center around milk and milk products, since the attitude towards them reveals much of the variance in approaches that this article argues for. After coming back to Iceland from an outlawry sentence in Norway, Grettir Ásmundarson returns with significantly more status and riches. One day he sets off towards his kinsman Auðunn, who had insulted him years before during a ball game. When Grettir arrives at Auðunn's farm, he finds his kinsman carrying a milk curd pouch. After Grettir makes Auðunn trip on the curd pouch, his kinsman returns the favor; "Audun bent down to pick up the curd pouch, slung it into Grettir's arms and told him to take what he was given. Grettir was covered with curds, which he considered a greater insult than if Audun had

⁴ I. Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Theory*, "Poetics Today" 11:1 (1990), pp. 9–26.

⁵ See e.g. Y. Tynyanov, *The Literary Fact*, translated by Ann Shukman, [in:] *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by D. Duff, Harlow 2000, pp. 29–49.

⁶ M. Bampi, *Literary Activity and Power Struggle*, [in:] *Textual Production and Status Contexts in Rising and Unstable Societies*, ed. by M. Bampi, M. Buzzoni, Filologie medievali e moderne 59, Venezia 2013, pp. 59–70, T.H. Tulinius, *Writing Strategies: Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland*, [in:] *Textual Production...*, ed. by M. Bampi, M. Buzzoni, Venezia 2013, pp. 33–42, S.G. Eriksen, *The Change in Position of Translated Riddarasögur within Old Norse Literary Polysystems: A Case Study of Eliss saga ok Rósamundar*, [in:] *Textual Production...*, ed. by M. Bampi, M. Buzzoni, pp. 43–58.

given him a bloody wound”⁷. Grettir’s new clothes are now covered with filth, and he has once again been defeated by a man who had humiliated him in the past. But what is it about being covered in curds that Grettir sees as more humiliating than a bloody wound? When one pays attention to milk and its by-products throughout the Icelandic saga corpus, a certain intolerance towards lactose can be detected. It will be argued that this stems from an equation between milk and femininity; and even more significantly, towards a certain awareness and assimilation of some of the Icelanders penning these texts towards contemporary continental European understandings of sexual difference.

The Saga Mind

Since the time of Ancient Mesopotamia and Gilgamesh, to the days of the Greeks and Romans, and the saga authors’ contemporary European visitors to the court of the Mongols, consumption of milk was considered an action done by people who they considered untamed, who led a nomadic life⁸. If beer meant civilization, milk meant being wild, beastly. Milk was therefore also closely associated with being monstrous. While monstrosity and femininity did not always go hand in hand, this was often the case, as studies into concepts such as *yki* and *ergi* have shown⁹. What seems to be even more humiliating is when this perceived feminine fluid is emitted, and in some cases even consumed, by men.

Milk was considered an undignified food to serve one’s guests. In *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa* Þorsteinn Kuggason is forced to take refuge from a storm at the house of his rival, the saga’s eponymous hero. Þorsteinn’s men are received quite literally coldly, as the fires are not lit up and they are not offered a change of clothes. To add insult to injury, the guests are offered “cheese and curds” to eat. The host makes sure the insult was clear to the guest: “Bjorn asked Thorstein, ‘What do people call this food in your district?’” He answered that they called it cheese and curds. Bjorn said, “We call this food ‘enemies’ cheer”¹⁰. The serving

⁷ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, transl. by B. Scudder, New York 2005, p. 67; *Auðunn laut þá niðr ok þreif upp skyrkyllinn ok sletti framan í fang Gretti ok bað hann fyrst taka við því, er honum var sent. Grettir varð allr skyrugr; þótti honum þat meiri smán en þó Auðunn hefði veitt honum mikinn áverka.* *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, [in:] *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar. Bandamanna saga. Odds þátr Ófeiggssonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit VII, Reykjavík 1936, p. 96.

⁸ D. Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, New Haven 2011, pp. 23–30.

⁹ A. Finlay, *Monstrous Allegations. An Exchange of yki in Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, “Alvíssmál” 10 (2001), pp. 124–141, Ármann Jakobsson, *The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímur the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi in Medieval Iceland*, [in:] *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*, Reykjavík 2013, pp. 93–123, Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*, Earth, Milky Way [sic], 2017.

