

Goadings, ritual discord and the deflection of blame

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This article brings some of the discourses of contemporary frame analysis to bear on female incitement — often called goading or whetting (from *hvetja* ‘to whet’) — in feud structures within several well-known medieval Icelandic family sagas. Broadly speaking, female goading in saga literature is a form of dialogic exchange in which women urge men to perform particular tasks, often seemingly against their will. These tasks mainly revolve around blood-vengeance and legal action, the twin obsessions of saga literature; in neither area is it simple for saga women to participate officially or directly. The article’s approach is similar to Marcel Bax’s (2000) approach to moments of ritual discord in sixteenth-century Dutch plays in that it considers specific historical framing practices as forms of ritual language.

1. Problems of exclusion

This article identifies ways in which issues of gender and voice can enrich analysis of a particular form of ritual discord, known as goading or whetting, within Icelandic sagas, those marvellous examples of early prose literature. Icelandic sagas, which were mainly produced in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are extraordinary within the range of medieval texts: not novels, but not so unlike them as one might assume. Their directness and elegance of style is unparalleled, and their psychological insights are made more acute by the often indirect means of their revelation to the reader. In the excellent recent English edition of *The Sagas of Icelanders* (2000), Jane Smiley observes in her preface that

[m]edieval Iceland shared with the modern world a considerable degree of social mobility and a considerable ambiguousness about how men (and women) of exceptional qualities (strength, talent, beauty, passion) could be fitted into the fabric of society.

Female goading — scenes in which women pressure men to do particular (frequently violent) things, with a high rate of success — highlights this ambiguity, as it raises serious questions about responsibility and authority. Saga men, while generally more active than saga women, often appear to be acting out a course of events determined by women; moreover, they tend to resist female goading, to argue with it and to insist on other courses of action — until they give in. Female-male conflict leads to female-male contract, which manifests in the social body as male action. Just how reluctant is this action? Female goading is a form of performance/theatre within saga literature, complete with props — a form of theatre that, as is the case with so many forms of verbal dueling, exposes a social problem or conflict of interests: how do women get around their exclusion from major social structures?

The article attempts to provide some insights into the historical processes at work in female incitement, especially given that incitement often has the effect of deflecting blame for violence from its perpetrators onto a group that is largely, though not perfectly or completely, excluded from direct participation in violence. Goading raises questions about the relative values of words and deeds, an issue especially relevant to medieval Icelandic literature where legal proceedings maintain a complicated and unstable interactive relationship with feud structures. Goading makes it a less simple-minded matter to identify the active players in a given scenario, and to delimit the effects of ritual language; though it remains the case that the active participants in violence are almost always men, it is often women who perpetuate hostilities or urge men to commit particular acts of violence. Discussions of verbal dueling structures in particular tend to skip over the question of gender even while making various strong claims about real life and major players. Often the base assumption is that verbal dueling is something between men. Within the spectrum of ritual discord, where does female goading stand relative to more fully-realized forms of verbal dueling such as the *senna* or the ritual exchanges of *Hárbarðsljóð*?

Some of the most instantly recognizable literary scenes offer definitive characterizations of a protagonist or hero in a manner that is perfectly poised between plot advancement and the exposure of underlying symbolic systems: Aeneas fleeing the ruins of Troy, carrying his father on his shoulders, holding his son's hand, losing his wife by the way; Beowulf making his last stand against a

backdrop of human cowardice; Roland turning his head ritually towards Spain as he dies in the valley of Roncevaux. These snapshots tell us as much about patterns of representation as about the trajectory of present or future events. Creusa is not the only woman whose abjection enables the founding of Rome: Aeneas' burdened, fleeing form acts out the priorities of patriarchy. Beowulf's exceptional qualities are clearest when delineated against other, less extraordinary, men. Roland's obsession with conquest endures beyond his death in his final gesture; his body becomes a legible sign of his pride, and is properly read as such by his king and fellow warriors.

But what happens to this representational dynamic when there is the added constraint of depicting indirect action, or indirect influence, within a structure that nevertheless prizes and depends on direct action, such as a blood-feud, quest or contest of arms? Theodore Andersson and William Ian Miller (1989:20) observe of the Icelandic sagas that

[t]he art of persuasion, although useful to all, is especially so to those who must act with others or through others. Such was always a woman's position in matters of law and feud that she had to act through men.

