The Flight of the Valkyries: An Explanation for the Existence of Shield Maidens and Valkyries in Viking Society

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Lo, a shield-hung castle before him, and a banner on the topmost thereof: into the castle went Sigurd, and saw one lying there asleep, and all-armed. Therewith he takes the helm from off the head of him, and sees that it is no man, but a woman; and she was clad in a byrny as closely set on her as though it had grown to her flesh.

The Volsunga Saga[1]

This snippet of narration, taken from part of the Nibelungenlied chapter of Eirikr Magnusson's translation of the Völsunga Saga, recounts the fated first meeting of Sigurd Sigmundsson, the famed Norse hero responsible for the slaying of the monstrous dragon Fafnir, and Brynhildr, the recently disgraced Valkyrie serving out the punishment given to her by Odin for killing the wrong man on the field of battle. In the first moment of their encounter Sigurd, who had been advised to find Brynhildr in his hero's quest for wisdom, mistakes her for a man. The shield, the helm, and the byrny (similar to chainmail or torso armor) worn by Brynhildr so disguise her form that Sigurd must remove her helm to discern her gender. However, rather than marveling at her rather traditionally masculine attire, and her declaration that she participated in war and the killing of men, he asks her to "teach us the lore of mighty matters!...Sure no wiser woman than thou art one may be found in the wide world; yea, yea, teach me more yet of thy wisdom."[2] Instead of being intimidated or affronted by her more "masculine" traits, Sigurd actually steps back as the authoritative figure in this scene and allows Brynhildr to advise him and teach him how to use rune stones to his advantage.

The Völsunga Saga is not the only instance of a woman's taking on the characteristics of her male warrior counterparts. The Edda of Saemund reports that "there was a king named Eylimi; Sváva was his daughter; she was a Valkyrie

[1] Eirikr Magnusson, William Morris, and Jessie L. Weston, *The Volsunga Saga* (London: Norraena Society, 1906), 84.
[2] *Ibid.,* 86, 90.

and rode through air and water."[3] Sváva, though sometimes said to be her own person, is often conflated with and identified as Sigrún, a major character in the Helgakviða Hundingsbana, or the Helgi Poems of the Poetic Edda. Sigrún, or Sváva, is introduced to the reader as part of a Valkyriur, or a group of Valkyries: "Then gleamed a ray from Logafiöll, and from that ray lightnings issued; then appeared, in the field of air, a helmed band of Valkyriur: their corslets were with blood besprinkled, and from their spears shone beams of light."[4] Again, rather than being put off by their "masculine" warrior traits Helgi, the hero for whom the Helgi Poems are named, invites the women to camp with him and his entourage for the night; a salacious offer that almost ends with him being killed by the women for his impertinence.[5] Sváva and Sigrún, whether they were the same woman or different ones, are examples of women warriors in Viking culture.

But while these previous examples have shown female warriors, it has only been through the lens of sagas and eddas. In other words, they have appeared only in poetry, and there is no real historical evidence as to their existence beyond the literary plane. However, this does not mean that female warriors never existed and that there is no evidence to support their role in Viking society. Saxo Grammaticus was a Danish scholar remembered for his historical written work: the Gesta Danorum, or History of the Danes, which he finished sometime between 1208 and 1219 AD.[6] His intention was to create a heroic history of his people, the Danes, for his employer, Absalon, the Archbishop of Lund, Denmark. His history is therefore specifically organized to exalt epic battles and warriors. One event to which Saxo pays particular attention to is the rise of Ragnar Lothbrok, whose story begins with the murder of his grandfather. Ragnar had come to Norway to avenge the death of his grandfather and to preserve the honor of his now widowed wives who had been forced into prostitution by the invading forces. While Ragnar arrives the women of the kingdom take it upon themselves to preserve their integrity:

> Many women of quality, who had lately suffered abuse to their bodies or feared that their chastity was in imminent danger, began

[3] Benjamin Thorpe, *Edda Saemundar Hinns Froða: the Edda of Saemund the Learned* (London, Trübner, 1866), 217.
[4] *Ibid,* 230.
[5] *Ibid,* 230-231.
[6] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes, Edited by Karsten Friis-Jensen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), xxxv.

> to dress themselves as men… vowing that they would put death before dishonor. The man who had come to revenge the humiliation offered to these women felt no shame in borrowing their help against the cause of their disgrace.[7]

One of these disguised women was Lathgertha, whom Saxo calls:

> A skilled female fighter, who bore a man's temper in a girl's body; with locks flowing loose over her shoulders she would do battle in the forefront of the most valiant warriors. Everyone marveled at her matchless feats, for the hair to be seen flying down her back made it clear that she was a woman…Having discovered that she was of distinguished foreign birth, he (Ragnar) set about wooing her with determination through intermediaries.[8]

Ragnar, like Sigurd and Helgi in the eddas and sagas, recognizes when help is available to him and does not question the gender of those who aid him. Rather than being disgusted by her cross-dressing behavior and warrior ways, he finds himself smitten with her demeanor and cannot rest until he possesses her.