¹⁰ *The Saga of Bjorn: Champion of the men of Hitardale*, transl. by A. Finlay, Enfield Lock Middlesex 2000, pp. 64–65. *Björn spurði Þorstein: “Hvern veg kalla menn slika vist í yðvarri*

of these milk products as food is meant to make Björn's rival feel unwelcome. In *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, the wayward skáld answers King Haraldr harðráði's implied lack of hospitality by running off from his retinue and eating buttered porridge¹¹; this play on convention means that the connotation between bad hospitality and serving of milk products was prevalent.

A more extreme case where milk products serve as a sign of bad hospitality can be found in *Egils saga*. There, Ármóðr skegg serves the violent protagonist and his companions skyr without informing them that better food will come afterwards.

The drunk Egill sees this as a severe breach in rules of hospitality. As a response,

“He stood up and walked across the floor to where Armod was sitting, seized him by the shoulders and thrust him up against a wall-post. Then Egil spewed a torrent of vomit that gushed all over Armod's face, filling his eyes and nostrils and mouth and pouring down his beard and chest. Armod was close to choking, and when he managed to let out his breath, a jet of vomit gushed out of it. All Armod's men who were there said that Egil had done a base and despicable deed by not going outside when he needed to vomit, but had made a spectacle of himself in the drinking-room instead. Egil said ‘Don't blame me for following the master of the house's example. He's spewing his guts out just as much as I am’¹².”

Egill had just before eagerly eaten a large amount of skyr, which implies that the vomit would contain the white material. When he spews, Egill transfers the shame onto the host himself. But there is also something shameful about this behavior, and Egill himself acknowledges this; after all, the host Ármóðr him-

sveit?” *Hann svarar ok kvað menn kalla ost og skyr. Björn mælti: “En vér køllum slíka vist óvínafagnað, Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa, [in:] Borgfirðinga sögur, Hænsna-Þóris saga, Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu, Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa, Heiðarvíga saga, Gísls þátr Illugasonar, ed. by S. Nordal, G. Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit III, Reykjavík 1938, p. 185. I wish to thank Joanne Shortt Butler for pointing out this scene to me.*

¹¹ *Morkinskinna I*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Íslensk fornrit XXIII, Reykjavík 2011, pp. 274–275. See Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging. Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity*, C. 1220, Viking Collection 22, Odense 2014, p. 178, and Y. Tirosh, *Scolding the Skald: The Construction of Cultural Memory in Morkinskinna's Sneglu-Halla þátr*, “European Journal of Scandinavian Studies” 47 (2017), p. 7 ft. 11, as well as the *þátr*'s Flateyjarbók version where the connection between Halli's actions and the king's lack of hospitality are made clearer.

¹² *Egils saga*, transl. by B. Scudder, [in:] *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. by Ö. Thorsson, London 2001, p. 139. *stóð hann þá upp ok gekk um gólf þvert, þangat er Ármóðr sat; hann tók höndum í axlir honum ok kneikði hann upp at stofum. Síðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun ok nasarnar ok í munninn; rann svá ofan um bringuna, en Ármóði varð við andhlaup, ok er hann fekk öndinni frá sér hrundit, þá gaus upp spýja. En allir mæltu þat, þeir er hjá váru, húskarlar Ármóðs, at Egill skyldi fara allra manna armastr ok hann væri inn versti maðr af þessu verk, er hann skyldi eigi ganga út, er hann vildi spýja, en verða eigi at undrum inni í drykkjustofunni. Egill segir: ‘Ekki er at hallmæla mér um þetta, þótt ek gera sem bóndi gerir, spýr hann af öllu aflu, eigi síðr en ek.’ (*Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurðr Nordal, Íslensk fornrit II, Reykjavík 1933, p. 226).*