How does a scene capture both symbolism and action when action is diffused elsewhere, outside the scene? How are various scenes of incitement set up, and how can they be situated within ongoing critical debates in medieval studies and gender studies? Where and how are the lines drawn between direct and indirect, public and private, disenfranchisement and agency?

An excellent example of a scene in which action is diffused elsewhere, in this case into the future, arises in *Laxdæla saga*. With an impressive cast of strong female characters, chief among them being Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, *Laxdæla saga* in many ways emphasizes female access to power. At the same time, it also brings to light the many legal and social exclusions that delimit that access, as in this scene which both celebrates one woman's strength of character and highlights the severe restrictions on her role. In the course of a larger feud structure, Guðrún's husband Bolli is killed. His killers confront Guðrún, who is pregnant at the time, and is wearing a shawl over her kirtle. One of the murderers, Helgi Harðbeinsson, goes up to her and wipes the blood off his spear on her shawl. Guðrún looks at him and smiles. Another man rebukes Helgi for his action, calling it cruel, to which Helgi replies that he should not let it bother him:

... því at ek hygg þat, at undir þessu blæjuhorni búi minn höfuðsbani.¹ (168)

...as something tells me that my own death lies under the end of that shawl.² (381)

This image has profound implications in terms of medieval literary approaches to female power. What Helgi means by this is that he expects Guðrún to nurse her vengeance in the long term. Eventually her unborn child will avenge its father: vicarious revenge is understood to be Guðrún's proper lot, and her smile tells us that she knows it.

Nowhere is it made clearer that women are the vessels of indirect revenge than in the motif of the woman pregnant with a child who will avenge a wrong in the distant future. Despite the danger she represents, Guðrún is not an appropriate object for direct assault. Helgi knows that Guðrún is carrying a child who will kill him, and he knows that she is in some sense responsible for a prior death in the same feud, but he does not act against her or the unborn child. The figure of the pregnant woman concentrates a range of anxieties about maternity and vengefulness; Guðrún produces life just as she ends it. Her unassailable pregnant body here provides us with a reminder that patriarchy is not self-sustaining, but dependent on internal maintenance and support from women even when, or perhaps especially when, they are relegated to the margins, or like Creusa, lost along the way. And yet exclusion can never be fully exhaustive or complete. Simply by being pregnant in that moment, Guðrún is acting in a powerful way within the ongoing blood-feud — though obviously not in a way that is transparent or easy to unpack in terms of agency or subjectivity.

2. Vengeance and memory

The simple fact of pregnancy does explain some of Guðrún's power, in the sense that, for practical reasons, it is obviously undesirable to focus blood-revenge on women and children. But it is not just her pregnant body that is important within the body politic, though it remains true that in many ways, her symbolic value is at its most potent in the moment in which Helgi wipes his spear on her clothing, coming as close as he dares to an assault on a pregnant woman. After the incident with the bloody spear, Guðrún walks with Helgi and the other killers for a while, chatting. In time it becomes clear that this is not to show any friendliness but to fix their names and faces in her mind, for she has a long wait ahead of her. At the time of Bolli's death, his sons are four and as yet unborn, respectively, and thus too young to avenge him. Yet when the time comes, years later, Guðrún's memory is clear; she carries the conflicts of the past with her into the present. She exhorts her grown sons to avenge their father

in a highly choreographed scene, complete with props. Pointing to Bolli's blood-stained clothing, Guðrún says to her sons:

Þessi sömu klæði, er þit sjáið hér, frýja ykkur föðurhefnda; nú mun ek ekki hafa hér um mörg orð, því at ekki er ván, at þit skipizk at framhvöt orða, ef þit ihugið ekki við slíkar bendingar ok áminningar. (179)

These very clothes which you see here reproach you for not avenging your father. I have few words to add, for it is hardly likely that you would let the urging of words direct you if unmoved by such displays and reminders. (388)

Guðrún here makes explicit what is so often implicit, namely, that the word and the deed go hand in hand. Her combination of words, gestures, and props is classic. Guðrún points out to her sons that if the sight of their dead father's clothing does not stir them, her words will hardly make much difference, but as is so often the case in scenes of female goading, it is the combination of visual and verbal cues that is so effective. Agonistic confrontation is transformed into social contract: a contract to kill.

