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## Sexual Identity, Cultural Integrity, Verbal and Other Magic in Episodes from *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*

The family sagas are celebrated for their complex interdependence of plot, character, theme and motif. This stranding effect takes a variety of forms. The saga introduces, leaves and returns to characters according to its internal logic. The locus of action moves from Iceland abroad and back. A dispute over property may generate small-scale feud, which is then damped through mediation or may escalate into court challenge or open violence. But it may also have hard-to-foresee effects on tangential paths of action, such as a marriage suit or travel. Other patterning, less tied in our minds to empirical causality, takes the form of objects that pass, often with dire consequences, through several sets of hands, e.g., a costly weapon or item of dress. Episodes may be formally paralleled by other sets of events, such as recurrent meetings between the same parties at the Alþing, or may be sequential, for example an individual's marriage and remarriage(s). Other interweaving of events finds expression in a curse, dream or prophecy and its realization. Here, one might again say the narrative's causality is at work, although in a society that believed in the predictive effect of foresight and word magic, such performative utterances must be seen as having a complementary determinative influence on the persons involved, whether or not we take modern concepts of psychology and the personality into account. Other interpenetrations are of the kind that might be called intertextual; a saga character central to one tale may appear in a minor, but usually consistent, role in another. Then there are homological equivalences established between events or objects, such as the equation "beard is to face is to honour" as "grass is to land is (inversely) to manure", illustrated in Hallgerðr's scurrilous reference to the beardless Njáll and to his sons as *taðskeggingar* "little dung beards" (Sayers 1990 b:52 f.). It is relationships of this latter kind, albeit seldom as explicitly highlighted, viewed through the lens of the admittedly anachronistic concepts of sexual identity and cultural integrity, and the more traditional one of verbal magic, that will be examined in some episodes from *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*.

*Laxdæla saga* is particularly rich in the types of interlacing outlined above, producing a tapestry-like, almost mannered effect, where, as in other sagas, the dimension of depth is largely created through the public's understanding

of often unstated motives, legal, economical or political situations, and community ethos. Pairs of events, related symbolically or in more *realpolitisch* terms, may be viewed as demarcating blocks of narrative (or “envelopes” as other critics have called them), although these should not long be viewed discretely or in isolation, given the extensive overlapping among saga segments so bracketed by our selection of key happenings. The larger frame for our examination will be the directly related events of Óláfr pái Høskulds-son’s dream, in which the supernatural woman, mother of the slain ox Harri, threatens to have Óláfr’s son killed as he has killed hers, and Kjartan Ólafsson’s death at the hands of his foster-brother, Bolli Þorleiksson. Related in rather less evident fashion are the events in the narrow focus of this inquiry: the antecedents and course of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir’s second marriage, and, more to the background, the activities of the sorcerers, Kotkell and his family (ch. 34–38).

Guðrún’s marriages had their oneiromantic forestage, although one may judge that the symbolism of rings, headdress and helmet as interpreted by Gestr Oddleifsson (ch. 33) is overly neat and a trifle forced. As the events that will occupy us in this study are not foretold in dreams one and two, save on the largest scale, the dreams will be considered a “given”, but still a foretaste of the inevitable. Guðrún’s first marriage, in which she is the unwilling partner, is to Þorvaldr Halldórsson, a man beneath her social station, but rich enough to indulge her taste, perhaps vengefully imposed, for jewellery. One such demand for a gift exceeds her husband’s limit and results in a slap to the face, which Guðrún – ever the saga Icelander at no loss for a telling retort – calls beneficial to her facial colouring. She says that she will not further bother him.

She does, however, recount the insult to Þórðr Ingunnarson, a neighbour, him too caught in a marriage based on economic advantage rather than affection. His wife is Auðr, characterized by the sagaman as “neither attractive nor accomplished”, but these, we shall see, are gender-specific criteria of merit. Þórðr, smilingly we are told, offers the requested counsel: *Gerðu honum skyrtu ok brautgangs hofuðsmátt ok seg skilit við hann fyrir þessar sakar*, as always rather less economically rendered: “Make him a shirt with such a wide neck-opening that by wearing it he gives you grounds for divorcing him” (ch. 34). Effeminacy was a serious charge in sex-conscious Iceland, as were male homosexual acts, both to the person charged and the person so charging (Sørensen 1986, Gade 1986). Nor was the complementary opposite, women taking on male dress and action, any less severely viewed. Cross-dressing will be used as a convenient portemanteau word for such dress and behaviour on both sides of the sexual divide.

Although the scene is not played out in the saga, we are to assume that Guðrún followed this course of action, for we are told that she was divorced

in the spring, taking a portion of the estate with her back to Laugar, the family homestead adjacent to the hot springs or “Baths”. As a divorcee of independent means (to use some anachronistic descriptors), she would doubtless have had greater social mobility (to use another) than unmarried daughters, although study of the law codes cautions us against ascribing unlimited freedom to Icelandic women in such circumstances.

It is at this juncture that the saga introduces Kotkell, his wife Gríma, and their sons Hallbjörn *slíkisteinsauga* ‘sleekstone eye’ and Stígandi. They are recent arrivals from the Hebrides and are described as *mjqk fjqlkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn* “extremely skilled in witchcraft and great sorcerers” (ch. 35). Names, epithets and skills are worth a quick dissection. *Seiðr*, whence *seiðmenn*, was a feared form of magic generally reserved to women and some unmanly men, among whom we must reckon Óðinn, who learned this art from Freyja, the goddess of love (*Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7). The association with female potency, the negative association with effeminacy, the dark chthonic side of the supreme god, all encourage us to see a “black” magic drawing on sexual, regenerative and earth-bound power. We then have a juxtaposition, in succeeding episodes of the saga, of effeminate or overly male dress, dissolution of marriage, the bath motif, and a gender-specific type of magic.

From the vantage point of the entire corpus of family sagas it seems legitimate to view the geographical origins of Kotkell’s family with a degree of suspicion. While there is no lack of virtuous outsiders in the sagas, like the Hebridean Kári Sǫlmundarson in *Njáls saga*, in the post-Settlement period devious criminals and surly berserks tend to come from the farther reaches of the Norse world: Sweden and the Western Isles. The ambiguity with which this cultural heritage is treated in the sagas is perhaps less easily defined than the status accorded the attentions of the Norwegian king and his court, or gifts of Norwegian provenance, i.e., flattering but potentially dangerous once transported to Iceland. The occasional highlighting of aristocratic Celtic origins and scorn for equivalent slave origins, both embodied in *Laxdæla*’s Melkorka, *konungsdóttir* and *ambátt* ‘concubine’ (the latter a word of Celtic origin), prove a strong clue for our interpretation (Sayers 1988). We shall consider below just how “Celtic” are Kotkell and family’s magic and other actions. It must remain a moot question whether any word play or associational intention is at work in the pairing of *suðreyskir* and *seiðr/seiðmenn*.