self vomits in response to Egill spewing on him, which in a way equates the two actions, though Egill's defecation is intentional and forceful. It is possible that the force by which Egill pins Ármóðr to the wall, the slowed down pacing of the scene, the untypically (and unpleasantly) descriptive focus on the vomit, and Egill's need to justify himself, all point to there being another layer to this liquid emission. A hint for this can be found in *Ljósvetninga saga*, where it is described how Guðmundr inn ríki's henchman Rindill is speared and spews skyr at his assailant, Ísleifr/Eilífr¹³. Rindill's spewing skyr parallels Egill's vomiting on his host. As Gísli Sigurðsson has suggested, given the rumors concerning Rindill's patron's sexuality, this spewing of skyr could be meant to indicate another white liquid; semen¹⁴. The fact that Rindill was left alone with a single companion to look for his horse supports this. In his study of phallic symbolism, Thorkil Vanggaard introduced the concepts of phallic aggression and the aggressive erection, that assert that beyond an erotic element, sexual acts of penetration could also be a means for men to establish their dominance over other men¹⁵. The forcefulness of Egill's spewing suggests a reading wherein by vomiting on Ármóðr skegg, Egill asserts his dominance, and shows phallic aggression; the white skyr that accompanies the vomit would then symbolize semen. But since Ármóðr skegg spews back at Egill, the need arises to further assert his male dominance by emasculating Ármóðr; removing an eye and cutting off a beard can both be read as emasculating actions¹⁶. In addition, Egill removed from Ármóðr the very thing that had given him his nickname skegg; his beard.

¹³ "Rindil had curds and ate quickly because it was thin; then they rode away into the woods where men jumped out at them. It was Eilif and another man with him. Not much time was taken to exchange greetings. He plunged a halberd into Rindil, and the curds spurted out of him and all over Eilif", *The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn*, transl. Th.M. Anderson and W.I. Miller, [in:] *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. IV, p. 228. *Rindill hafði skyr ok mataðisk skjótt, því at skyrit var þunnt; ok riðu síðan út frá garði ok svá í skoginn. Þá hleypðu menn í móti þeim. Ok var þar kominn Eilífr ok maðr með honum, – þar varð fátt af kveðjum –, ok setti þegar kesjuna á Rindil miðjan, en skyrit sprændi ór honum ok upp á Eilíf.* *Ljósvetninga saga*, [in:] *Ljósvetninga saga með þáttum, Reykdæla saga ok Víga-Skútu. Hreiðars þátr*, ed. by Björn Sigfússon, Íslenzk fornrit X, Reykjavík 1940, pp. 1–106, p. 55.

¹⁴ G. Sigurðsson, *The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki*, transl. by N. Jones, [in:] *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse world. Essays in Honour of Margaret Chunies Ross*, ed. by J. Quinn et al., (Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 18), Turnhout 2007, pp. 201–218.

¹⁵ T. Vanggaard, *Phallós*, Copenhagen 1969, pp. 93–103, see also P. Meulengracht Sørensen *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, The Viking collection: studies in Northern civilization 1, transl. by J. Turville-Petre, Odense 1983, p. 27 as well as pp. 51–61, and G.L. Evans, *Men and Masculinities...*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁶ Cf. C. Phepstead, *Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland*, "Scandinavian Studies" 85:1 (2013), pp. 1–19, esp. 9–10, and S. Lawing, *Perspectives on Disfigurement in Medieval Iceland: Cultural Study Based on Old Norse Laws and Icelandic Sagas*, Doctoral thesis, Reykjavík 2016, pp. 94–5.

Immersion in milk products could be seen as humiliating: in *Íslendingasaga*'s account of the *Flugumýrabrenna*, or burning of Flugumýri, when Gizurr Þorvaldsson's farmstead is almost completely overrun by his enemies, the head of the household hides in a barrel of whey to avoid the battle and fire. When the burners search the room in which he hides, they thrust their spears into the whey barrel. It is then related that "Gizurr moved his hands before his stomach very gently, so that they would barely feel that something was there"¹⁷. Gizurr is here described as caressing these long shafted objects, which cause him to emit a liquid; blood. This immersion of whey alongside the gentle handling of phallic objects puts Gizurr in a passive role. The impression that this action is seen as a breach in masculinity norms that needs to be remedied is strengthened when after the fire the freezing Gizurr is warmed between the thighs of a woman, which helps to reassert his masculinity. However, not every dip into whey is seen as a humiliation; in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* immersion into sour whey is seen as a practical solution to avoid a fire rather than a source of humiliation¹⁸, Gíslí's father's nickname 'súrr' notwithstanding¹⁹.