In scenarios of indirect revenge, it is often difficult to locate either agency or satisfaction with any precision; this is particularly true in the scene above, given that the sons appear to acquire their sense of vengefulness entirely from their mother. It is also difficult to get a precise fix on the degree of approval or disapproval embedded in many scenes of female whetting and revenge. Jenny Jochens (1996: 143) points to a conflicted "feeling of awe and disgust" evoked by the acts of violence and the eggings carried out by the female avengers of the eddic poems, even in *Atlamál* where Guðrún's actions in public space are so remarkable and where she carries on her martial career after marriage. This mixture of admiration and condemnation is of particular interest to an examination of ways in which female goading, together with many other forms of indirect or restricted (however effective) female access to power, serves both to advance plot and to maintain various hierarchies and symbolic systems (of sex, power, and age) that shape plot. The implications of this maintenance can never be entirely contained within patriarchal structures, given that a natural order that needs such supports is immediately exposed as a constructed thing. Ambivalence itself has a great deal to teach us about the problems and pleasures of developing that bizarre being so celebrated in the critical literature of saga and edda alike, the strong woman. Ambivalence tends to indicate an awareness of instability and fracture, of the disruptions — potential or realized — introduced by these female characters, many of whom act like or on men, in what is represented as a man's world.

Andersson and Miller (1989:20) comment that woman was “not an appropriate avenger or victim in the field,” adding that “we should not then be surprised to see women adept in the rhetorical and psychological skills needed to motivate men to represent women’s interests adequately.” Goadng simultaneously motivates men to represent women’s interests and also serves to implicate women in forms of social violence, and also legal settlement, from which they appear to be systematically excluded. It provides women with access to the public realms of law and vengeance-taking — hence with certain forms, however secondary, of power — and also cements their relative disempowerment by providing socially-sanctioned outlets for female resistance to that disempowerment. This resistance is contained and controlled by the social organization and ritualization of goading, wherein women only infrequently “counseled violence in situations where violence was not an appropriate or even a smart strategy” (Andersson and Miller, 1989:21). Miller (1990:213) points out that

[t]he social constitution of goading also served to integrate and confine the structurally generated hostility that the socially disempowered — the women, the servants, the elderly — must have felt towards their own dominant males into a form that confirmed the cultural value of manliness.

Goading is a form of public performance that has as much to reveal about men as about women, since a verbal assault on manliness is only effective if manliness is understood to be socially constructed and thus vulnerable to such assaults. An important aspect of female persuasiveness, in the context of blood feud, is that it enables saga authors to include women in the decision-making processes of feud structures in a manner that cements ideas about female illogic and vengeancefulness — this too, tells us as much about men as about women.

Goading is both approved and disapproved throughout saga literature; women are illogical and vengeful even while voicing givens of the genre. Nor is it to a woman’s credit, as Miller points out, *not* to goad when the circumstances seem to merit it — he points to saga references where a woman’s failure to goad is remarked upon by others (Miller, 1990:213–214). Both desired and rejected, goading does not offer any easy ground. Clover (1986:145) observes that

it is as incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it; and despite what appears to be the “official” disapproval of whetting women in the literary sources, they are still repeatedly described in admiring terms.

A woman who goads makes a difference within the systems of feud violence, but by acting within the system she also shores it up. Women’s verbal attacks on

men in saga literature are not aimed at bringing down the system but at shoring it up; the idea is to pressure men to live up to demanding standards of personal honor. Miller (1990:395) comments that “the sagas did not put women on pedestals. It was women who put men there and then goaded them into maintaining their precarious stance aloft if they showed an inclination to descend.” While goading often looks like a destructive pressure, and while men often talk about it as being a negative thing, it is not other or alien. Goading is both rejected and acted upon; it seems clear that the (male) motion of rejection allows for a sort of self-formation that makes men look less vengeful and more logical; while on the other hand women who goad are given roles as maintainers of an overriding structure of manliness. No internally-produced attack can damage this structure, as it is designed for precisely this type of flexibility. What appear to be moments of breakage are actually moments of repair. At the most basic level, goading is a maintenance tool for a system that prizes direct male action.

The show-and-tell of female incitement relies on assailable manhood to function properly. It hinges on the notion that manhood is publicly contested, and that reputation needs to be shored up with both word and deed. Reputation is vulnerable to the spoken word, and certain combinations of words and gestures can puncture a reputation like a collapsed lung, spurring the injured party to perform drastic acts of self-preservation, and in a sense of self-formation. The public nature of these spoken exchanges is essential. Daniel Lord Smail (2001: 108) makes an analogous point in his article on “Hatred as a Social Institution in Late-Medieval Society,” in which he points to the ritualized behaviors that enable transitions from personal enmity to public actions:

All of these behaviors look scripted, as if the actors in hatred were conforming to an established idiom that marked hatred in formulaic and conventional ways....this behaviour was vitally important. It was posturing that effectively activated the legal claims that accompanied hatred. Without posturing, hatred was merely an internal emotional state and therefore invalid. The idiom of hatred, as a set of behaviours or speech acts, did the necessary work of bringing the hatred to the attention of the public.

