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“*Helzt þóttumk nú heima í millim...*”

## A reassessment of Hervör in light of seiðr’s supernatural gender dynamics

### Introduction

*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, a *fornaldarsaga* whose oldest extant Icelandic manuscript dates to the first decade of the fourteenth century, had excited imaginations of early modern antiquarians, poets, and Romantic nationalists with its tapestry of Danish legendary matter (Fell 1996), but it was not until the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century – amid the ascent of gender-focused scholarship – that the relatively brief section in the saga concerning Hervör Bjarmarsdóttir started to attract critical attention of its own.

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**Abstract:** Focusing on *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, this article examines Hervör’s cross-dressing from the perspective of her confrontation with the dead on Sámsey, attempting to go beyond the conventional biary-gender model which still continues to be employed in saga criticism. Aiming to situate the present inquiry within the discursive matrix of Old Norse-Icelandic worldview, I engage recent research on *seiðr* and *ergi* which challenges standard readings of these concepts, expanding *ergi* from mere “unmanliness” to the broader notion of “queerness” as sexually ambiguous and perverse magical otherness, and *seiðr* to supernatural empowerment. A closer examination of the *ergi* complex provides a platform from which an interplay of multiple gender possibilities may be observed – not as fixed dichotomous polarities as they appear in modern perspective, but as a polyphonic inter-gender continuum. One’s positioning within this continuum, then, depends upon the extent of one’s immersion into the supernatural. The case of Hervör is used as an illustration of how the inter-gender dynamics of sexual abnormality play out in her own situation. It is argued that her cross-dressing activity is not ad hoc, but is crucial to her supernatural transformation into a wielder of power that can awaken the dead at Sámsey.

**Keywords:** *Fornaldarsögur*, the supernatural, *seiðr*, gender, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.

Indeed, *Hervarar saga* presents a curious gender-reversal of a familiar supernatural Eddic motif. While it is Óðinn, the master of *seiðr* and spellcraft, who is famous for summoning dead female sibyls by his magic to inquire for prophesies, and while Svipdagr resurrects his sorcerous matriarch Gróa to ask for magically empowered protection in the Eddic poem *Grógaldr*, in this present saga we have a female hero who is conjuring up her dead father to appear before her: “Vaki þú, Angantýr / vek þik Hervör”.<sup>1</sup> While the female prophetesses warn Óðinn of impending doom, in Hervör’s case we have the words of prophetic warning being directed to a female from the dead lips of a male. This gender reversal is made all the more intriguing given the context of Hervör’s behavior before as well as after this episode, as the waking of Angantýr occurred at a time in her life when she was clad in male garments, and indeed having assumed a male name.

Despite their prominence, the gender-related supernatural phenomena in this narrative have received little attention to date. The rise of women-focused saga research has run parallel with the rise of gender as a subject in 1970’s feminist identity politics (Wallach Scott 1999), and the latter had left a considerable impact on the former (Stig Sørensen 2009). Old Norse research into gender in the sagas has an ongoing tendency to lean towards literary approaches from a modern theoretical viewpoint, which regards the subjects of magic and supernatural as mere literary motifs without giving them a more thorough consideration (Anderson and Swenson eds. 2002, Bagerius 2009, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013).

Old Norse scholarship on gender and women in the sagas has a notable tendency, for the most part, to draw parallels and contrasts between Old Norse society and the present, operating under assumption that the cultural vocabulary, values, and social attitudes of modernity are an adequate measuring stick against which the past may be evaluated and judged. Such inquiries and critiques stem from the assumption of a linear progression from the barbarous cruelty of the middle ages to the present, and their tone is not always free of accusatory and pejorative condescension towards the Old Norse texts under examination, from the stance of a modern progressive society looking back at the savage primitive past (Larington 1992, Jochens 1996, Ballif Straubhaar 2001, Helga Kress 2002).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 22. ‘Awaken, Angantýr / Hervör wakes you’.