The Christian Mind

Another kind of approach towards milk products can be detected when we are presented with a Christian hero. The version of *Morkinskinna* preserved in the Hulda-Hrokkinskinna manuscripts contains the story *Þorgríms þáttur Hallasonar*, a tale about an Icelandic follower of King Óláfr helgi. The narrative relates that during Ember Week a snowstorm hits Þorgrímr and his family as they are travelling. Þorgrímr displays his valiance by helping others, while risking himself, but eventually succumbs and falls unconscious. Þorgrímr is brought into a farm and is given warm milk to resuscitate him, and is thus saved. Later on, when he arrives in Norway, he is met by the retinue of Kálfr Árnason, who battled against King Óláfr helgi in the battle of Stiklastaðir. Kálfr offers Þorgrímr and several other Icelanders winter lodgings, and Þorgrímr shows himself to be uncomfortable in

¹⁷ My translation: *Gizurr hafði lófana fyrir kviði sér sem hógligast, at þeir skyldi sem sízt kenna at fyrir yrði. Sturlunga saga I*, ed. by J. Jóhannesson et al., Reykjavík 1946, p. 493.

¹⁸ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, [in:] *Vestfirðinga sögur: Gísla saga Súrssonar, Fóstbræðra saga, Þáttur Þormóðar, Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings, Auðunar þáttur Vestfirzka, Þorvarðar þáttur krákunefs*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit VI, Reykjavík 1943, pp. 12–13 chapter 3 and pp. 30–31 chapter 9 of the longer version, extant in NKS 1181 fol. and AM 149 fol., marked as Y in the Íslenzk fornrit edition. For a discussion of the variance between different *Gísla saga* redactions, see E. Lethbridge, *Gísla saga Súrssonar: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations*, [in:] *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse saga literature*, ed. by J. Quinn, E. Lethbridge, Odense 2010, pp. 123–152.

¹⁹ *Gísla saga Súrssonar...*, p. 15 and p. 15 ft. 1.

the presence of the man who was involved in his sovereign's death. Things are exacerbated when two Icelandic brothers point out Þorgrímr's cold attitude. One of these brothers, Bjarni, recites a poem composed in Kálfr's honor; a poem full of praise for the magnate's part in the battle of Stiklastaðir. This becomes too much for Þorgrímr to handle, and he calls out Kálfr for his pride in killing the saintly king. To this Bjarni replies: "Be quiet, villain. Out in Iceland you pretended to be ill so that you could be fed milk during the fast"²⁰. Þorgrímr's consumption of milk, then, is used as a source of shame; but this time from a Christian perspective; the follower of King Óláfr helgi is mocked for consumption of milk that is against Christian law; but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the material itself nevertheless makes the shaming even worse.

Flóamanna saga has its protagonist Þorgils recreate scenes from the lives of saints and Christ in various ways²¹. In one such scene, the Christian Þorgils irresponsibly leaves his wife alone with a group of disgruntled enslaved men, after they are all shipwrecked. As is the wont of shipwrecked enslaved men, these men kill Þorgils's wife. The Christian man must now deal with the issue of feeding his newborn son, lest it starve and perish. He solves the issue by cutting his nipple. Initially blood drips out, but then, slowly, milk starts to come out, and the child is breastfed by the father. Þorgils's story is not told to shame the main character by having him emit the female liquid; *au contraire*, Þorgils's actions are meant to retrace those of male and female saints whose wounds drew milk rather than blood and the Holy Virgin and Christ Himself emitting milk from their nipples²².

But as Siân Grønlie points out, the *Flóamanna saga* narrative does not feel entirely comfortable with its lactating protagonist. In one redaction of the text, we are told that before cutting his nipple Þorgils "bravely called to mind his manhood"²³. Later on a dispute starts between a follower of Þorgils and one of Eiríkr inn rauði's followers in – tellingly – the queue for the toilet, because the latter

²⁰ *Thorgrim Hallason's Tale*, transl. by S. Brumfit, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. 3, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, Reykjavík 1997, p. 486. *Þegiðu, skemmdarmaðrinn; þú slótt á þik skrópasótt, til þess at hellt var í þik mjólk á imbrudögum út á Íslandi. Þorgríms þáttur Hallasonar*, [in:] *Eyfirðinga sögur: Víga-Glúms saga, Ögmundar þáttur dytts, Þorvalds þáttur tasalda, Svarfáela saga, Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskáld, Valla-Ljóts saga, Þorgríms þáttur Hallasonar*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslensk fornrit IX, Reykjavík 1956, p. 301.