Lathgertha's strength does not end with her marriage; arguably she becomes only more powerful. Ragnar soon divorces her for another woman and she remarries. Ragnar later begs her and her new husband for aid in his battles and she, still feeling a modicum of love for him, sends a fleet and an army, along with herself, to help him. The battle is hard and Ragnar's troops are soon dejected and close to defeat: "Lathgertha too, with a measure of vitality at odds with her tender frame, restored the mettle of the faltering soldiery by a splendid exhibition of bravery."[9] Lathgertha succeeds where Ragnar and his sons could not. She rallies the troops, not with her feminine charms, but with her strength and conduct in battle. She rallies the masculine battle spirit of the troops even though she is a woman. And her quest for conquest does not stop there: "…she returned home from battle; that night she stuck a dart, which she had concealed beneath her gown, into her husband's throat, thereby seizing for herself his whole sovereignty and title. This woman, of the haughtiest temperament, found it pleasanter to govern a realm alone than to share to fortunes of her husband"[10] In this one moment Lathgertha transcends most Viking women's wildest dreams: not only

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[7] *Ibid,* 633.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid,* 639.
[10] *Ibid.*

does she use her wit and skill to seize control of an entire kingdom, her success in doing so shows that the kingdom accepted her as a fit ruler, despite her gender. Though she is a woman, an entire kingdom supported her claim to her deceased husband's throne.

These three examples, Brynhildr, Sváva/Sigrún, and Lathgertha, all show that women in Viking society were acknowledged even when they showed overtly un-feminine characteristics. They wore armor, fought freely and valiantly, and even gained political power, roles that during the Medieval Ages were predominantly occupied by men. But what, then, made these three, and others, different and able to transcend their role as women? I would like to put forward the theory that, though at first glance these women seem to exist in the same realm as men, what, in fact, is happening is a careful policing of women's boundaries and power in order to preserve the patriarchal order of Viking society. In order to support this theory we must look at Viking Society through a variety of theoretical lenses. In this paper I will attempt to show that Viking society was strictly patriarchal. I will also show that, though Viking women were able to transcend the label of domestic female, it was only under terms that continued to satisfy the patriarchy. To support these claims I will employ Simone de Beauvoir's famous work The Second Sex to show that Viking society was patriarchal because women were being construed as the "Other". I will then apply Thomas Laqueur's work *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* alongside the Viking concept of *drengr* to interpret Viking ideas about sexuality to show how these two themes provide the groundwork for women to be able to essentially "ascend" close to the level of men, while never fully achieving it. Finally I will employ Max Weber's ideas on routinization and charisma to explain the continued existence of the Valkyrie and the Shield Maiden in the written histories of the Vikings as a method to allow women a sense of freedom while actually satisfying the patriarchy. The rise, and acceptance, of the Shield Maiden and the Valkyrie in Viking culture can be directly linked to several key characteristics in Viking social structure.

Viking Society

Before one can truly begin a discourse on events during the Viking Age, one must first define what one means by using the phrase "Viking Age". According to documented raids on surrounding countries, Vikings ruled Scandinavia