What saga men often talk about as female emotionalism or vengefulness is actually a scripted form of public display of enmity; it sets events in motion by manifesting the internal state of hostility in the public realm. Goading makes enmity visible and actionable.

3. Vengeance and agency

These Icelandic texts show us the violence of the speech act and the possibilities of action-on-a-slant. When Judith Jesch (1991: 1) points out that “[h]istorically, women have had little opportunity to participate in war, murder, rape, and robbery; such activities have usually been the prerogative of members of the male sex,” she is expressing a fundamental truth, but another truth is that women had other avenues of participation. Among the questions that arise in connection with these avenues of participation is one that seems to me to be of central importance: what degree of feminine experience is embedded or expressed through these avenues? Are they windows into male experience, or independent phenomena, or perhaps nothing much to do with women at all? What, in fact, can they tell us about women?

Clover (1993: 64) comments that when looking at Old Icelandic texts

readers have been startled and not infrequently appalled by the extraordinary array of “exceptional” or “strong” or “outstanding” or “proud” or “independent” women — women whose behaviour exceeds what is presumed to be custom and sometimes the law as well. No summary can do them justice, not least because paraphrase (indeed, translation in general) forfeits the tone of marvelous aplomb, both social and textual, that is such a conspicuous aspect of their stories.

Clover is careful to look for law codes and other sources of validation for the reality, for lack of a better word, of these women but in the end, in relation to the numerous legends of “fierce and imperious women” she must repeat the words of Peter Foote and David Wilson (1980: 110–111): they “must certainly have some basis in reality.”

We may be able to learn something about aplomb and female experience from an examination of the well-known *hvöt* enacted by Hildigunnr in the thirteenth-century Icelandic family saga, *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Richard F. Allen (1971: 167) maintains that Hildigunnr’s *hvöt* “stands for all the times women have stirred up trouble in *Njáls saga*.” In Hildigunnr’s goading the lines between performance and interiority are blurred; it becomes clear that female goading involves a distinctive combination of performed grief and stylized vengefulness. With tears streaking down her face, widowed Hildigunnr incites her uncle Flosi to avenge her husband’s death:

þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi, Höskuldi, ok gef ek þér nú apr. Var hann ok í þessi veginn. Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek særi þik fyrir alla krapta

Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella (291).

This is the cloak you gave to Hoskuld, Flosiand 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 be an object of contempt to all men (239–40).³

As she speaks she flings the bloody cloak around Flosi's shoulders. Speech and gesture work together in line with the precepts of ritual theory, even while her speech falls into the category of utterances that are neither true nor false, but rather performative: utterances of which it may be said that the person speaking is doing something rather than merely saying something (*I apologize, I do, I thee wed, I name this thing*). Joseph Harris (1990: 234) observes that

[t]he Jolles-Todorov notion of the origin of primitive forms finds an easy application in Germanic oral literatures if we look past the independent poetic forms (*kviða, mál, ljóð*, etc.) of the anthologies to subordinate forms such as ON *hvöt* 'encitement', from the word family of 'to whet', etc., or OE *beot*, a heroic vaunt from the word family of OE *hatan*, German *heißen*, where *beot* derived from an original meaning something like 'promise to do'. Generic history could begin here with simple speech acts and pass through a stage of ordinary 'speech genres' and a further stage of privileged 'speech event'... The point is just to derive the minimal genres of an oral literature from the continuum of everyday language and as far as possible to mark stages in their elaboration.

Hildigunnr's deployment of household objects and the bloody cloak in the course of her goading also speak to the importance of public and choreographed confrontation.

The interdependence of female incitement and performative utterances is pervasive but not absolute. Though the majority of moments of incitement display this tendency, there are other more inferential types of incitement that depend on a more associative set of pressures. This is the case when Njál's wife, Bergþóra, incites her sons to fight by saying things like *þat mun engi nú ætla, at þér þorið vápn at hefja* (229) 'everyone must be thinking that you are all scared to lift your weapons now' (200). This is recognizable as a short-form for a more elaborate goading. Bergþóra moves straight to the central threat of a goading, the loss of reputation, and all the other elements may be understood to inhere in her short form. This type of short-form of egging occurs with some frequency

and depends on the implicit presence of the other elements of a longer and more ritualized goading.