²¹ H. Antonsson, *Damnation and Salvation in Old Norse Literature*, Woodbridge, Suffolk 2018, pp. 171–177.

²² C.W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley, CA 1984, pp. 122–123, 132–133, S. Grønlie, *Saint's Life and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*, Cambridge 2017, p. 21, H. Antonsson, *Damnation and Salvation...*, p. 175.

²³ S. Grønlie, *Saint's Life...*, p. 175. *minntist þá drengilega á karlmennsku, Flóamanna saga*, [in:] *Harðar Saga. Bárðar Saga. Þorskfirðinga Saga. Flóamannasaga...*, ed. by Þ Þórhallur Vílmundarson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslensk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavík 1991, p. 288.

states about Þorgils that “it’s not clear to me whether he is a man or a woman”²⁴, due to his misfortunes. Likewise, when Þorgils’s son first drinks breastmilk from a woman, the surprisingly talkative newborn responds that it is of a different color or appearance than his father’s breastmilk²⁵. With this statement, the son implies that his father is nothing like a woman, even though he has breastfed him. The narrative reveals that while Þorgils is certainly respected in the narrative for his Christian action, the association with the female action of emitting milk nevertheless causes unease.

The Scientific Mind

In her often – quoted 1993 article “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe”, Carol Clover pointed out the *blauðr/blautr* weak, soft, and wet semantic field in Old Norse literature²⁶. She also noted that “I also presume that in the same way that the thirteenth-century authors were cognizant of other medical learning (the theory of humors, for example), they were cognizant of the learned hot/cool model of sexual difference-but they did not insinuate that model into the “historical” texts”²⁷. It is indeed hard to dismiss an awareness of contemporary scientific thought in Old Norse learned society. In the second half of the thirteenth century we find AM 655 XXX 4to that cites Pedanius Dioscorides and Galen, both of whom applied humor theory in their treatments. The late fourteenth century manuscript AM 194 8vo features an extensive medical treatise based on the work of Hippocrates²⁸. Hippocrates (or the Hippocratic

²⁴ *óvíst er mér, hvárt hann er heldr karlmaðr en kona, Flóamanna saga...*, p. 305. This echoes a similar accusation made by Flosi in *Brennu-Njáls saga (Flóamanna saga...*, p. 305 ft. 1.).

²⁵ *sagði hann mjólk föður síns ekki svá lita, Flóamanna saga...*, p. 299. On this see also G. Evans, *Men and Masculinities*, pp. 101–102.

²⁶ C.J. Clover, *Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, “Representations”⁴⁴ 1993, pp. 1–28. Clover’s understanding of Old Norse sexual difference was influenced by the much problematized one-sex model offered by Thomas Laqueur, and she therefore did not distinguish between the male and female sex in her writing on the topic. See T.W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge 1990. For criticisms of his model, see K. Park and R. Nye, ‘Destiny Is Anatomy’. *Essay review of Thomas Laqueur: Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, The New Republic* (February 18, 1991), pp. 53–57, J. Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, Cambridge 1993, Park 1995. See also B. Bandlien, *Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society*, “Acta Humaniora” 236, Oslo 2005, pp. 10–11, and G. Evans. *Men and Masculinities* pp. 12–15, as well as M. Mayburd, ‘Helzt þóttumk nú heima í millim...’: *A reassessment of Hervör in light of seiðr’s supernatural gender dynamics*, “Arkiv för nordisk filologi” 129 (2014), p. 123 ft. 3 for criticism of Clover’s one-sex model.

²⁷ C.J. Clover, *Regardless of Sex...*, p. 12.

²⁸ *Samfundet til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur*, 37, *Cod. Mbr. AM 194 8vo*, [in:] *Alfræði Íslenzk*, Vol. 1, *Íslandsk encyklopædisk Litteratur*, ed. by K. Kálund, Copenhagen 1908, pp. 61–77.

corpus) is the one that introduced the hot/cold, dry/moist polarities in antiquity²⁹. Most interesting of all is the *Heimspeki ok helgifræði* segment in the early-fourteenth-century *Hauksbók* that features an extensive description of the different humors and their effect. According to this study, depending on the balance of temperature and moist in the body, a person could take on different ailments and characteristics. This shows an elaborate understanding of the humor system and its influences.