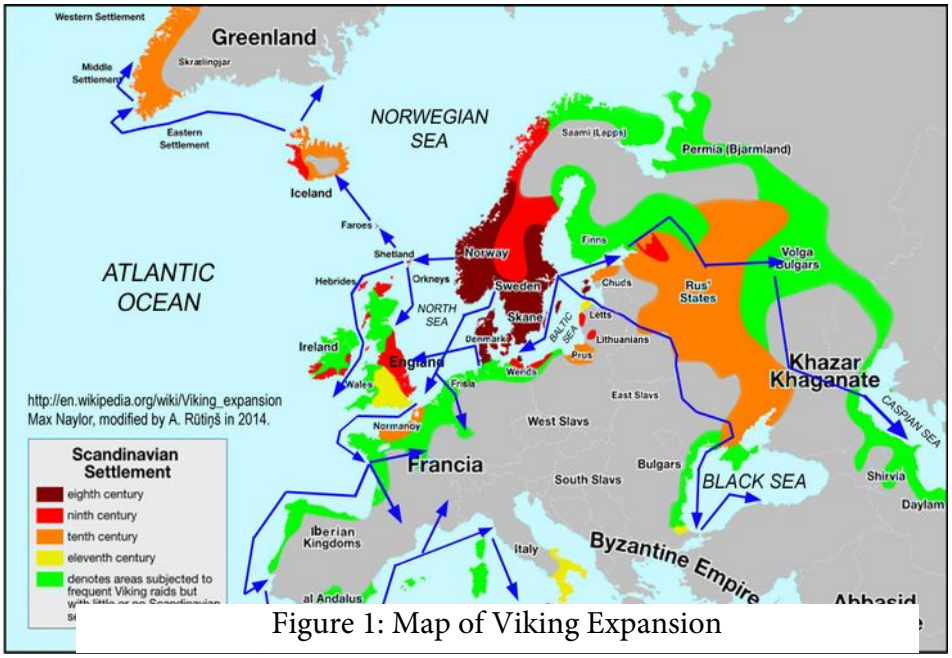

Figure 1: Map of Viking Expansion

(Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway) as well as Iceland and the Faroe Islands starting in the 790's AD until 1066 AD (the Norman Conquest).[11] This means that "Viking Age", as a phrase, covers a massive expanse, both territorially and chronologically. For my paper, in an effort to cut down on both these expanses, I will give the specific dates, as closely as one can narrow these things down, of the sagas, eddas, epics, and laws that will be examined. I will start with the sagas and eddas. First, the Poetic Edda, or Elder Edda, is collected and written down somewhere in the late 900's AD. Then, the Heimskringla Edda is written down in approximately 1230 AD. Finally, the Volsunga Saga is written down in its compendium form circa 1250 AD. When looking at the dates for the eddas and sagas one must remember that these are merely the dates around which they were first written down. These stories were originally oral traditions handed down for countless generations before they were ever written down on parchment. This means that the origins of these stories is often much older than the dates given, though how much older is impossible to tell. Second, I will give the dates of the laws. The GulaÞing Laws were written down in Norway in approximately the 11th century and were updated well into the 13th century. The Grágás were written down in Iceland in the 920's, making them the earliest primary sources this article employs. Thus my usage of the phrase "Viking Age" will refer to the areas of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland from the 10th century into the 13th century.

[11] Knut E. Helle, I. Kouri, and Jens E. Olesen, *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105.

Ragr, Sannsorðinn, and Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir once said "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[12] What she meant by this statement was that our genders, and the roles associated with each one, are socially constructed and reinforced throughout our lives. One can be born biologically female but is taught, through positive and negative reinforcement offered by the reactions of those around us, to be a girl or woman. Beauvoir's book The Second Sex sets out to prove that, in a patriarchal society, men dominate women by categorizing them as "Other" in every possible category: "The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth."[13] Beauvoir's claim hinges on her idea that men see themselves as the ideal form; they believe they are the social norm, thus women must be the "Other" because they are fundamentally not men.

This idea of men's being the norm and women's being a subservient, lesser and "Other" form of men can also be seen in Viking society, particularly in the predominantly, though not exclusively, male tradition of insulting. Insulting was considered a sport between Vikings, a sort of battle of wits meant to sharpen the mind as well as temper an opponent's hubris:

> In terms more or less formal and more or less humorous, the insulter impugns his antagonist's appearance, reminds him of heroic failure, accuses him of cowardice, of trivial or irresponsible behavior, or of failings of honor, declares him a breaker of alimentary taboos (drinking urine, eating corpses), and/or charges him with sexual irregularity (incest, castration, bestiality, "receptive homosexuality").[14]

It is this last vein of insulting, sexual irregularity, as Clover calls it, which is of particular interest as insulting a man about his sexuality could carry hefty fines, both financially and socially. There were two major insults that could result in punishment: Ragr, and Sannsorðinn. Each of these words carried a slightly

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[12] *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 330.
[13] *Ibid,* 196.
[14] Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Representations No. 44* (October 1, 1993): 8.

different connotation but all three are closely related to making remarks on a man's sexual prowess. However, where Clover seeks to show that the sexual nature of these insults show the fluidity of the notion of what makes a man, as many of these insults compare men to women, I disagree. I believe that these insults do not show that "maleness" is a fluid state of being, rather, I think these insults reflect what Beauvoir referred to as "Othering". Men's insulting other men by comparing them to women reflects a society constructed around men being better, or above women.

Sannsorðinn is perhaps the easiest of these words to explain and connect to male sexuality:

> There are certain expressions known as fullréttisorð (words for which full compensation must be paid). One is if a man says to another that he has given birth to a child. A second is if a man says of another that he is sannsorðinn (demonstrably fucked). The third is if he compares him to a mare, or calls him a bitch or harlot, or compares him with the female of any kind of animal.[15]

I believe that this passage reveals something about the social relations between the genders in Viking society. Clover claims that insulting a man by calling him a woman blurs the line between what one considers a man and what one considers a woman. I posit that the usage of the word Sannsorðinn in fact cements the way one categorizes a man and the way one categorizes a woman. Sannsorðinn here refers to a man's passivity during sexual relations; if a man takes on the role of the penetrated, i.e. the traditional role of the woman, then he has become less than a man, he has lowered himself to the rank of a woman. In other words, he has rejected the norm in favor of the lesser and he must be insulted by "real men", i.e. men who consider themselves the active penetrator, for him to realize his fall from grace. It is obvious that there are two spheres of gender here: the male sphere which is the greater sphere and the female sphere which is the lesser sphere. By calling a man Sannsorðinn the insulter casts the insulted from one sphere to another; they are now completely the "Other". A Sannsorðinn man ceases to be a man and in all ways becomes a woman; it is not a blurring of genders but rather a complete reassignment. By being Sannsorðinn one does not take on female attributes, one is female, and therefore lesser and criticisable. Perhaps this is why

