

Bloody Minds and Hard Hearts

Women's Work in Old Norse Literature

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Introduction

“Stereotypes of women’s speech as irritating, disruptive, and dangerous have been present in Western culture for at least two millennia” (Bardsley 46). Unlike some of their European counterparts, the women of the Icelandic family sagas have no bones about stating their minds, regardless of the consequences. Using words to chastise and motivate their male counterparts into carrying out their will is a hallmark of these women. This includes revenge, defending honor in times of conflict, and encouraging men to move past grief to rejoin the living.

In this context, women’s speech might be “irritating” and “disruptive” but it is necessary, even if it is “dangerous.” Their words may very well anger, irritate, disrupt the social order, incite feuds, and fuel discord. Like all individuals, women use the tools at hand and so, if they cannot in and of themselves take direct action, their only hope is to use harsh words and insults into manipulating men into doing it for them.

Women's Rights in Icelandic Law

Icelandic Commonwealth (c.930-1264)

While Icelandic law provided more rights and privileges to women than many of its contemporary European neighbors, it did not grant them the same as their male counterparts. For example, women could not bring suit, even if they were due benefit from a judicial settlement. Since direct, legal action was unavailable to women, their only recourse at times was to incite men to act for them.

“More likely, if women did in fact resist judicial composition more readily than men, they did so because they were excluded from the legal arena and hence from whatever antagonistic satisfaction was to be had from the successful prosecution of a case (and according to the sagas this could be considerable; if legal revenge was second-class revenge even for men, it must have been no revenge at all for women – or at best, second-class revenge at a vicarious remove) because little or no economic benefit ran to them directly from a judicial settlement [...] their alienation from the formal judicial system that came to prevail was in rough proportion to their disenfranchisement from it.” (Clover 36-37)

Immediate Action

Eiríks Saga Rauða

The settling of North America was a fraught endeavor, as the indigenous peoples were understandably less than welcoming to their Icelandic invaders, as they attempted to colonize the New World much as they had Iceland and Greenland. While there are more instances of women using speech to incite violence in others, there are a few instances in which they do not hesitate to back up their own words. The following excerpt illustrates that women were not above goading their male counterparts while also taking care of the problem themselves.

“‘Why do you men run before these worthless men – such estimable men as you are – who I’ve have thought you could cut down like domesticated cattle. But if I had a weapon, I’d think that I should fight better than any of you.’ To the Norsemen’s greater ignominy, she [Freydis] then singlehandedly beats the skrælingar back.” (Falk 201)

Bloody Tokens & Seeking Justice

Brennu-Njáls Saga

Hildigunn could not ever be accused of being subtle. “Flosi is to be treated to one of the best-known scene in the saga corpus. The author depicts Flosi’s nervous defensiveness perfectly, no less than he has Hildigunn overplay her part with cold, calculating brilliance. Thus the words of welcome – ‘My heart rejoices in your coming’ – the high-seat, faux icy laugh, the towel with holds, the promise literally to get in his face – ‘we shall get closer yet before we part’ – and then to approach Flosi closely, push her hair back from her eyes and weep” (Miller 202). In this, she is determined for Flosi to take up what she views as his “moral and legal duty” (Miller 202) to avenge Hoskuldr in the bloodiest way possible.

“She went to the far end of the room, unlocked her chest, and took out the cloak that Flosi had given Hoskuldr, the one in which he had been killed and that she had saved, blood and all. She came back with it and silently walked up to Flosi. He had finished eating and the tables had been cleared. Hildigunnr threw the cloak over his shoulders, and the bits of blood showered all over him.

Then she said: ‘This is the cloak you gave to Hoskuld, Flosi,’ she said, ‘and now I give it back to you. He was wearing it when he was killed. I call upon God and all good men to witness that I charge you in the name of all the powers of your Christ and in the name of your courage and your manhood, to avenge every one of the wounds that marked his body – or to be an object of contempt to all men.’