But was the hot/cool and by implication dry/wet, as well as the humor theory, truly not integrated into saga literature, what Clover refers to as “historical” texts³⁰? Medical learning was certainly integrated into some of these texts, the most memorable examples can be found in *Flateyjarbók*’s redaction of *Fóstbræðra saga*. We are told there about a certain Loðinn who is stricken with jealousy in regards to his lover: “He felt that she did not twine her fingers around his neck as she used to and that made him angry. A man’s anger resides in his gall, his life-blood in his heart, his memory in his brains, his ambition in his lungs, his laughter in his spleen and his desire in his liver³⁰. Later, when a certain Egill is mistakenly identified as a killer, the reaction of this less than valiant man is related: “Every bone in his body shook, all two hundred and fourteen of them. All his teeth chattered, and there were thirty of them. And all the veins in his skin trembled with fear, and there were four hundred and fifteen of them³¹. Yet another informative scene can be found in *Fóstbræðra saga*, after Þorgeirr receives news of his father’s death: “His face did not redden because no anger ran through his skin. Nor did he grow pale because his breast stored no rage. Nor did he become blue because no anger flowed through his bones. In fact, he showed no response whatsoever to the news – for his heart was not like the crop of a bird, nor was it so full of blood that it shook with fear. It had been hardened in the Almighty Maker’s forge to dare anything³². Lars Lönnroth examines this example and others to suggest that we can find evidence for knowledge and application of physiognomy and humor theory in

²⁹ J. Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference...*, p. 17.

³⁰ *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, transl. by M.S. Regal, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. 2, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, Reykjavík 1997, p. 374, ch. 21. *Þykkir honum hon leggja sjaldnar tíu [fingr] upp sér um háls en verit hafði. Lyptisk þá lítt þat reiði í sínu rúmi, en reiði hvers manns er í galli, en líf í hjarta, minni í heilam metnaðr í lungum, hlátr í milti, lystisemi í lifr, Fóstbræðra saga, [in:] Vestfirðinga sögur..., p. 226 ft. 1.*

³¹ *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, p. 378. *Öll bein hans skulfu, þau sem í vǫru hans líkama, en þat vǫru tvau hundruð beina ok fjórtán bein; tennr hans nǫtruðu, þær vǫru þrír tigir; allar æðar í hans hǫrundi pípruðu fyrir hræzlu sakar; þær vǫru fjögur hundruð ok fimmtán, Fóstbræðra saga..., p. 233 ft. 3.*

³² *Eigi roðnaði hann, því at eigi rann honum reiði í hǫrund; eigi bliknaði hann, því at honum lagði eigi heipt í brjóst; eigi blánaði hann, því at honum rann eigi í bein reiði, heldr brá hann sér engan veg við tíðenda sǫgnina, því at eigi var hjarta hans sem fǫarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu, heldr var þat hert af inum hæsta hǫfuðsmið í öllum hvatleik. Fóstbræðra saga..., pp. 127–128.*

the sagas³³. These examples show that at least some Icelandic saga authors/scribes incorporated their scientific learning into their ‘historical’ writing.

Treatment of milk could be argued to be another manifestation of this learned perception of the body. In a climactic moment of *Ljósvetninga saga*, the chieftain Guðmundr inn ríki confronts his nemesis Þorkell hákr by attacking him at his home. At the moment of confrontation, Þorkell mocks Guðmundr for his sweaty buttocks, and then, when Þorkell is almost vanquished, Guðmundr tumbles into a conveniently placed milk-vat. To this the dying Þorkell reacts by saying: “I imagine your ass has slaked itself at many streams, but I doubt it has drunk milk before”³⁴. As Andersson and Miller point out, there are several layers of insult here. After Guðmundr’s buttocks were established as sweaty, they now drink from the milk vat. Andersson and Miller also point out that Guðmundr’s body is established here as inverted, somewhat bizarre and monstrous, since he drinks from his behind rather than from his mouth³⁵. But the fact that Guðmundr’s body is described as emitting and taking in liquid also gives the sense of a porous body, borderless, and wet. Another occurrence of this kind is in Guðmundr’s final scene in the saga. After a farmer tells him what seems to be a cursed dream, Guðmundr proceeds to drink warm milk. Each time his wife presents him with the milk, he complains that it is not hot. After the third time this occurs, he sits back and dies. After his brother Einarr is called from his farm to come and handle the body, he says that “He must have been cold inside already since he felt nothing”³⁶. To our modern ears this sounds like an emotional statement, especially considering the cold relations between the two brothers Einarr and Guðmundr as described in *Ljósvetninga saga* and elsewhere. But here, again, it should be considered that the