[15] Ibid.

the punishment for uttering the word is so hefty. The punishment for calling someone Sannsorðinn, according to the GulaÞing, the laws that governed Viking Norway, is fullréttisorð, or full financial compensation; the insulter would have to pay a heavy fine to the insulted for his transgression. According to the Grágás, the laws that governed Viking Iceland, on the other hand, the punishment for calling someone a Sannsorðinn was full outlawry, or permanent exile; in fact, the Grágás allow the insulted to seek retribution by murdering the insulter. An interesting side note here is that Sannsorðinn does not seem to be a remark against homosexuality as seen in an exchange of insults between Sinfjǫtli and Guðmundur in the Helgakviða Hundingsbana: "Nine wolves you and I begot on the island of Sága; I alone was their father."[16] What this shows is that it is not the action of two men having intercourse that is the issue concerning Sannsorðinn, but rather the insult is aimed at Guðmundur because he was not the father, meaning he was not the penetrator but rather the penetrated.

Ragr, sometimes called Argr or Ergi, was another insult punishable by either heavy fine or life in exile. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen gives three definitions for the word Ragr: "Perversity in sexual matters (being penetrated anally), versed in witchcraft, and cowardly, unmanly, and effeminate in regard to morals and character."[17] As we can see Ragr is closely linked to Sannsorðinn in terms of implying sexual submissiveness and impotence; if a man is penetrated during sex then he is both Sannsorðinn and Ragr. But the true implication of Ragr go beyond sexual effeminacy; it implies a general submissiveness. Ragr brings up the connotation that sexual comportment is directly linked to everyday activities. If a man is submissive sexually, i.e. if he acts like a woman in the marriage bed, then he will presumably be submissive, i.e. like a woman in everyday life. His morals and character will not be those of a strong, aggressive man, but rather a weak and suggestable woman. In this way Ragr is a step beyond Sannsorðinn in that it removes the receiver of the insult from the exclusive circle of manhood into the lesser ring of femaleness, not only sexually but socially. This again provides evidence for the separate, unequal division of gender in Viking society. Women are considered lesser, not only sexually, but across all social venues.

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[16] Benjamin Thorpe, *Edda Saemunder Hinns Froða: the Edda of Saemund the Learned* (London, Trübner & Co., 1866), 235.

[17] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1983), 19-20.

What is also fascinating about Sørensen's definition is the connection between sexual effeminacy and witchcraft. Even Odin, the most revered and skilled god of the Norse pantheon rejected the use of magic: "Óðinn knew, and practiced himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called seiðr ('black magic')… But this magic, when it is practiced, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses."[18] Witchcraft was closely associated with women and was considered an underhanded, cowardly tactic for gaining revenge as the victim had no way of retaliating. This connection lends credibility to the modern translation of the word Ragr which is coward. Any man who associates with witchcraft is associating with female culture and thereby assuming those female qualities of underhandedness, weakness, and cowardice. A man who takes on female traits is considered female and is, by his very action of acting womanly, unmanned.

What is truly interesting, however, is that when women enter the game of insults, and their options when they themselves are insulted.

> Once again, although most insults are traded between men, there are also women in the role of both insulter and insultee—though a woman in either role usually faces off against a man, not another woman, and although she may score lots of direct hits, in the end she always loses. The most frequent charges against women were incest, promiscuity, and sleeping with the enemy.[19]

Even when women are allowed, socially, to level insults at another person, they inevitably face off against a man, a match that, by her inherent femaleness, she is doomed to lose. By limiting the times when a woman can openly insult another person, and by then pitting her against a man, Viking social norms are policing who is able to win. A woman can never defeat a man in an argument because she is his lesser; her "Otherness" has consigned her to be the loser before the match has even begun.

While exchanging insults was seen as a way for men to pit themselves against each other in a battle of wits, certain insults, such as Sannsorðinn and Ragr, were taboo because they ejected members of the patriarchy from their

[18] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla (*London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), 11.
[19] Carol J Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,", 8.