The suffix of the name *Kotkell* suggests a simple Norse origin, although the name is, in fact, not otherwise attested (Lind 1905–15). *Kot* ‘cottage’ could have yielded a meaning such as “cottier”, but this would have been demeaning and more suited to a slave. One may then at least raise the question of whether some Gaelic word such as Irish *coitlud* ‘sleeping’ may not

be echoed here (*DIL*; see the magic at work *infra*). His wife's name, *Gríma*, must first be referred to the known Norse word meaning 'covering for the face or head, mask, cowl' and, poetically, 'night' (among other applications), and only secondarily to such Irish words as *grim* 'battle' and *greimm* 'authority, sway, power; seizure; bond'. Another woman with "shaded eyes" and Celtic affinities will be considered in the latter half of this study. The sons, it should be noted, have common Norse names. *Slikisteinsauga* is derived from the name of a stone used to flatten and press cloth, perhaps at an early stage in the finishing of linen. Hallbjörn's ability is, however, of the "evil eye" variety. His brother's gaze, too, is capable of flattening the nap on more than the weaver's work, as he scorches hillsides of grass mat by his malignant eye.

Kotkell and the others are taken in by the *goði* Hallsteinn, a powerful but little liked chieftain in the region. They too are disliked although no specific reason is given at this point. Instead, the saga returns to Guðrún and Þórðr, when the former turns tables on her adviser during a ride at the Alþing and asks: *Hvárt er þat satt, Þórðr, at Auðr, kona þín, er jafnan í brókum, ok setgeiri í, en vafit spjorrum mjök í skúa niðr?* "Is it true Thord that your wife Aud always wears breeches with gores in the crutch, like a man's, and cross-garters almost down to her shoes?" (ch. 35). Þórðr is reluctant to be drawn into the discussion, but Guðrún presses him, saying his wife is already known as *Bróka-Auðr* 'Breeches-Audr', ominously adding that "it will matter much more to her if she keeps that name for a long time to come".

Þórðr's earlier suggestion to Guðrún was an amusing if malicious expedient, and there is no reason to think the subsequent life of her former husband was seriously impaired by the contrived breach of the social code. Identifying Auðr as dressed to move into an exclusively male arena of action has consequences not only for her but also for the masculine image of her husband Þórðr. We are to believe that Þórðr reflected on this matter for some time, for later he asks Guðrún what the penalty was for a woman dressing as a man. Guðrún then gives a formal, legalistic reply which in narrative terms looks both backward in explanation and forward in anticipation: *Slíkt víti á konum at skapa fyrir þat á sitt hóf sem karlmanni, ef hann hefir hqfuðmátt svá mikla, at sjái geirvqrtur hans berar, brautgangssqk hvárt-tveggja* "The same penalty applies to women in a case like that as to a man who wears a neckopening so wide that his nipples are exposed: both are grounds for divorce" (ch. 35). Þórðr's next question moves the action ahead sharply: should he divorce Auðr at the Alþing or back in his home-district where he can count on support? Guðrún commands proverbial wisdom as well as the law: *Aptans bíðr óframs sqk* "Only idlers wait till evening."

Þórðr divorces Auðr on the grounds that she dressed in breeches like *karlkonur* 'masculine women'. The term is a ready enough compound but is suggestive, like the legal statute, that the practise was not unknown and/or

was a serious breach of norms. On hearing of the divorce, Auðr, seemingly not to be outdone by Guðrún, replies in verse: *Vel es ek veit þat / vask ein of látin* “I’m glad I know I’ve been abandoned.” Again an estate is divided, this time with Þórðr making the concessions, and Guðrún and Þórðr are happily married at a magnificent feast, settling at Laugar. The marriage has then had its origins in two divorces. The androgynous organism that the successful marriage should be is twice split and once reassembled, the cross-dressing motif paralleled by that of spousal substitution.

The next summer Auðr sends a shepherd lad to find out who is at home at Laugar and who is up at the shieling. The answer is a simple enough domestic expression but telling in the larger context for its sexual image: “There’s now a wide floor between Thord’s bed and Gudrun’s, for she is up at the shieling and he is toiling hard at house-building” (ch. 35), along with Ósvífr at the farm. Towards evening Auðr pulls on her breeches and rides hard to Laugar. There she wounds the sleeping Þórðr. The detail is suggestive that the crossdressing and role reversal are here being extended to Þórðr, i.e., that he symbolically plays a woman’s part. The bolt has not been shot on the door to the sleeping closet; he is lying on his back; wakened by Auðr, he takes her for a man; she strikes him with a short single-bladed sword (*sax*, perhaps a demeaning choice of weapon), not only wounding his arm severely but slashing across both nipples, a final detail that cannot but recall the first of the two divorces and can be visualized as the blood-red line of a deep-cut bodice. Þórðr will not hear of punishing Auðr, saying that she did only what she had to. Her brothers, whose function in the act of vengeance she has assumed, are understandably less generous, saying that she probably had not done enough. Þórðr is bed-ridden with his injuries for some time. The chest wound heals well but he never recovers full use of his arm. While a symbolical interpretation may be a bit strained, we could say that Þórðr survives the feminine role forced on him by the masculine Auðr but his own masculine nature remains impaired, a situation perhaps not dissimilar to that of Guðrún’s first husband (similar considerations in Sørensen 1986).

At this point, the saga returns to Kotkell and his family, who have been harassing Þórðr’s mother, Ingunn, with their “thieving and sorcery” (*í fjárránum ok fjqlkynngi*, ch. 35), under the protection of the *goði* Þorsteinn. Þórðr’s father must be assumed to have died when he was young for he uses the matronymic Ingunnarson, and his mother comes to place herself in his care. Þórðr says he will risk offending Þorsteinn and will bring the thieves to justice. Þórðr plans to bring his mother’s goods by boat to Laugar, stopping on the way at Kotkell’s farm to summon Kotkell, Gríma and their sons, the last two absent at the time, for witchcraft and theft on pain of outlawry. The case is to be referred to the Alþing.

The Kotkelssons return and are furious on learning of the court charge; *þeir bræðir urðu óðir við þetta*, the use of the adjective *óðr* providing an economical linking of the supreme divinity Óðinn, magic and emotional arousal. No one, it would appear, had ever challenged them so openly before, that is, their witchcraft, while a criminal activity, had not been formally countered by legal means. This offers a parallel to cross-dressing, the possible subject of local gossip until the legal implications are activated by one party at an opportune moment. The saga then gives the first of a number of descriptions of the Hebrideans' magic. *Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau færðusk þar á upp qll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin fræði; þat váru galdrar. Því næst laust á hrið mikilli.* "Then Kotkell erected a large ritual platform and they all climbed onto it; there they chanted potent incantations – these were magic spells. And presently a tempest arose" (ch. 35). To anticipate somewhat, the accounts given by the saga do not suggest any Celtic component in the Hebrideans' magic. In fact, it is, as we shall see in the other instances, a fairly conventional kind of malign sorcery not dissimilar to that ascribed to the Sámi or Lapplanders (a rather different perspective in Jochens 1991). We cannot know whether there was any widespread knowledge in the thirteenth century Norse world of residual magical practises in an Ireland and Scotland that had been Christian for centuries. More significant, perhaps, the saga seems to make no distinction between *seiðr* and *galdr*. *Seiðr*, as earlier noted, seems to have drawn on female potencies. *Galdr*, often rendered "sacred incantation", may once have lain toward the other end of the spectrum, perhaps the prerogative of male priests. It is thought to have been essentially verbal in form (cf. the metrical term *galdralag* 'incantation metre', *Háttatal*, 101) and the verb *gala* 'sing, chant', but also 'crow [of a cock]'. Perhaps practised mostly for personal advantage, it seems to have carried no connotation of illegality (*KLNM*, s.v.v. *seiðr*, *galdr*, Strömbäck 1935, Buchholz 1987). While Óðinn learned *seiðr* from Freyja, he was also an exponent of *galdr*, and a greater distinction than the evidence will bear should not be forced (*Hávamál*, st. 152). The occurrence of the word *galdr* in this same context as *seiðr* militates against too sharp a distinction in the world of *Laxdæla* at least. If, then, the Hebrideans are to be judged as presenting a threat to normative Icelandic society, it is for their readiness to break the law and practise magic, including women's magic, rather than specifically Celtic magic. This same ambiguity – Celtic or Germanic magic? – can be noted in *Orkneyinga saga* when Sigurðr of Orkney's Celtic mother Eðna (OIr. *Eithne*), described as *margkunnig* (cf. *fjqlkunnig*, *supra*), invests a raven banner with the double-edged power to bring victory to the chieftain before whom it is borne but death to the bearer.