³³ L. Lönnroth, *Kroppen som själens spegel: ett motiv i de isländska sagorna*, „Lychnos” 4 (1963), pp. 24–61. See also B. Þorgeirsdóttir, *Humoral Theory in the Medieval North: An Old Norse Translation of Epistula Vindiciani in Hauksbók*. “Gripla” 29 (2018), pp. 35–66 and C. Crocker, *Emotions*, [in:] *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson. New York and London, p. 243.

³⁴ *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga*, ed. by T.M. Andersson and W.I. Miller, Stanford, CA 1989, p. 193. *nú kveð ek, at rassinn þinn hafði áðr leitast flestra lækjanna annarra, en mjólkina hygg ek hann ekki fyrr hafa drukkit*, *Ljósvetninga saga: Eptir*, ed. by Þorgeir Guðmundsson, Þorsteinn Helgason, Sérprent úr Íslendinga sögum, 2 bindi. Kaupmannahöfn 1830, pp. 61–62. Note that I am using this edition rather than Íslenzk Fornrit due to my preference for its base manuscript AM 485 4to, over Björn Sigfússon’s JS 624 4to for the saga’s C-redaction. The following scene appears almost verbatim in the earlier extant AM 561 4to, also known as the A-redaction manuscript.

³⁵ T.M. Andersson, W.I. Miller, *Law and Literature...*, p. 193, ft. 125. See also *Ölkofra þáttur*, p. 94, Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man...*, p. 37. and L. Keens, *Scenes of a Sexual Nature: Theorising Representations of Sex and the Sexual Body in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, Doctoral thesis, London 2016, pp. 194–199.

³⁶ T.M. Andersson, W.I. Miller, *Law and Literature...*, p. 204. *kaldur hefðu hann nú verið innan, er hann kendi sín eigi*, *Ljósvetninga saga...*, p. 70.

coldness Einarr and the narrator refer to could be also a bodily condition: Guðmundr is described as cold, and before as wet. In the medieval manuscript Hauksbók, we learn how different humors in a person influence their characteristics; when blood phlegm is the most prominent, the man is “of cold nature and wet. Unsteady, alert and a coward”³⁷. Guðmundr described as cold and wet at the end of his narrative, therefore, fits with his general portrayal in the saga as a cowardly and unpredictable individual. Elsewhere I have argued that Guðmundr inn ríki’s portrayal is the embodiment of the Icelandic concept of *argr*³⁸, an unmanly man. The present analysis suggests that Guðmundr could also be seen as a phlegmatic man. This, in turn, points to the high similarities between the *argr* and phlegmatic man; both were unmanly men, in the eyes of medieval Icelanders.

Gender and the Old Norse Polysystem

The saga, Christian and scientific minds are by no means isolated. Lars Lönnroth has suggested, for example, that concepts such as *feigr* and *gæfa*, which we perceive as native to the Icelandic sources, could actually show Christian influence as well³⁹. And, indeed, as he also pointed out, “even a layman in thirteenth-century Iceland may have had a “clerical mind” ... a mind formed by the Christian culture of medieval Europe”⁴⁰. Clover too argued that “Christian resonances” could at times be detected in saga literature⁴¹. It is hard at times to tell apart what is Christian and what is ‘scientific’, since the same basic belief system leads both approaches in medieval times. Even the examples have, at times, a multiplicity of voices. In Bjarnar saga, for example, when Þorsteinn Kuggason’s men are served cheese and curds, we are told that this is done “for fasts were not yet established by law”⁴². The narrative finds it necessary to clarify this, either because it wants to absolve Björn and Þorsteinn from breaking of Christian decree, or because it wants to qualify the insult of serving the cheese and curds as pertaining to the saga mind rather than the Christian mind. Be it as it may, the mere mention of the fast brings Christianity into the narrative and makes it clear that the audience (the ideal one, at least) would be people who cared about whether or not their saga character offended Christian law or not.