sacred circle. As Beauvoir eloquently put it: "no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or more disdainful, than a man anxious about his own virility."[20] Insults in Viking society often focused on making the male effeminate as it would put his virility on trial. Men's being compared to women created the impression that their virility had left them. Sannsorðinn equated a man to the submissive role of a woman. "…the woman lies on the bed in a position of defeat; it is even worse if the man straddles her like an animal subjugated by reins and a bit. In any case, she feels passive: she is caressed, penetrated; she undergoes intercourse, whereas the man spends himself actively."[21] It implies that the role of the woman is to be subservient to the man, she is the one who is penetrated and thus the passive object. Any man who takes on the sexual role of a woman has lowered himself below the rank of man. Ragr builds on Sannsorðinn by implying that not only should a man never stoop to the level of a woman but, if he somehow does, then he is not only weak sexually, he is weak in all parts of his life. A man who cannot assert himself during sex certainly cannot assert himself outside of the marriage bed. These two words, and the fact that the punishment for uttering them was so severe, imply that Viking society was inherently patriarchal. Men were construed as the active member, both sexually and socially, therefore women had to be characterized as the "Other", since they obviously were not men. A woman's role in Viking society was to be the passive gender, sexually and in every other aspect of life. Comparing a man to a woman was the lowest form of insult because it completely stripped the man of all the traits that Vikings considered good. In this climate of strong patriarchy, it is no surprise that women would want to be equal to men. To have the lowest insult one could give another be that they are a woman could not have sat well with the females in Viking society. As Beauvoir said, these females were not born women, they learned their role as the lesser sex through a social climate that constantly implied that men were the norm and women were lesser. I believe that this constant belittling and domination of women led directly to their desire to be on level with their oppressors; they no longer wanted to be the lesser sex, they wanted to be recognized for their skills.

[20] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 34.
[21] Ibid., 455-456.

Women, Drengr, and Laqueur

Having now reached an understanding of the sort of patriarchal social climate Viking women lived in we can begin to explore the ways women attempted to, and to a degree were successful with, becoming social equals with their male counterparts. To do this I have decided to employ Laqueur's One-Sex theory and show how it could have framed the way Viking men and women thought about the sexes. Laqueur's theory posits that prior to the period of enlightenment the two sexes were seen as either the "normal" sex or the "inverse" sex. To explain this Laqueur quotes from, and expands on, the writings of Galen of Pergamum: "'Think first, please, of the man's [external genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen, the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes lying outside, next to it on either side.' The penis becomes the cervix and vagina, the prepuce becomes the female pudenda, and so forth on through various ducts and blood vessels."[22] With this definition in mind we can, I believe, begin to understand Viking sexuality. Viking men saw women as the biological inverse; an imperfect version of themselves. In this way Lacan and Beauvoir match up their ideologies: Women are biologically different/inverted, and therefore constructed as lesser by men. Male genital makeup was the proper form and since women's were inverted, in other words imperfect, they were lesser than. However, this view of sexuality, in my opinion, was the perfect mentality to allow women a modicum of freedom, satisfying their desire to be equals, while still ensuring the integrity of the patriarchy. By having genitalia that was seen as the inverse, rather than completely different from that of men, women could technically be seen as marginally capable of achieving the things that men could achieve, though still seen as being other and lesser. Since they still had all the right parts, albeit in the wrong place, hypothetically they could still do all the things that men could do, to a degree.

Women in the Viking world, though ultimately consigned to a lower place in society, did have considerable power over their own households. This would make sense as there was distinct separation of the male and female sphere; men had dominion over theirs and women had dominion over theirs. By looking at rune stones erected at Viking settlements we get a hint of the level of respect

[22] Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 25-26.

Viking society had for the domestic woman: "Odindisa from Västmanland in Sweden was given this obituary by her husband: 'There has not come to Hassmyra a better mistress who holds sway over the farm'."[23] What we can see from Odindisa's obituary is that while the woman's role was clearly consigned to the household, while she was in there she was the master. In matters of home and hearth, woman held dominion over man. Considering that Viking society was built around agriculture the person in control of the farm was, at least symbolically, in charge of the society; in the case of the domestic household the woman was the leader and the man was the follower. Women had power as long as they stayed in their realm of femininity.

Women in Viking society also had an active role in choosing who could remain in the family and who could not. In terms of marriage and divorce the right to choose a spouse lay with the man but the right to divorce lay with the woman. Jesse Byock explains the terms of divorce: "when a husband wanted to take a wife's property out of the country against her will; when violence had been committed by either party against the other; incompatibility; or when a husband wore feminine clothing."[24] Byock's terms show a variety of subtleties in Viking society that differentiate it from other societies existing within the same period. First of all it shows that women had the right to own their own property and where solely in charge of its distribution. Second, it reinforces the ideas of Sannsorðinn and Ragr in that a man wearing women's clothing, thus assuming the role of a woman, was grounds for a divorce. Since both people, in cases of cross-dressing, were considered to be women, it would be believed that no offspring could be had and therefore the marriage was pointless. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it shows the power women had within their niche. While the process of marriage was governed by men, a woman's father or brother arranged her marriage, if the woman did not approve she had the power to take matters into her own hands. This is an excellent representation of the One-Sex Theory because it shows that men and women had opposite roles matrimonially, mirroring the opposite biology of each. In terms of equality, it would seem that marriage was the closest concept; men had the power to choose and women, under certain circumstances, the power to refute that choice. To have to power to divorce was an uncommon luxury in a medieval world, and one that proves that,

[23] Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 59.
[24] Jesse L. Byock, Viking *Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 200.

though Viking men considered themselves superior to women, they respected women enough to give them this power, and to acknowledge the woman's judgment.