But back to the saga, where Þórðr and his companions were still at sea when the Kotkell family's magical storm struck. Despite heroic efforts and

good seamanship, the boat is finally overturned by a breaker which rises where none had been known to rise before. All on board are drowned, and after marriage and divorce Guðrún now experiences widowhood; she will shortly experience motherhood. Her son, Þórðr *kqtr* ‘the Cat’, is fostered by Snorri *goði*, and will eventually be the father of an Icelandic poet at the Norwegian court. Gestr Oddleifsson brings pressure to bear on Þorsteinn to have Kotkell and his family expelled from the district, and the general sentiment is that they deserve death. They leave with only four stud-horses, including a fine black stallion, an experienced fighter. A deal is struck with Þorleikr Hqskuldsson to exchange the horses for his protection, Kotkell cleverly flattering the initially reluctant but then rather gullible Þorleikr, an attenuated kind of word magic. These horses, like so many other fine gifts, will play a fateful role, here in the relations between Þorleikr and his uncle Hrótr, when a third party takes a liking to the horses and the aged Hrótr defends his nephew’s property in the latter’s absence, winning great credit in this reversal where age acts before youth is given a chance.

Guðrún and her brothers agree to follow Snorri’s advice not to take vengeance on the sorcerers but to let events run their course. When their thieving alienates their new host community, someone else will act, and Þorleikr may become implicated. Irked at Hrótr’s defence of his property, Þorleikr does indeed become involved, by asking Kotkell to do something to humiliate his uncle Hrótr. But the punitive action is grossly out of proportion. Kotkell and family go to Hrótr’s house at night. *Þau fóru á bæ Hrúts ok gerðu þar seið mikinn. En er seiðlætinn kómu upp, þá þóttusk þeir eigi skilja, er inni váru, hverju gegna myndi; en fqgr var sú kveðandi at heyra* “They climbed on the roof of Hrut’s house and made great incantations there. When the spells began, the people inside were at a loss to make out what was going on, but sweet was the singing they heard” (ch. 37). The singing causes all in the house to fall asleep, even Hrótr, who had sensed the danger and urged wakefulness. Irish tradition had three strains of music, one of which, *súantraide*, imposed sleep, but this need not necessarily be a touch of local colour, although we may have a hint in the name *Kotkell* (cf. Ir. *collud* ‘sleeping’). More important is the association of seductive art forms, malevolence and magic. Kotkell’s aim, however, is to make Hrótr’s young son restive and bring him outdoors. “He walked into the spells and fell down dead at once.” Once again, the modern reader eager to know more about magic may feel somewhat shortchanged.

It is at this point that Óláfr Hqskuldsson is yet again belatedly moved to action that, less indecisive, he might well have taken earlier. A party goes in pursuit of the Kotkell family. Hallbjqrn *slíkisteinsauga* is captured and a bag put over his head (cf. the mother’s name *Grima* ‘hood, cow’, but also ‘night’, a tie to the motif of induced sleep). His father and mother are

captured in the mountains, stoned to death, and buried under a cairn, called *Skrattavarði* 'Devils' Cairn'. Stoning seems to have been considered an appropriate death for slaves and magicians and for such base crimes as theft and rape. Stígandi escapes into the hills. Hallbjörn is taken out to sea in a boat and the bag removed from his head. *Hallbjörn rak þá skyggnur á landit, ok vār augnalag hans ekki gott* "Hallbjorn turned his gaze towards the land, and the look in his eye was far from pleasant" (ch. 37). Before he is drowned, Hallbjörn curses Þorleikr and his successors at Kambsness, saying the former will have little happiness in the future, the latter only trouble with the farm. And, inevitably, the curse is effective, as the saga bears out; Þorleikr will eventually be encouraged to leave Iceland. Óláfr's concurrent offer to foster his son, Bolli, will set the stage for the fateful Kjartan-Guðrún-Bolli triangle. Hallbjörn's curse then dovetails with that of the ox Harri's mother.

Stígandi becomes an outlaw and forms a liaison with a bondswoman (*ambátt*) charged with the care of a flock of ewes. When the ewes are found to be yielding little milk, the woman displaying new valuables and often absent, a confession is forced from her. When Stígandi next comes to visit, she offers to search his head for lice, and when he falls asleep, his head in her lap, she alerts Óláfr and his party. Capturing the outlaw magician, they are at pains that he not "have the chance of putting his evil eye on anything" and put a bag over his head. But there is a tear in the bag, and Stígandi catches a glimpse of a fine stretch of land across the valley. Suddenly it is struck by a whirlwind, the grass is uprooted, and none ever grows there later. The place is called *Brenna*. Thus the image of *slíkisteinsauga*, used of the brother Hallbjörn and drawn from women's sphere of work, is associated with destructive magic. Stígandi is stoned to death and buried. The body of his dead brother Hallbjörn is washed ashore and he has a brief career as a *draugr*, a corporeal revenant, until he is laid by a farmer after a wrestling match. Thus end the Kotkell episodes, but not before the saga mentions that Lambi Þorbjarnarson took over his father's farmstead, both Þorbjörn and Melkorka now being dead. Lambi is held in greater esteem than his father, because of his distinguished ancestry through his mother, the enslaved but now freed Irish princess. The closure effect that concludes the account of the Hebrideans then seems to have an extra Celtic touch, since there is no compelling reason for the mention of Lambi at this point. Þorleikr now leaves Iceland, and the saga turns to the rapidly developing friendship between Kjartan and Guðrún.<sup>1</sup> Into this relationship will be introduced the

<sup>1</sup> Kjartan and Guðrún's conversations take place at the baths. Mixed bathing was practised. Modern practise suggests that this was a sexually defused rather than charged atmosphere, but some social conventions may have been relaxed, making the situation conducive to courting. Formal gender distinctions would be reassumed along with outer clothing.



seductive attraction of the Norwegian court, its king and princess, a kind of white magic contrasting with, but ultimately no less fatal than, the black magic of the Hebridean wizards. The threat to Iceland then came from the extremes of the social spectrum: royal power and sexually generated magic.