Flosi threw off the cloak and flung it back into her arms. ‘Monster’ he cried. ‘You want us to take the course which will turn out worst of all of us. Cold are the counsels of women.’”

“[Hildigunn goes on to say], ‘Hoskuld would have taken blood revenge if he were in your place now.’” (Miller 202)

Hildigunn is not the only one to attempt to incite revenge on the behalf of Hoskuld. In Chapter 89, Hoskuld’s mom uses his corpse to as a prop to demand Skarphedin get revenge for her son. Hrodney, Hoskuld’s sister, employs his bloodstained cap to ask Ingjald for the same. In short, the women of Hoskuld’s life are more than determined to see his killers suffer and they do not hesitate to use every tool available to them in order to make that happen.

Grief and Loss

Egil’s Saga

“As men indulged their grief, women assured that life continued” (Jochens 113). In the case of Egil’s saga, Egil’s son, Bǫðvarr dies drowning and so, Egil takes to his bed. His daughter takes it upon herself to goad him into writing a poem commemorating his deceased son.

“Then Thorgerd said, ‘[...] I want us to stay alive, father, long enough for you to compose a poem in Bǫðvarr’s memory and I will carve it on to a rune-stick. Then, we can die if we want to. I doubt whether your son Thorstein would ever compose a poem for Bǫðvarr, and it is unseemly if his memory is not honored, because I do not expect us to be sitting there at the feast when it is.’

Egil said it was unlikely that he would be able to compose a poem even if he attempted to.

‘But I will try.’ He said.

[...] Egil began to recover his spirits as eh proceeded to compose the poem, and when it was finished, he delivered it to Asgerd and Thorgerd and his farmhands, left his bed and sat down in the high seat” (Scudder 151-158).