Hildigunnr provides us with this long form. Flosi cries out that Hildigunnr is a monster, cites the proverb that *eru köld kvenna ráð* ‘cold are the counsels of women’ (240) and then leaves the house in a state of agitation. He acts out a standard combination of rejection and acceptance: Hildigunnr’s counsel is framed as monstrous, but Flosi’s condemnation does not mean that he actually disallows or ignores her words. Hildigunnr’s willingness to counsel violence highlights Flosi’s unwillingness. After he leaves to pursue the physical business of violence, she becomes the absent guarantor of his moral and logical superiority, as well as — as is clear in her challenge to his manhood — the guardian of his honour. Clover (1986: 145, footnote) points to a pattern of generalization directed at female inciters:

One cannot refrain from noting here that although the Njálssons’ slaying of Höskuldr and Hildigunnr’s call for revenge are linked and matching actions, they meet with rather different reactions. Hildigunnr’s whetting occasions an angry proverb on Flosi’s part about the destructive nature of the female sex....whereas the Njálssons’ deed — commonly regarded as one of the most heinous slayings in all of saga literature — is “talked about in all the districts” and condemned as an individual act, not as inherently male behavior. To what extent the clear tendency, in Old Norse literature, to view men individually and women generically reflects Church attitudes and to what extent native ones is unclear, but it is in any case nowhere more strikingly displayed than in *Njáls saga*.

Though Hildigunnr does not receive entirely bad press throughout the saga (she is praised for her courage), her whetting is subsumed into larger discourses about women’s speech in a relatively unproblematized way, while the many actual killings of the saga accrue more individualized commentaries.

Despite his inner resistance, Flosi does take up Hildigunnr’s challenge, acting out the paradoxical nature of the male role, at once unwilling and willing. He acts as Hildigunnr’s agent in the blood feud with Njál and his sons, helping to plan an attack on the Njálssons and burning Njál’s home. Flosi does so in order to expiate or buy back potential damage to his courage or manhood. Hildigunnr’s goading springs from a dual tradition of female incitement — obviously powerful enough to generate its own proverbs — and of personal insult, both of which are areas in which the damaging power of speech and the vulnerability of reputation are laid bare for examination. Hildigunnr’s goading is representative of a pattern of Old Icelandic literary imagination. She is typical of all those saga women who, in Miller’s phrase, are “organizers of vengeance

taking” (Miller, 1990: 170). As is the case when Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* eggs her sons on to avenge their father by showing them his bloody clothes, the most important structural feature in Hildigunnr’s goading is her potent combination of gesture and words: there is the crying, the bloody cloak, and only then the threatened reputation, the formulaic invocations of male cowardice and public shame. This pattern holds true for many examples of incitement, which often involve bloody clothing, lopped limbs, or severed heads; as we have seen: e.g. Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga* wishes she had the head of one of her murdered household servants to show her husband because then, confronted with this bloody evidence, her incitement would be more powerful than Gunnar’s commitment to peaceful settlement. In 98 A.D. Cornelius Tacitus wrote in his *Germania* of women who rallied their men in war, “pleading heroically thrusting forward their bared bosoms, and making [their men] realize the imminent prospect of enslavement” (1970: 108). The breast-baring gesture in this case seems to be a bodily reminder of the possibility of the death or capture of the women in war. Heroic pleading might seem on the surface to be a contradiction in terms. Yet the heroic pleading that is at the root of the *hvöt* is fundamentally aggressive. In tears, unable to take direct vengeance, Hildigunnr goads Flosi by threatening his manhood, and by becoming her agent in blood feud Flosi acknowledges that she has the power to carry out her threats. Word and deed stand on a level in the *hvöt*: the word breeds the deed in a way only paralleled by the heroic oath or boast, and yet the formal aspects of the whetting are not developed nearly to the same extent as in the two major forms of verbal dueling found in Old Icelandic literary texts, the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr*.