Before attempting some summary comment on the intertwining of the cross-dressing, divorce and marriage motifs with those of black magic, one other Celtic avenue merits brief exploration. Although the events of Stígandi's capture seem plausible enough in terms of both historical medieval Iceland and folktale narrative, they have a strikingly close Irish parallel in the Ulster cycle of epic texts. This is the death tale of the hero Cú Roí mac Dáire, a giant, elemental figure in many other tales (Best 1905). Cú Roí had assisted the Ulstermen in a siege intended to recover Bláthnait, daughter of Mend, a cauldron holding the milk of thirty cows and three magic cows capable of filling it. During the siege Cú Roí had worn a grey mantle as a disguise and had collaborated in taking every head of the enemy that the Ulstermen won. But when he is not given his fair share of the spoils, he makes off with Bláthnait, cauldron and cows. Cú Chulainn pursues him but is ignominiously thrust into the earth up to his armpits, his hair shorn with the giant's sword, and cow dung rubbed on it, all this apparently intended to give the stripling another chance to grow as a true warrior (nb. the resemblances to the episode of the beardless Njáll and *taðskegglingar* 'little dung-beards' in *Njáls saga*). After a year of self-imposed exile, Cú Chulainn makes an amorous tryst with Bláthnait who agrees to deliver Cú Roí into his power. The signal is to pour the cows' milk down the river to whiten its water. Bláthnait undertakes to search the giant's head for lice, then to wash his hair, but ties the warrior's long hair to the bedpost. Cú Chulainn and his forces attack. Cú Roí, starting up and losing some of his hair we must assume, is killed after heroic resistance and beheaded. The now patronless poet of Cú Roí, Ferchertne, takes his revenge on the Ulstermen by seizing Bláthnait and leaping off a cliff to their joint death on the rocks below. The tale also contains the "watchman motif" in the variant of two conflicting interpretations of the visual phenomena associated with the advance of an enemy host, Bláthnait identifying fortress builders, Cú Roí more clearly seeing warriors.

If the final events in the life of Hebridean sorcerer Stígandi are a conscious incorporation of a Celtic touch, they are not the only ones in *Laxdæla saga* (Heller 1986, 1988, Sayers 1990 a). Further comment will be reserved for the conclusion of this study. A brief summary, however, can be offered of findings thus far, before turning to another saga with Celtic overtones, erotic motifs and a rather different verbal magic. *Laxdæla's* alternation between the motifs of homosexuality, cross-dressing, marriage dissolution and re-formation, and those of sexually based magic and other illegal acts such as

theft and magically effected murder seems quite conscious, for no other narrative intervenes. Þórðr and Guðrún successfully exploit the law concerning cross-dressing to further their own interests. Auðr carries cross-dressing to its logical extreme, the expected *Hetzerin* 'Incitress' of her kinsmen preferring resolute male action, but Þórðr survives the act of vengeance (*Hetzerin* from Heller 1958; see too Clover 1986, Jochens 1986, Miller 1984, Sayers 1990 d). Thus the issue of sexual identity is handled legally or extra-legally, but does not prove a continuing threat to Icelandic society. Yet for a man to exploit the potential of *seiðr*, with its power founded in female sexuality, he must sacrifice his sexual identity, be an "unmanly man". When Þórðr tries to counter such magic with a legal charge he is defeated and killed, in this prefiguring other lovers and husbands of Guðrún who are the losers in more conventional feud. Here the Hebrideans play the role for Þórðr that the Norwegian court does for Kjartan. The Hebrideans' magic, realized largely but not exclusively through verbal means, can be categorized as curses affecting the future, weather-working (storm at sea, breaker, and possibly the scorching of the hillside), soporific singing, the otherwise unexplained instant death of Hrútr's son when he enters the magical force-field, and the more common rising from the dead as a *draugr*. Kotkell's black horses, in particular the fighting black stallion, which largely generate the circumstances that will bring Bolli into Óláfr's household, can be seen as Odinic animals, originating in the same world as the sorcerers' magic. It would appear that it is not so much that the magic could be of Celtic origin as that personal origins in the Celtic world make Kotkell and his family more ready to employ such extra-legal means to exploit and disrupt Icelandic society. But the Celtic admixture to Icelandic ethnicity and culture is presented in the saga in such contained fashion that we cannot speak of more than a passing threat to cultural identity (Sayers 1988, Sørensen 1987). Significantly, it is the half-Irish Óláfr pái, having earlier declined his grandfather's kingdom in Ireland, who leads the punitive party against the Hebridean sorcerers. From the vantage point of this study the events of these chapters can also be seen as steps on a rising scale of intensity, emotional and societal. A first contrived instance of cross-dressing leads to a divorce, but has no other consequence than facilitating the second instances of both. The second divorce has Auðr's wound to Þórðr as a more serious consequence. Then the first concentrated application of *seiðr* leads to a legal challenge but also the magically effected death of Þórðr. The culminating use of magic is against one that would have been thought outside the saga causality, the innocent son of Hrútr. And it is this act that is collectively punished in the death of Kotkell, Gríma and their sons.

In the introduction to his 1949 translation of *Kormáks saga* Lee M. Hollander passed in review the reasons that might be entertained to account for the poet Kormákr's "nerveless indecision", "explosive rashness", and the unconsummated love affair with Steingerðr that is central to this "curious saga" (p. 3). Is the last-named to be blamed on Þórveig's curse on the poet? Kormákr himself seems to think so. Or is it socially and economically motivated, with origins in the difference in social station and the adequacy of a dowry? Is the poet, a Romantic before the time, shying away from the pedestrian reality of marriage or simply a chronic ditherer? Or was it fear of the social and personal consequences of revealed impotence or a mother-tie? Hollander adduced counter-evidence for most of these charges and favoured a partial explanation in the power of suggestion that made Kormákr more susceptible to Þórveig's magic. The basic question retains its interest today, and is made the more tantalizing by disparities between the prose account of Kormákr's life and the events and attitudes that can be gleaned from the interspersed verses (O'Donoghue 1991). Can the lines of thought developed in our review of *Laxdæla saga* assist in readdressing the question? We are perhaps somewhat freer in this regard than was Hollander, since we recognize that there is no necessity of finding an answer that satisfies the criteria of any one or more modern theories of the personality. It will be sufficient if the explanation is viable within the imaginary world of the saga, its conventions and portrayal of the early Icelandic ethos.

*Kormáks saga* is older than *Laxdæla saga*, but the events in both stories are roughly synchronous and characters such as Bersi and Óláfr Høskuldsson figure in both, as does the sword Sköfnungr. Although there is little reason to think that *Laxdæla* would have modelled itself in any conscious way on *Kormáks saga* and despite the universality of the love triangle, it is of interest to note the structural parallel apparent in the failed courtships of Kjartan and Guðrún, Kormákr and Steingerðr, and the "second best choices" of the two women in their marriages to Bolli and Bersi, respectively. Bolli is a more shaded character than the straightforward Bersi. Like Hrútr, the aged Bersi, who also figures in *Laxdæla*, makes an impressive killing with a halberd (*infra*). But it is Kjartan and Kormákr, both bearing Celtic (or Celtic-inspired) names, who are the more complex personalities, largely authors of their own misfortune. Norway was the complicating factor in Kjartan's case; Kormákr's case is before us.

Erotic verse was consciously marginalized in early Icelandic society, because of the threat to the honour of the men nominally charged with the virtue of the woman so addressed. The legal proscriptions against such verse-making can be compared to the social stigma attached to witchcraft and efforts to contain it through legal means. The current of sexuality runs through both, if our reading of *seiðr* is correct. One might even say that both

call into question conventional notions of masculinity. The circulation of erotic verse obliged the male members of the target woman's family to live up to idealized standards of personal and family honour, unmanliness the likely charge if appropriate action were not taken. For a man to practise *seiðr* he had to forego a portion of his male identity. Crossing these two ideas, can one suggest that, paradoxically, one might also have to surrender some aspect of masculinity in order to produce erotic verse?