³⁷ My translation: *af kalldri naturu. ok vátri. vstóðugr. vakr ok udiarfr. Hauksbók*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, København 1892–1896, p. 181.

³⁸ Y. Tirosh, *Arg Management: Vilifying Guðmundr inn ríki in Ljósvetninga saga*, [in:] *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by D. Hahn, A. Schmidt, Münchner Nordistische Studien 27, Munich 2016, pp. 240–72.

³⁹ L. Lönnroth, *Kroppen som själens spegel...*

⁴⁰ L. Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*, Berkeley, CA 1976, p. 105.

⁴¹ C. Clover, *Regardless of sex...*, p. 2.

⁴² *Því at eigi var þá enn lögtekin fasta, Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa...*, p. 185.

Despite the many intersections, however, by taking saga authors' treatment of milk and showing how different texts express different perceptions of gender and sex difference, we are able to better understand the different forces operating within medieval Icelandic society. These forces were not only separated by genre; all of these can also be apparent in the same text, and it is possible to identify them and where they operate. A polysystemic approach allows to find moments of intersection, but also moments when an individual perception is fore fronted.

Medieval Icelandic society showed a clear apprehension when it came to milk products. There seemed to be specific situations in which these could be served, but people had to be careful how they consumed it, used it, and interacted with it, since the wrong usage could be a source of shame. Christian decrees regarding milk products were in many times excuses for perpetuating pre-existing notions; this is most apparent in the case of Þorgrímr, who is shamed for consuming warm milk during a fast, but the implication is on his manhood, and being put in this helpless position. What came to them from learned treatises echoed what they already knew from local tradition; that there was something problematic about certain aspects of milk products, and that one must be wary when handling this material.

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MLEKO, MĘSKOŚĆ I POZBAWIENI HUMORU WIKINGOWIE – GENDER W STARONORDYCKIM POLISYSTEMIE

Streszczenie

Po niedawnej dyskusji na temat różnorodnych poglądów na płęć w literaturze staronordyckiej artykuł ten promuje wielosystemowe podejście do tematu. Teoria wielosystemowa sugeruje, że w każdym społeczeństwie działa wiele systemów narracji literackiej, które reprezentują różne siły społeczne. Teorię tę stosowano głównie w dyskusji na temat gatunku, ale tutaj sugeruje się, że można ją zastosować w odniesieniu do innych dziedzin nauki, takich jak płęć. Artykuł koncentruje się na podejściu do mleka i przetworów mlecznych w odniesieniu do męskości w korpusie *Sag o Islandczy-*

kach jako studium przypadku, oddzielając trzy systemy: umysł sagi, umysł chrześcijański i umysł naukowy. W dyskusji o umyśle sagi w artykule przeanalizowano przykłady upokorzenia związanego z mlekiem w *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, *Sneglu-Halla páttur*, *Sadze o Egilu* i *Ljósvetninga saga*, a także współczesnych *Islendinga sogur*. W dyskusji o chrześcijańskim umyśle *Þógrims þáttur Hallasonar* i *Flóamanna saga* rzucają światło na ambiwalentne podejście do mleka w chrześcijańskich ramach myślowych. Dyskusja naukowego umysłu stwierdza najpierw, że autorzy *Sag o Islandczykach* rzeczywiście włączyli naukową wiedzę do swoich tekstów, a następnie pokazują wykorzystanie mleka w *Ljósvetninga saga* do przedstawienia jej głównego bohatera, Guðmunda inn ríkíego, jako człowieka flegmatycznego. Po ustaleniu tych różnych sposobów postrzegania uznawane są momenty skrzyżowania w ramach różnych systemów płci. Ten artykuł stanowi wkład zarówno w badania nad płcią i męskością staronordycką, jak i obrazuje podejście do produktów mlecznych w średniowiecznej Skandynawii.