While the examples of running the household and controlling divorce show how women had power over men within the sphere of domesticity, there was one ideal that would allow them to set foot within the world of men outside of their home. Defined as a "'bold, valiant, worthy man,' drengr is conventionally help up as the very soul of masculine excellence in Norse culture."[25] Drengr is an exclusively Scandinavian term that takes on a variety of similar meanings, from a youthful brave man to loyal servant of a Thane (Þegn), or chieftain, depending on the skaldic story, saga, or ruin stone where it appears. Regardless of the specific contextual definition of the word, the meaning is always roughly the same: that of an honest, brave fighter. It is this, seemingly deliberately vague definition that opened up the floor for Viking women to transcend their roles as purely housekeepers and child rearers. Drengr was the most sought after quality in a Viking, someone who was honorable in battle, brave, and sure. Though most frequently associated with men there are several mentions of women being categorized as having Drengr, two such examples appear in the Njáls Saga. The first instance is the introduction of Njál's (the man for whom the saga is named) wife BergÞora: "kvenskǫrungr mikill ok drengr góðr ok nǫkkut skaphǫrð" which Carol Clover translates to "a woman of great bearing and good drengr, but somewhat harsh natured."[26] The second example, from the same saga, concerns Hildigunnr, a major female character: "Hon var allra kvenna gimmust ok skaphǫrðust ok drengr mikill, Þar sem vel skyldi vera" which Clover translates to "She was the sternest and most hard-minded of women but a great drengr when need be."[27] In these two instances these women have, through their actions, almost entirely overcome the barrier of femaleness. There is still, however, the connotation of being lesser then, implied by their being characterized as harsh natured and hard-minded. Though they seem to possess the rank of men, at least through proven action, they must still be consigned to a lesser role in order to keep the patriarchy intact. If every woman, through achieving Drengr, automatically became a man, then the patriarchy would cease to exist because

[25] Carol J Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," pg. 7.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*

there would technically be no more women to dominate. By assigning them the monikers of "harsh-natured" and "hard-minded" these sagas help subtly reinforce the point that, although achieving Drengr is possible for women, it is frowned up as it changes their nature.

This concept of honor's trumping gender even existed after death: "Men who die in battle and women who die in childbirth are rewarded with an afterlife in Valhǫl (Valhalla), the residence of the honored dead, located in Asgard, the god's realm."[28] Women who died giving birth were seen to have given their lives in the same way that brave men did in battle. Childbirth was seen as a battle for women, and considering the lack of medicine, lack of sanitary birthing conditions, and the general dangers of giving birth such as preeclampsia, breach babies, miscarriages, and stillbirths, this comparison seems fairly accurate and justified. However, it should be noted that childbirth again falls into the realm of the feminine as childbirth is something that only women endure. In this way, though they are said to have achieved the highest of honors, being called to Odin's Halls, it was for doing something that was strictly feminine.

Though there were certain aspects of Viking life where women held more power over men, it was almost always in places that did not threaten the patriarchy. Women had power of the household and the sphere of domesticity, areas that were removed from the male sphere and thus did not negatively affect it. Even in death, a seemingly genderless realm, women were honored for domestic roles such as childbirth rather while men were rewarded for their actions in battle. In moments where women achieved Drengr like men did, the sagas were quick to remind the reader that, although they had achieved Drengr, they also had unfavorable traits that would give the reader the impression that women were not meant to achieve Drengr as it would corrupt their character. In terms of women having power in Viking society they only reached an equal level of power as men wielded in areas of life that did not threaten to reverse the social standings of men and women.

Imagery and Routinization

Max Weber once posited that "The desire to transform charisma and charismatic blessing from a unique, transitory gift of grace of extraordinary times and persons

[28] *Ibid.*

into a permanent possession of everyday life. This is desired usually by the master, always by his disciples, and most of all by his charismatic subjects."[29] What he meant by this is that the wish of any leader of a movement is to have that movement enter the mainstream way of thinking and remain a permanent fixture in society rather than a passing fad. In order to have this happen, Weber says, the movement and its ideals must be routinized. The practice of the movement must become part of the everyday fabric of people's lives. Only in this way can the movement survive beyond the death of its creator. While Lacan and Beauvoir provide a basis for understanding how men and women were viewed in Viking society, Weber provides the framework for understanding how those gender differences could be smoothly integrated into daily life to the degree where one would not even be consciously aware of their existence. I employ Weber, not as a means to understanding gender but in an effort to show how a gender divided society might come into being and how it would remain the norm for centuries. I believe that we can apply Weber's theory on routinization to Viking society to look at how representations of the Shield Maidens and Valkyries in sagas and physical artifacts helped to simultaneously integrate the idea of the existence of powerful women into Viking culture while doing it in a way that maintained the patriarchy.

Let us first look at the sagas and stories of the Vikings and what they can tell us about the routinization of the patriarchy. Warrior women in Viking literature, though not the majority of characters, do appear prevalently enough to be of note. Their very existence implies that Viking society accepted them as a fact of life: in order for them to appear in the literature without prior explanation as to their gender, then there must have already been some acceptance of them in Viking society. However, upon closer inspection one begins to see that there are certain caveats to Shield Maiden and Valkyrie existence in the Norse literature.