Before pursuing this tack, Kormákr's Celtic affinities, like those of the Hebridean sorcerers, can be investigated. The name was frequently used of Irish kings, resonating with associations of the legendary Cormac mac Airt, the archetypically just ruler, whose *fír* 'truth' or 'justice' had determining consequences for the fertility of man, beast and land.<sup>2</sup> The poet's mother, Dalla, has a name suggestive of Ir. *dall* 'blind' (cf. the early Irish poet Dallán mac Forgaill and *Laxdæla's* *Gríma* 'hood, night'), while her father Öundur is called *sjóni* 'the Seer'. In the following we shall pursue the clue given in the pairing of physical sightlessness and mental foresight. As Hollander noted (see, too, Durand 1979), Kormákr's physical appearance recalls his mother's and suggests Celtic blood, perhaps the early Norse stereotype of the Gael: dark, curly hair (criticized by Steingerðr), light complexion, size, strength, an aggressive disposition (*áhlaupamaðr í skapi*, ch. 2; word play on *áhlaup* 'attack' but also 'covering [of an animal]?). Although his dark eyes are mentioned at a later moment in the saga they can be said to be hinted at in the stated similarity of Kormákr to Dalla ('Blind'). Steingerðr says that she would have him even if blind, an ironic proleptic reference to other deficiencies that will appear. Typical of the saga genre, this information on physique and personality is given before the character begins to act on the scene. We have learned to recognize these as programmatic statements whose contents the saga will go on to develop and illustrate. A later commentator, Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, characterizes Kormákr as impatient and rash (*óðláttr ok óðlundaðr*), in contrast to the sword *Sköfnungr* which is deliberate (*tómláttr*, ch. 9). In the early Icelandic view, these might be contrasted as typically female and male characteristics. In the early history of Kormákr's family we also find prior instance of the name *Kormákr*, the motifs of second sight, single combat (*hólmganga*) with weapons suddenly blunted (the latter, one of Óðinn's accomplishments), and a shrinking measuring rod, used to mark off a new homestead, but indicative, through its decrease in length, of failing family fortunes. The saga suggests that this slow decline was initiated by the malevolence of the Norwegian queen Gunnhildr, also suspected of black magic in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*.

Kormákr first meets Steingerðr when he elects to go to the mountains to

<sup>2</sup> Cormac's father was Art, a tabu name for the bear; cf. ON Bersi, with similar function.

bring down the sheep rather than to the shore to flense a stranded whale, and spots her attractive ankles below the door of the hall. This seems a fairly direct recall of the mismatch between the giantess Skaði (the name perhaps suggestive of “shadow”), who preferred life in the mountains, and the god Njördr, who sought the sea and shore. The marriage was the result of Skaði picking a husband on the basis of his handsome feet (thought to be Baldr’s) in compensation for the death of her father, Píazi. Píazi had been killed in the effort to recover the stolen apples of Iðunn that ensured the physical perfection of the gods and their eternal youth. The marriage must be thought to have been barren and Skaði would later marry Óðinn. If these points of contact are more than coincidental, can we associate Steingerðr’s rather coarse reference to the wound to her husband Bersi’s buttocks (see *infra*) with Skaði’s laughter that the gods had to stimulate by a tug-of-war between a nanny-goat’s beard and Loki’s testicles (Ross 1989)?

Despite the sexually unconsummated relationship between Kormákr and Steingerðr, a strong current of everyday sensuality runs through the saga. Steingerðr is twice married; men repeatedly fight with each other without fatal injuries, almost like rival siblings, and offer to heal each other’s wounds. Sisters are offered in marriage to resolve disputes. Kormákr makes increasingly free with Steingerðr’s physical being: he borrows her comb, asks her to make him a shirt (or kirtle), wipes his sweat on her mantle, drinks from the same cup, takes her rings, gives her multiple kisses in public. All this might have been normal between spouses, but must be seen as placing a strain on behavioural norms. Does any of this, for example the borrowed comb, hint at cross-dressing? The incidents will have to stand for the moment, but can be contrasted with Steingerðr’s resolute masculine action at a later point in the saga. To pursue the matter of the somatic dimension of life, the description of the layout of the field for single combat, which uncharacteristically breaks the narrative flow of the saga, mentions the tie to fertility ritual (the pegs called *tjqsnur* and a related sacrifice), an explicit reference even if we suspect the sagaman of imaginatively recreating a practise that had fallen from use in the Christian period.<sup>3</sup> The saga also makes mention of the sacrifice of a bovine that concluded the *hólmganga*, and the need to redden the elves’ hill with the blood.

This last incident leads us to the central matter of magic and Kormákr’s attitude towards it. Clearly, it is ambiguous. As a consequence of Kormákr killing her sons and driving her from the district, the sorceress Þórveig lays a

<sup>3</sup> Single combat was practised in early Ireland as a judicial ordeal. The unique descriptive text, Tirechán’s Latin *Life of Patrick*, refers to a *lignum contensionis* ‘wood of contention’ between the fighters, glossed with the word *caam*, which otherwise suggests ‘contention, conflict’ alone. It has been speculated that the wood was a log over which the combattants might not step (Kelly 1988, p. 213).

curse on him: *Pat er líkast, at því komir þú á leið, at ek verða heraðflótta, en synir mínir óbættir, en því skal ek þér launa, at þú skalt Steingerðar aldri njóta*. Hollander 1949 translates: “Likely enough that you will succeed in making me move from the district, with my sons unatoned for; but I shall pay you back and tell you that you will never have Steingerð” (ch. 5), although “have the pleasure/benefit of” might be a clearer rendering of *njóta*. Kormákr replies: *Því mantu ekki ráða, in vanda kerling* “You will not have the power to do that, you evil old hag”, but the remainder of the saga and his subsequent comments amply demonstrate that the curse is not inefficacious nor is Kormákr indifferent to it. Parenthetically, it is of interest to note how grateful Þórveig is to receive land from Bersi (ch. 8). Kotkell and family also had successive farms, rather than living with a protector. Was this in order to practise magic away from public scrutiny or was some tie to the land required on the part of the practitioner? Kormákr’s suit is successful with Steingerð and her family, but when procedural difficulties over dowry are ironed out, Kormákr appears to lose interest in the wedding. At this point the sagaman is not content to allow us to draw our own inferences and conclusions in the usual fashion, but makes an explicit statement: *en þat var fyrir þá sǫk, at Þórveig seiddi til, at þau skyldi eigi njótast mega* “And that was because Þórveig brought it about by her witchcraft that Kormák and Steingerð should never have intercourse together” (ch. 6). Kormákr’s ambivalent attitude toward magic is illustrated throughout the saga: inattention to the correct handling of a temperamental weapon which he nonetheless borrows, poking a prying nose into magical practises intended to shield him in combat and vitiating their efficacy, failure to complete sacrificial rituals. In this, Kormákr displays the same dualistic stance as he adopts in erotic matters: public statement of verse aimed at and celebrating Steingerð, jealous wrangling over her, but never taking his physical advances to the ultimate stage that, later, the twice married Steingerð seems ready to grant him.