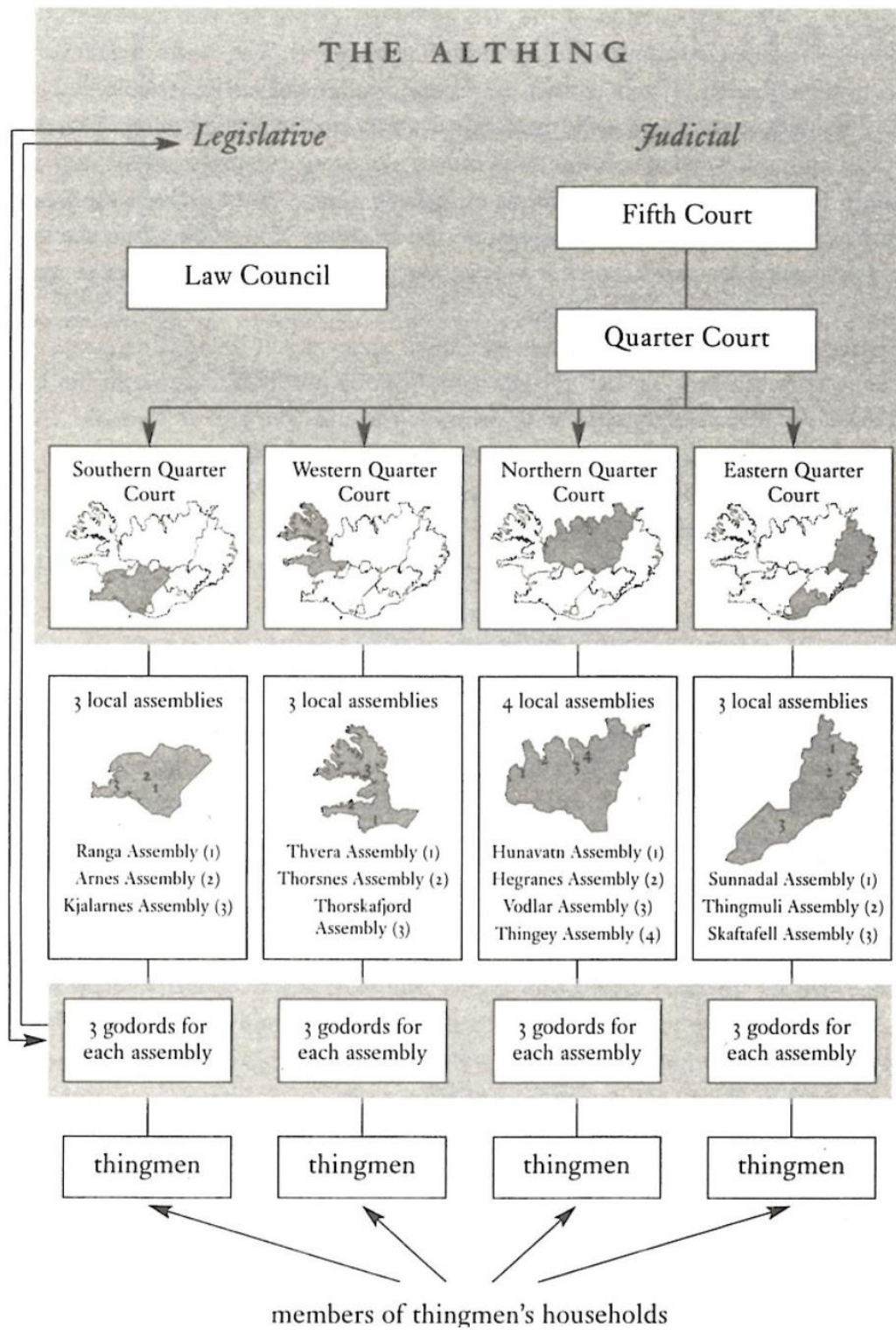
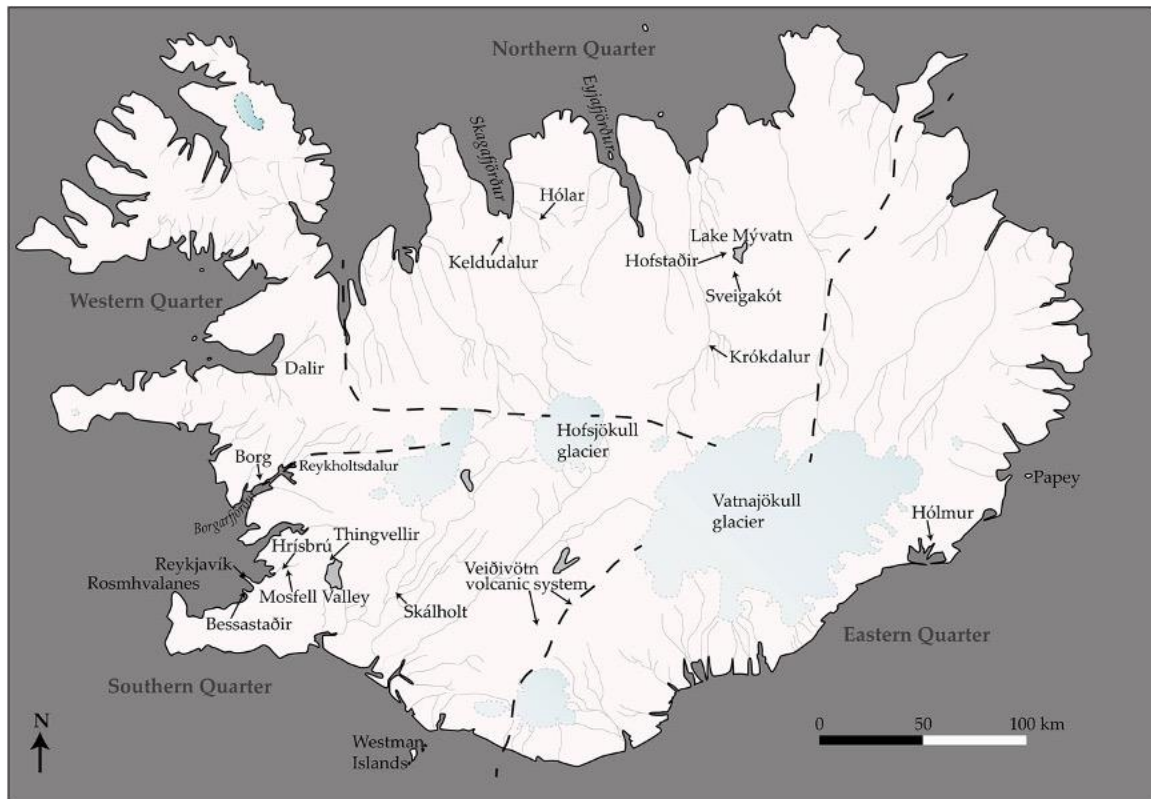