[29] Max Weber, *Economy and Society; an Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 1121.

To start, even the etymology of the work Shield Maiden, in relation to the figure the phrase is used for, shows some policing of women's boundaries by the male authors of the stories in which they appear. First, Shield Maidens are always virginal, unmarried women; no doubt the root of the use of the word maiden in their title. In the stories in which they appear they are always introduced as single, quickly wooed by a man, and settle down to have children. What is interesting is what the stories say happen after the marriage: Shield Maidens give up their wild ways. In the case of Sváva/Sigrún, whom I mentioned in the introduction, when she marries Helgi "she no longer wears armor nor carries weapons; she is no longer a presence on the battlefield, nor does she hold any power over the fates of men in battle—not even her husband's."[30] Sváva/Sigrún's marriage is used here as almost as a warning for those reading the saga: It is alright to play at being a man while one is young and unmarried, but once one is married one is expected to

Figure 2. A Valkyrie, with a drinking horn, greets a fallen warrior at the Gates of Valhalla

behave as a woman, which means laying down one's arms and assuming one's proper domestic role. If women did not want to settle down and get married and have children then there would be two problems: no offspring and no way for

[30] Kathleen M. Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender." *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014): 143–72, pg. 156.

men to control women. By showing that even the strongest of women, Shield Maidens who fought alongside men for glory and honor, wanted to get married and put down their weapons the male authors of the Viking sagas were able to send the message to young women everywhere that following Sváva/Sigrún's example was the socially acceptable ending to a Shield Maiden's reign. By putting these subliminal messages into their writings, men were able to routinize marriage and female submission while giving women the chance to release their "wildness" during a period of their life where they were not a threat to the patriarchy.

Similarly, in the tale concerning Lathgertha, upon her marriage to Ragnar Lothbrok she seems to become a passive figure void of all of her previous mettle: "From their union were born two daughters, whose names history has not remembered, and a son, Fridlev; they spent the next three years peacefully."[31] After this verse there is no more mention of Lathgertha until Ragnar's divorce from her. At this point she once again becomes an active member in the world of warfare, summoning fleets and rallying troop on the field of battle.[32] During her tenure as wife and mother she seemingly loses all the traits that made her a Shield Maiden. Again, it seems, that the role of wife has more to bear than the role of mother, in terms of what causes a Shield Maiden to put down her Shield. When Lathgertha is divorced she is, symbolically at least, a virginal, unmarried woman again, giving her the freedom to fight like a man again. It does not matter that she has children to care for, rather it is the status of being single again that allows her character to again morph into that of the Shield Maiden. Saxo Grammaticus' telling of Lathgertha's tale drives home the same message as that of Sváva/Sigrún: when one is married one is bound to the rules of being a woman. In this way again, the patriarchy manages to subtly entrench itself in the popular literature of the time.

Even Brynhildr, a Valkyrie strong enough to have defied Odin, is not free from the policing of the patriarchy. In contrast to Lathgertha's or Sváva/Sigrún's sagas, where the message to lay down arms in the face of marriage was subtle, Brynhildr's first interaction with Sigurd lays out a rather blatant message. "She was clad in a byrny as closely set on her as though it had grown to her flesh; so he rent it from the collar downwards; and then the sleeves thereof, and ever the

[31] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes,* Edited by Karsten Friis-Jensen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 633.
[32] Ibid, 637-638.

sword bit on it as if it were cloth."[33] The process by which Sigurd rends Brynhildr's byrny renders it practically useless as a garment: "It is a mail coat no longer, but scrap metal."[34] The message being conferred here is that, now that Sigurd has arrived to rescue her from her punishment, Brynhildr no longer needs to keep up the façade of acting like a man. Here it is not the subtlety of a Shield Maiden marrying a man and simply leaving her warrior world behind, this is the blatant action of a man pushing a woman from the sphere of masculinity back to the circle of femininity. Sigurd's cutting of the byrny once again represents the idea that once a woman has found an eligible man, and it seems as though marriage is imminent, she no longer has to pretend at being a man, she can settle into her predetermined role as a woman.

Valkyries, the female heralds of Odin who bring the fallen in battle to his hall of Valhalla, were especially policed by the patriarchy in their presentation, both in literature and in the archaeological record. This, I believe, was due in part to the sheer power of their position in literature and in part to their unwillingness to marry. Valkyries in the sagas are commanded by Odin to "'choose the slain' or the heroes who were doomed to fall."[35] These "slain" would then be brought to Valhalla to feast and be merry until Ragnarok, or the end of the world. This, obviously, was a lot of power for a woman, even a seemingly divine one, to command. One simple way that the power of the Valkyrie is mitigated is found in the archaeological record in the form of pendants and standing stones. On these artifacts the Valkyrie is show as a cupbearer in Odin's halls; she has been rendered a serving maid (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Once she has done her duty of collecting the fallen, a duty conveniently commanded of her by a male god, she once again is rendered female. By having her collect warriors at the behest of Odin, the Valkyrie is thrust back into the role of the submissive female, a role reinforced by her later duty of cupbearer. In this way, the original power of the Valkyrie to choose who enters Valhalla is mitigated by her submission both to Odin and the men she serves.