The magic dimension is operative at many points in the saga, which Hollander called rich in evidence of native supernaturalism. I would suggest, however, that its inclusion is due more to conscious literary purpose than to any particular ethnographical effort at cataloguing earlier practises. What of the motifs of cross-dressing, homosexuality or impaired male sexuality? On the first count, aside from Kormákr’s familiarity with Steingerð’s (perhaps not too gender-specific) personal objects, the best example comes late in the saga and recalls Auðr’s taking male action into her own hands, if not her dress. Steering his ship close to that carrying Steingerð and her second husband, Þorvaldr, Kormákr brought his vessel round so that his tiller knocked Þorvaldr unconscious. But Steingerð seizes the rudder and steers straight at Kormákr causing his ship to capsize. The other two subjects can be dealt with together from the early Norse perspective as sexual dysfunc-

tionality. In his single combat with Steingerðr's first husband, Bersi, Kormákr mismanages his borrowed weapon, one of the consequences being that he breaks off the point of his opponent's sword but the tip of his thumb is split. He will not have the wound treated, it swells up and is long in healing. Bersi then comes off the winner in this first encounter. The split thumb, like the pointless sword, is a ready enough phallic symbol, one supported by the Indo-European root \**téu-* 'swell, increase' behind ON *þumalfingr*, *þumaltá*. Similarly the sword Skoðfungr is notched in the combat, when it strikes the shield given Bersi by the witch Þórveig. The notch only grows larger with whetting. Later, Kormákr will be robbed, while in conversation with Steingerðr, of a pin that fastens his cloak. Did the shrinking measuring rod of the opening chapter anticipate all this? But we may prefer to see the larger pattern of Kormákr's avoidance of carnal union with Steingerðr as evidence of sexual dysfunction. The second single combat is between Bersi and Steinarr, Kormákr's uncle and proxy, for whom he holds the shields. It results in a double wound to Bersi. Steinarr's sword glances from Bersi's shield, slashes his buttocks and cuts into the bone behind his knee. The knee was widely seen among cultures drawing on the Indo-European heritage as a symbol of male reproductive organs, and taking a child on a man's knee was a public confirmation of paternity. Bersi's wounds, too, are slow to heal, until an estranged friend brings his healing stone. But the knee wound, however rich in symbolic worth, is the less important one in social terms. After recounting the magical healing of Bersi's leg, the saga, more than usually laconic, states: *Við þessa atburði lagði Steingerðr leiðendi á við Bersa ok vill skilja við hann* "in consequence of these events [the combats? the wounds? the restored friendship with Þórðr?] Steingerd took a deep dislike to Bersi and wished to divorce him" (ch. 13). Her parting insult, however, is clear, and she says that from once having been called *Eyglu-Bersi* then *Hólmqngu-Bersi* he might now best be known as *Raza-Bersi* 'Buttocks Bersi' (see the discussion of *klámhogg* 'shame stroke' in Miller 1990, pp. 101 ff.). More than symbolic of a wound taken in flight, although this was not the case, the slash on the buttocks is here seen as the sexual domination of one male by another, a proxy for sodomy. We may recall the outcome of Auðr's nighttime attack on Þórðr (and perhaps also the explicit reference to gores or puckers in the seat of men's trousers to fit over the buttocks). To her kinsmen Steingerðr says that she does not wish to live with Bersi as *þrkumlaðan*. This may be read as 'cripple', but the semantic core is *kuml*, *kumb* 'mark, sign' and the meaning here is one man marked by another. In this, the perspective of the observer is more important than that of the antagonists. All of this may have been no more than the expression of Steingerðr's ongoing dissatisfaction with a marriage she had not wished and the exploitation of a convenient event, for Bersi's career as dueller and poet does not

appear hampered by the divorce or the slur. In these several respects, Bersi, although of a calmer temperament, is not that different from Kormákr. The true distinction between the near doublets is then Kormákr's desire for Steingerðr and Bersi's initial possession of her.

If Kormákr and Bersi were evenly matched opponents, in a sense two realizations of the warrior/poet ideal, Kormákr and Þorvaldr, Steingerðr's second husband, are still closer, but in different ways, as events develop to almost a *ménage à trois*. The duelling over Steingerðr, however, continues, with Þorvaldr's interests defended by his brother Þorvarðr. Magical means are invoked on both sides, so that there are bruises and cracked bones when blades will not cut, but no decisive result. Magic blunts weapons, as it thwarts sexual union. Kormákr's advances to and familiarities with Steingerðr continue in an atmosphere where Þorvaldr might be called a *mari complaisant*, were it not for the duels. This husband, a family choice to which Steingerðr was not averse, is characterized as wealthy, clever with his hands, a skald (as was Bersi), but of no great spirit (*engi skörungur í skaplyndi*, ch. 17). He also bears the nickname *tinteinn*, seen as a Celtic tag since tin was mined in Cornwall, which becomes the subject of some of Kormákr's mocking verse. ON *tin* 'tin' is evident in the Icelander's interpretation of the name, but Hollander's Cornish *tin-tan* 'lower fortress' and *tinden* 'castle on the hill' seem wide of the mark. An Irish term for a foundry was *tinntén*, composed of *tinne* 'ingot, molten mass of metal' and *teine* 'fire' but also 'fireplace' or 'furnace'. The name is perhaps to be read as an ironic comment on Þorvaldr's lack of fiery spirit, the quality that the other "Celt", Kormákr, has in querulous excess.

Kormákr proves an outstanding fighter and successful courtier when abroad in the service of the Norwegian king, Haraldr, despite the annoyance of his familiar attentions to Steingerðr. One could, in fact, say that Kormákr's cultural identity as warrior and poet is most effectively realized outside Iceland, and the astute king recommends that he not return home. In Iceland his identity as poet is even threatened when obscene verses are attributed to him, in an effort to discredit him with Steingerðr. It is also on his outward voyage to Norway that he spots a walrus thought to be the witch Þórveig in animal guise and fatally wounds her, thus disposing of his nemesis although not her curse. Abroad, Steingerðr continues to occupy his mind, and in verse he contrasts his activity on the field of combat with her husband's at home in bed. In Kormákr's final verses there is an explicit contrast of grappling in battle and in bed (st. 82) and it is perhaps legitimate to see in the cloak and staked-out field of the *hólmganga* a symbolic alternative to the Icelandic sleeping compartment, bed and bedposts, the socially significant event a flow of blood in both instances.<sup>4</sup> Kormákr the

<sup>4</sup> In the first duel between Bersi and Kormákr, where the tip of the sword (*oddr*) flies off and wounds the tip (*kaggull*) of Kormákr's thumb, one could speculate, in this context of duelling



Battler and Kormákr the Lover are, unsurprisingly, a recurrent pair in the verse which is incorporated in the saga. As an example:

*Svá kveðk snyrti-Freyju,  
snímr trúða ek brúði,  
gamðis vangs of gengna  
greipar báls ór skólum  
at vegskorðan verði  
varrskíðs nemit síðan,  
sqddum hqlðs á holdi  
hrafna, mér at tafni. (st. 25)*

Hollander renders this:

In such wise the winsome  
woman – I had trusted  
her before – passed from my  
fathoming arms and kisses  
that not e'er hereafter  
I shall – yet I often  
sated wolves on weapon-slain  
warriors' bodies – have her.