Figure 1 (Smiley 736)

Timeline

Early 9 th C.	Irish monks are the only inhabitants of Iceland.
860	Norse sailor named Naddoðr gets lost while sailing to the Faroe Islands. He lands in Iceland and briefly explores the territory before sailing back to the Faroes. He names the land Snæland (Snowland).
860s	Swedish Viking, Garðarr Svavarsson, was sailing to the Hebrides when a storm blew his ship off course. He circumnavigated the island before returning east.
C.868	Hrafna-Flóki Vilgerðarsson leads an expedition to Iceland and explores it. He is the first to call it 'Iceland'.
C.874	Ingólfr Arnarson becomes the first permanent settler in Reykjavík, Iceland after exile from Norway for murder.
C.895	Auðr Ketilsdóttir, settles in Iceland after her husband, Olaf the White, King of Dublin, is killed.
Late 9 th C.	Between 4,300 and 24,000 people settle in Iceland, mostly coming from Norway.
920	Auðr Ketilsdóttir dies while attending the wedding feast of her youngest son.
930	The Icelandic Commonwealth is founded with the establishment of the Icelandic parliament, the Alþing, at Þingvellir.
981	Þorvaldr Konráðsson, Thorvald the Far Traveler, leads a mission to convert Iceland to Christianity.
C.995	Egil Skallagrímsson dies in Mosfellsbær.
1000	Iceland adopts Christianity as the official religion during the Alþing. Some Norse pagan religious practices are allowed, including private worship.
1011	Njáll Þorgilsson and his family are killed when their home is burned down.
1030-1040	Grettir Ásmundarson, Grettir the Strong, dies in Iceland.
1056	Skálholt becomes the first diocese in Iceland. Ísleifur Gissurarson is the first bishop.
1104	The volcano Hekla erupts, resulting in the devastation in parts of southern Iceland.
1106	Hólar becomes the country's 2 nd diocese. Jón Ögmundsson becomes its first bishop. He is canonized in 1202.
1112	The first monastery in Iceland is founded at Þingeyraklaustu but becomes formally established in 1133.
1117	The <i>Grágás</i> , Iceland's law code, is put into writing.
1122	Ari Þorgilsson begins to write the historical work <i>Íslendingabók</i> (Book of Icelanders).
1186	Iceland's first woman's monastery, Kirkjubæjar Abbey, is established.
1215	Snorri Sturluson becomes lawspeaker of the Alþing, serving until 1218.
1222	Snorri Sturluson resumes the role of lawspeaker until 1232, becoming the most powerful figure in Iceland.
1241	Gizurr Þorvaldsson attacks and murders Snorri Sturluson at his home in Reykholt.
1258	King Haakon IV of Norway appoints Gizurr Þorvaldsson as Jarl of Iceland. Gizurr works to bring all of Iceland under Norwegian rule.
1262-1264	Icelanders agree to become subjects of the King of Norway, ending the Icelandic Commonwealth.
1281	New law code, the <i>Jónsbók</i> , is compiled by Jón Einarsson, further establishing Norwegian rule over Iceland.

Timeline courtesy of Medievalists.Net, edited to suit



Suggested Reading

Anderson, Theodore, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*

Gueber, H.A., *Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and the Sagas*

Oinas, Felix J., *Heroic Epic and Saga*

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