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[33] Eirikr Magnusson, William Morris, and Jessie L. Weston, *The Volsunga Saga* (London: Norraena Society, 1906), 84.

[34] Kathleen M. Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender." *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014): 143–72. doi:10.1353/ff.2014.0000, 152.

[35] Peter Andreas Munch, *Norse Mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes. Edited by Magnus Bernhard Olsen* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968), 32.

By examining the sagas and the archaeological record closely we can see how Max Weber's ideas of routinization can be applied to the Viking patriarchy. When looking at the sagas we begin to see how the patriarchal values of marriage, as a means of subjugating and controlling women, is carefully and neatly woven directly into the fabric of the narration. The writer doesn't have to blatantly come out and say that Sváva/Sigrún and Lathgertha sacrifice their "manly ways" in favor of a life of marital bliss and motherhood. The idea is formulated in the gaps between the words. In the case of Brynhildr the message is slightly more opaque but no less effective for it. The sagas give women lease to be "un-feminine" in their youth, a time before they should be married and start producing children, a time where they do not yet pose a threat to the patriarchy. The archaeological record gives us information on how the Valkyrie was simultaneously built up as a valiant woman and stripped down to the level of a regular bar maid. Though she may choose who enters Valhalla, Odin, a male god, gives her that task. She is told what to do and thus, again, the passive figure. This is compounded with her domestic role inside of Odin's Hall as a lowly cupbearer, her only role within Valhalla is to serve the men there. The imagery of the Valkyrie with the drinking horn drives this message home, the lasting legacy of the Valkyrie, at least visually, is not one of a valiant woman, but rather that of the domestic servant. These methods of integrating patriarchal values into everyday objects like necklaces and stories serve to make these values routine. And since they appear in everyday objects and songs, according to the logic of Weber, this is how the patriarchy survived in Viking Europe.

Conclusion

This article has argued that although women in Viking society were given a lot of freedoms and powers, especially when compared to women in other societies during the early middle ages, these freedoms and powers only existed in ways that were unthreatening to the patriarchy. Women were "Othered" by their male counterparts in an effort to maintain separation between the realm of men and the realm of women. In competitions based on insults, femininity was the lowest insult a man could level against another man; the act of doing so could only lead to a heavy fine or lifelong exile. The comparison of a man to a woman proved Simone De Beauvoir's point that men see themselves as the norm while they see women as fundamentally different and, in order to keep that status quo they cast

women into the role of the "Other". This paper then argued that Laqueur's One-Sex Model, positing that women are simply the inverse of men allowed women certain spheres of control, provided they did not interfere with the world of men. Women were able to have full control over the home and hearth, places that were consigned to the sphere of domesticity, they also had the right to initiate divorce and control property. An inspection of the concept of Drengr showed that even when women proved themselves to be valiant in battle they would be criticized for having unfavorable character traits. In order to continue repressing women the patriarchy had to find a way to show that women who achieved Drengr were not perfect in the way a man who achieved Drengr was. Finally this paper sought to show how Max Weber's ideas about routinization of ideas being necessary to keep a system going could be applied to how patriarchal ideas permeated the sagas and artifacts of Viking Europe. Lathgertha's, Sváva/Sigrún's, and Brynhildr's stories all showed how patriarchal ideas about how women should feel about marriage and giving up their "wild ways" in favor of settling down were carefully and purposefully inserted into tales that would have been frequently passed around and shared. In the same vein, looking at the symbolism of the Valkyrie as a cupbearer showed how the patriarchy managed to transform a warrior woman into nothing more than a domestic servant.

Looking closely at the primary sources one gets the feeling that the modern opinion of Viking society, a romanticized notion that women had as much power as men, that they fought side by side constantly during raids, and that women were as respected as their male counterparts has been largely informed by media representation rather than by the original sources. Television shows such as the History Channel's Vikings draw on some of the primary sources but they fill in the gaps with fantastical material that has no background in original source material and, in fact, sometimes openly goes against the narration of the sagas that they claim to be portraying. The contemporary idea of Viking society, as represented in the modern media, is fostered by our own society; a television show promoting the subjugation of women, though accurate, would not get very high ratings. We view ourselves as a fairly egalitarian society and as such it is possible that our modern values and opinions frame the way we present historical events. In terms of Viking women, this meshing of aiming for historical accuracy and the contemporary trend of romanticizing of the past almost washes away their true identities and struggles. Television and fantasy literature paint an idyllic image of the past where women, though still somewhat restricted, led fairly

equal lives to their male counterparts. In reality their lives were hard, unequal, and entirely policed by the patriarchy in a very successful campaign to keep women from ever ascending to the realm of men.