Returning to the parallel of *hólmganga* and bed, we may note the wooden partition that separates the couple at the farmhouse, like the imaginary line between two duellers. In this episode, Kormákr's and Steingerðr's horses (animals sacred to Freyr) stray, but they do not, and conventional sexual morality is once again respected. In another related pairing of Eros and Ares, sisters are offered in marriage as an alternative to single combat or resolution of other conflict. While abroad, Steingerðr almost takes a third symbolic husband, when she is captured by vikings and awarded to one of them. Kormákr rescues her and, in recognition of Kormákr's persistence, her husband is ready to relinquish her to him. Kormákr is willing, but it is Steingerðr who refuses, and he then admits that it is not their fate to be together. At no point in the saga is Steingerðr ascribed children. Is she a barren beauty and thus the female counterpart of the reluctant but not reticent lover?

While campaigning in England and the Celtic lands, Scotland, Ireland and the North British kingdom of Strathclyde (an identification for *Bretland* preferred over Wales), Kormákr pursues the enemy beyond his companions and is attacked by what the saga, in a *hapax*, calls *blótrisi Skota* (ch. 27). "Uncanny Scottish giant" is a fair approximation, but *blót* is clearly a nod in

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ground matched to bed closet, each with its *feldr* 'cloak, skin covering', some wordplay between *kqgull* ('distal phalanx' < *kaggi* 'keg, barrel'; de Vries) and *kqggurr* 'bed spread'.

the direction of pagan sacrificial ritual. We have earlier seen Kormákr's deficiencies in this sphere back in Iceland. The giant appears to be unarmed and the two wrestle. Kormákr is aided by his sword and deals the giant a death blow, but his ribs are crushed and the dead giant falls on him. After the improvisation of last verses, again rejecting bandages, Kormákr dies. Such giant supernatural figures are common in early Irish literature, the Cú Roí of the earlier citation being toward the civilized end of the spectrum; others, under the general Irish term *bachlach* 'churl', seem more elemental natural forces. All such representatives of the Otherworld in its darker guise appear in mortal circumstances, such as the mutual beheading matches that occur in *Fled Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu* and seem to have informed the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (additional points of contact in Sayers 1990 c). Crushed ribs and a broken shoulder was the most extensive damage Kormákr could do to Þorvarðr; now he dies, in seemingly atavistic circumstances from similar internal, not weapon-inflicted, injuries at the hands of chthonic earth forces, in a sense in his spiritual Celtic homeland.

As a poet, Kormákr would have drawn his powers from Óðinn, a divinity with additional ties to be battlefield. Óðinn was also an exponent of *seiðr*, the unmasculine and emasculating magic which is employed against Kormákr: emasculating in two senses, rendering his blows ineffectual in single combat and also preventing his union with Steingerðr. But erotic poetry may also be seen to have its origin in the same forcefield of sexuality as *seiðr*, albeit not necessarily feminine as with the latter. If *seiðr* relied on verbal means, so erotic poetry can be seen as verbal magic, magical in creation, intended to be magical in its effects, literally charming the woman addressed. Seen against the mythical and legendary background of Óðinn sacrificing an eye in order to acquire secret knowledge, and other heroes both Germanic and Celtic suffering a burned thumb, or a seeress surrendering vision, we may see Kormákr's sexual dysfunction as the price he must pay for the ability to create erotic verse. Dumézil has called these *mutilations qualifiantes*, and more recently Jean-Michel Picard (1989) has summarized as follows: "the specific power or function of a given mythological character is confirmed or stressed by the loss of the organ which is normally the instrument of this function."<sup>5</sup> Symbolized *inter alia* by the self-inflicted and slow healing thumb wound that Kormákr will not have treated, the deficiency is interiorized and through interaction with the divine is transcended and transmuted into art. Recalling Cormac mac Airt, the paragon of the just Irish king who ruled over a fertile and bountiful kingdom, Kormákr's rule is in the severe but mannered world of extempory skaldic verse. We cannot expect the verse of

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of "tagging on" or mythological counterpointing in Frank 1978, p. 107.

the historical Kormákr to provide much in the way of evidence for our assessment of the Kormákr of the saga, but one stanza from his *Sigurðar-drápa*, excerpted in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 90, No. 12), offers an interesting coincidence of the patron won by poetry, and eros linked to magic.

*Eykr með eniduki  
iarðhlutr diafiarþar  
breyti hun sa er beinan  
bindr. Seið Ygr til Rindar.*

Faulkes translates:

The land-getter, who binds the mast-top straight, honours the provider of the dieties' fiord [the mead of poetry, whose provider is the poet] with a head-band. Ygg [Odin] won Rind by spells.

Verbal magic assures the poet of his prize, but his divine protector advances his sexual union through the same means that prevent the poet from achieving his.<sup>6</sup>

To advance that the unconsummated affair with Steingerðr is the price Kormákr pays for his art is an admittedly speculative conclusion, one that should be seen to complement on the mythic level rather than vitiate the text's or Hollander's identifications of magic and belief in magic as the obstacle to sexual relations. Similarly, it should not preclude further study of southern European influence such as the Tristan story or French erotic poetry on the main lines of the saga and its verses (Carney 1955, Einarsson 1964, 1971, 1976, Andersson 1967).

From this conclusion it is possible to return to an early incident in the saga, at what might have been a decisive turning point. When Kormákr is informed of Steingerðr's hasty and secretive wedding feast, he tries to intercept the wedding party as it is returning to Bersi's farm. Preferring to take the quicker route by sea, he is obliged to rent a boat from Þórveig who had been given land by Bersi. The witch has bored holes near the waterline of the boats so that Kormákr's boat is swamped and he must break off the pursuit. If we step back from this scene and consider the western European evidence of impaired rulers from the perspective of Dumézil's three functions (leaving aside the debated question of an *idéologie*), we shall note head-related

<sup>6</sup> The Tristan issue was first raised by Carney 1955. Debate was then joined by Andersson 1969, followed by Einarsson 1971 and 1976 (rev. Hughes, *Scandinavian Studies* 52 [1980], 449–51). Briefer characterization of the saga is found in Einarsson 1964, Andersson 1967, and Frank 1986. Additional general studies are Hallberg 1958 and 1959, Sveinsson 1966, and Schottmann 1982.

disfigurations and injuries to some, typically those who have failed in just rule or sacral observance. Those that fail in battle will bear battle wounds. But accompanying the indices of the blighted kingdom, where fertility has given way to barrenness, are various lower body and leg injuries, of which the thigh-wounded Fisher King of Arthurian romance is perhaps the best known. Consider this scene from Irish legendary history as preserved in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*:

... one day Gúaire happened to be scraping the barbed point of a spear with his own knife, sitting under a boat. Then he heard some men exchanging blows nearby and he got up quickly in order to separate them in their fight. In his great haste he struck against the knife that he had carelessly dropped on the ground and his knee was grievously wounded. This was the companion's act [as stated in a prophecy of his death] out of which the cause of his death arose. And, shaken in his mind, he immediately recognized it as in accordance with the holy man's prophecy. He died some months later, overcome by this injury.