4. Vengeance and fantasy

The ritualization of whetting inevitably raises questions about women’s laments — as Clover has discussed at length in “Hildigunnr’s Lament” — and forms of ritual shaming. It also raises questions about saga women’s complicated relationship(s) to the supernatural. Overtly supernatural types of female verbal death-dealing persist even in the late family sagas. The poem *Darraðarljóð*, preserved in *Njáls saga*, provides an excellent example. A man named Dörruðr has a vision of a group of women seated in front of a loom. This loom has men’s heads for weights, and human entrails in place of warp and woof; there is a sword for a treadle, and an arrow for the shuttle. The chanting of these weaving women is the poem, in which the valkyries go weaving, with drawn swords,

choosing who will live and die and describing the battle and their own actions in the poem:

Gengr Hildr vefa	The Valkyries go weaving
ok Hjörþrimul,	with drawn swords,
Sanngriðr, Svipul,	Hild and Hjorthrimul,
Sverðum tognum;	Sanngrid and Svipul.
skapt mun gnesta,	Spears will shatter,
skjöldr mun bresta,	Shields will splinter,
mun hjálmgagarr	Swords will gnaw
í hlíf koma. (455)	like wolves through armour. (349)

Valkyrja ‘valkyrie’ comes from *kjósa val* ‘to choose the slain’: in pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology, the valkyries are the ones who decide who dies on the battlefield, and take the slain to Valhalla, the hall of the dead. The weaving sword is an image that combines two elements of fate — the weaving of fate or the so-called tapestry of fate, and the war-imagery of the sword. The chanting women both determine and describe the action of an ongoing battle in their poem. Returning to *Laxdæla saga*, and keeping in mind that one of Guðrún’s goading scenes leads directly to Kjartan’s death, the description of her reaction to that death is particularly striking. Guðrún waits at home alone to hear about the outcome of the ambush on Kjartan. She does not know whether Bolli or Kjartan will be killed, and it is uncertain which result she really hopes for. Bolli returns, which means Kjartan is dead, and Guðrún comments on their respective tasks for the morning with: *ek hefi spunnit tólf álna garn, en þú hefir vegit Kjartan* (154) ‘I have spun twelve ells of yarn while you have slain Kjartan’ (372). Guðrún places her spinning and Bolli’s killings on a level in her comment, and in saga syntax, where every small remark has its function, where one turns red but does not actually say that one is embarrassed, this apposition is significant. Guðrún is, in fact, the weaver of Kjartan’s death, and her spinning reminds us of her part in his murder and of other women who spin life and death. As with *Darraðarljóð* in *Njáls saga*, this reference to Guðrún’s spinning appears to signal an eruption of the supernatural within *Laxdæla saga*.

While *Darraðarljóð* might seem to offer a completely different vision of women’s verbal death-dealing relative to a moment of goading enacted by a housewife, it is not so clear that the mundane and supernatural models are entirely separable. Is there really such a radical alterity? When Flosi leaves Hildigunnr’s house in a state of agitation, the saga author tells us that:

Flosi brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum fölr sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel (292).

He was so agitated that his face changed colour rapidly; one moment it was red as blood, then pale as withered grass, then black as death (240).

Blár sem hel ‘blue-black as Hel’: in the *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson reminds us that the goddess Hel is “half black, half flesh colour, and is easily recognized from this; she looks rather grim and gloomy” (1954: 56). Hel, as the keeper of men who do not die in battle (often cowards by implication), is the obverse of the valkyrie. Perhaps in some small sense, it is because Hildigunnr has the power to stamp cowardly death, and femininity of a sort, on Flosi, that he acquiesces to her plans.

In “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?” Jochens asks, “why was the literary heroine fashioned and by whom?” (1986: 47). Jochens’ conclusion emphasizes male fantasy, and this is always an element. Female strength and independent-mindedness are both celebrated and developed in ways useful to the maintenance of distinctions between direct (and often male/powerful) and indirect (and often female/disenfranchised) actions in public space. A saga heroine almost invariably exists within a relatively disenfranchised position (legally, socially, economically), and it is clear that feminine persuasiveness within these texts is frequently a function of male subject-formation that tells us rather more about men than about women. But literary treatments of goading draw out some of the destabilizing effects created by these women, effects that cannot be entirely explained away by the invocation of male fantasy. The woman who goads both participates in and rejects her own disenfranchisement; her position is alternately compelling and disappointing, as is so clearly reflected in the mixture of admiration and revulsion that these women accrue within their own stories — and within critical treatments of those stories as well.

Notes

1. All quotations from *Laxdæla saga* are from Sveinsson’s edition (1934). Page numbers appear in brackets within the text.
2. All English quotations from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* are from Kunz’s translation (2000). Page numbers appear in brackets within the text.
3. All English quotations from *Njáls saga* come from Magnusson and Palsson’s edition (1960). Page numbers appear in brackets next to quotations.

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