Picard (1989) has examined this and other instances of the constellation of marine environment, domestic implements and leg wounds, among which the wounding of Väinämöinen's knee in the *Kalevala*. While the wound to the lower body might be the punishment for misrule, or the signal that the aged king must be replaced and the kingship rejuvenated, one strand of the tradition displays sexually dysfunctional or crippled rulers as presiding over sumptuous banquets. In Kormákr's case we have verse from the cauldron of poetry. This was initiated, it will be recalled, by the sight of Steingerðr's feet below a door, a reversal of the mythical antecedents of the failed union of Skaði/(Baldr)Njörðr. Bersi's knee wound in the fight with Steinarr, or the incident of Grettir, striking his knee while chopping a log brought to his island by the witch Þuríðr and eventually being incapacitated by the resulting gangrene, may offer a closer match to the Indo-European tradition of the lower body wound. Yet the episode of Þorveig frustrating Kormákr's efforts to prevent the consummation of the marriage of Bersi and Steingerðr by incapacitating the boat (with an auger?), like the diminishing measuring rod, injured thumb, capsized ship, snapped sailyard, stolen cloak pin, attack by sea-monsters and, paradoxically, negligence in ritual magical matters, can be seen to fit into the larger picture of third function impairment and enhancement, impotency and potency, one of the great mythic patterns in the Indo-European cultural inheritance.<sup>7</sup> Finally, as opposed to the sky-related hang-

<sup>7</sup> Kormákr's brother Þorgils advised that they travel by land. It will be recalled from *Laxdæla* that Þórðr, when fetching his mother and charging Kotkell, elected to have the stock brought by land, while he took his mother's goods and his party by boat. Feminine malice and magic, and marine environment are common to both episodes. Other evidence of mythic patterning carried into the organization of legendary secular "history" is evident when Kormákr and his brother

ing or falling death of some kings, or heroes' deaths on the field of battle by weapons, Kormákr, in the third functional marine and subterranean sphere (where sorcerers also end), is crushed against the female earth in a final convergence of male sacrifice (*blót*), as masculinity had been earlier sacrificed, and sexual union. In fact, one of Kormákr's most celebrated stanzas (st. 61) features the imagery of land collapsing into the sea, an event no more likely to occur than the waning of his love. Ironically, it is rather Kormákr who will collapse toward the underearth.

\* \* \*

Now to pull these interwoven strands somewhat tighter. In doing so, we shall note a strong Odinic thread running through the incidents here reviewed, not so much the presence of the divinity as action in spheres where he is dominant or implicated: arcane wisdom, poetry, disguise (here expressed as cross-dressing), illegal and emasculating magic, combat, death (Polomé 1991). The accompanying figure situates the incidents of the two sagas on the grid suggested by the title of this study, less to point up similarities between the two sagas than to illustrate how two saga writers chose to deal with these concerns as a complex. On balance, neither questionable sexual identity (real or manipulated) nor magic (black or white, both highly conventionalized) nor foreign origins (realized through immigration or in temperament) is sufficient alone or in concert to impede the conventional functioning of early Icelandic society. Like erotic poetry, the temptations of adultery, and perceptions of female sexuality, they are accommodated within, rather than reconciled to or suppressed by the larger pattern of societal movement so often expressed agonistically in feud, its meditation and resolution. The legal framework all but contains sexual ambiguity and magic, divorce and charges of slander being available remedies on the one count, no maleficent magicians going unpunished in the sagas on the other. The *níðstǫng* 'pole of insult', on occasion combining magic, language, accusations of homosexual-

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Porgils are projected against the attributes of the "Divine Twins" or, from the well-known Greek evidence, *Dioscourai*, third functional heroes in the Dumézilian scheme of things. In the characterization of the Icelandic brothers, one is a contentious poet and dueller, the other a taciturn and gentle farmer. In an opening scene, one elects the mountains, the other the seashore, for domestic work. The "saviours at sea" motif, in which they rescue their sun- or swan-maiden sister (the relationship at times incestuous), is exemplified in their recovery of the blond Steingerðr from vikings. As the proponent of fertility, it is Porgils who urges his brother to accept Bersi's sister Helga in marriage. The Divine Twins were also founders of cities, the birth of aristocratic twins perhaps earlier seen as a signal for the community to divide. This may account for the rather arbitrary introduction by Kormákr of the nickname *Skarði* (< *skarð* 'notch, hack; harelip?') for his brother (st. 54 f.) and, during the warring in the British Isles, the attribution of the founding of Scarborough (*Skarðaborg*) to them. Although Kormákr and Porgils are not passed in review, see Ward 1968 and 1974.

ity, and social pressure, marks the outer limit of tolerance in early Iceland. Foreign origins, whether of persons or objects, Norwegian or Celtic, are rather differently managed in the family sagas, largely in extra-legal fashion. The ambiguity toward Norway is clearly expressed. The Celtic fact – and here we must remember the contingent of original settlers who came from Ireland and the Western Isles, with their Celtic slaves and in some cases, mixed blood – is fairly openly dealt with in *Laxdæla saga*, perhaps best illustrated in Óláfr Hǫskuldsson's rejection of the Irish throne to which his mother's descent entitled him, but lies submerged in many other sagas, like a skeleton locked in the ethnic closet.<sup>8</sup> Kotkell and Óláfr are black and white contrasts, Kormákr and Þorvaldr *tinteinn* more shaded realizations. In conclusion, these several threats destabilize but do not destroy society, and in doing so they interact in complex ways that, in these two sagas at least, must be seen as the intentional strengthening of saga dynamics and a statement of the strength of the early Icelandic commonwealth – an elegiac statement, since that strength was in decline at the time of the sagas' composition.

\* \* \*

<b>Threats to Social Stability and Cultural Integrity</b>	<b>Laxdæla saga</b>	<b>Kormáks saga</b>
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Dissolution/non-realization of marriage	Þorvaldr/Guðrún Þórðr/Auðr	Kormákr/Steingerðr Bersi/Steingerðr Kormákr/Helga (Bersi's sister)
Cross-dressing, -acting*	Þorvaldr, Auðr	Steingerðr (ship) Kormákr (sexually passive, feminine temperament?)
Symbolic violation (of person or marriage)*	Auðr → Þórðr	Steinnarr/Kormákr → Bersi Kormákr → Þorvarðr (Þorvaldr)
<i>Foreign Origins</i>	Kotkell & family	Kormákr

<sup>8</sup> See the recent review of studies on this topic in Sigurðsson 1988. Aðalsteinsson 1989 argues that apparent Celtic and Icelandic similarities in ABO blood group gene frequencies are the consequence of selection, viz., the susceptibility of certain blood groups to the ravages of cholera. The Celtic component among the settlers would then be confirmed at that suggested by other indicators, historical and anthropometric: about 15 %, at most 25 %. More speculatively, I would suggest that the original non-Norse element in the post-settlement population may have been suppressed through infanticide preferentially practiced on the female offspring of Celtic and other slave mothers; for a general discussion, although not of the "Irish question", see Clover 1988.

*Magic**Seiðr*, evil eye, curse\*

- impairing	Stígandi → Þorleikr Hallbjörn → farm	Þórveig → Kormákr
- fatal	Kotkell & family → Þórðr, Hrút's son	blótrisi → Kormákr

## Verbal

- provocation	Guðrún → Þórðr	Steingerðr → Bersi
- flattery	Kotkell → Þorleikr	
- erotic poetry*		Kormákr → Steingerðr, her family & husbands

Figure 1. Topical interweaving in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 34–38) and *Kormáks saga*. \* = Odinic involvement

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