<sup>2</sup> Supernatural encounters with the trolls and other *vættir* have been reduced to being seen as “xenophobic situations, caricaturing those thought unfit to dominate” (Ballif Straubhaar 2001: 117). While the ethnic analogy in the human-troll relations is a stimulating proposition, it is somewhat puzzling to encounter the claim that such a reading offers a “more realistic set of principles underlying these narrative tropes” (106) at the expense of alternate folkloric interpretations of the same motif.

The imposition of modern theoretical gender frameworks in such interpretations upon texts stemming from different cultural contexts not infrequently leads to a circular argument, which runs the risk of projecting upon that culture of personal biases and assumptions. They do not bring us any closer to arriving at a more enriched understanding of how gender was constructed within the discursive matrix of Old Norse society, as the latter is approached through the discursive matrix of our own.<sup>3</sup> “Repression may be said to produce the object that it comes to deny,” notes Judith Butler (1990: 93) – and indeed, it is the unfortunate irony that such readings are participating in constructing the very same discriminatory attitudes towards women in Old Norse sources that they stand in criticism of.

Such has been the fate, within modern theoretical literary analyses, of the female warrior figure in Norse texts – and in particular, that of Hervör from *Hervarar saga* who may be the most vivid exemplification of this character type. Not only is she depicted as dominant and independent, but engaging in activity and behavior which strikingly challenges the very notion of gender binary – namely, her cross-dressing and assumption of a male name. Furthermore, the saga narrator commences to refer to this character using a male name and masculine pronouns, presenting additional problems for attempts that seek to explain this through the static prism of the above gender model.<sup>4</sup> Engaging in the battle of wills

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<sup>3</sup> A notable departure from the biological binary gender model has been undertaken by Carol Clover in a 1993 article where she proposes to divorce gender from sex and read the gender binary not as a biological, but a social construction, consisting in the duality between *hvatr* (‘strong’) and *blauðr* (‘weak’). These social genders were not fixed or pre-ordained, and there was no guaranteed status quo for an individual: thus, one’s social status may slip away if not maintained or defended (1993: 375). This re-interpretation of gender is only handicapped in the conclusion that it draws. After abandoning the notion of gendered sexuality in favor of a one-sex model, and after situating gender within the Old Norse cultural vocabulary, Clover concludes that the default gender in Old Norse society was still “male”, thereby implying the repression of the feminine and the pressure put on women to behave like men in order to be socially accepted. “It goes without saying,” she writes, “that the one-sex or single-standard system ... is the one that advantaged men” (1993: 379). This conclusive summary of the society in question as gendered and unequal is somewhat perplexing, given Clover’s previously stated observations in the same article that “this is a universe in which maleness and femaleness were always negotiable” (378), and that “biological femaleness does not determine one’s juridical status” (370). Thus, we are back to the very same universalized, polarizing gender binary that has so often been applied uninterrogated in earlier saga studies.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Christopher Tolkien’s 1960 English translation of the saga ignores the shift towards the masculine pronouns and continues to refer to Hervör’s male *Hervarðr* persona as “she” even when the Old Icelandic text indicates the masculine gender (as it does in all the manuscript versions of *Hervarar saga*). It is not unlikely that the avoidance of gender issues in this English translation may have played a part in their lesser visibility within non-Nordic literary circles.

with a *draugr* who used to be her *berserker*-father, she is the central focus of *Hervararkviða* (indeed, in one saga variant she is presented as speaking entirely in poetry, up until after her marriage when the saga's focus begins to shift to the next generation).<sup>5</sup> Yet instead of regarding Hervör's depiction in the saga as an invitation to depart from the modern theoretical construct of gender binary, there has been an ongoing tendency to seek some ulterior (and necessarily patriarchal) motive in her portrayal, further limiting the creative range of potential that there is to explore in this multifaceted and complex character.

To Jenny Jochens (1996: 100), Hervör's presence in the saga functions as a mere placeholder in a genealogical link that is being detailed in the narrative. Noting that the latter portion of *Hervarar saga*, constructed around the poem *Hlöðskviða*, is based upon the legendary battle which stems from a more distant historic past than the first few chapters of the saga, Jochens proceeds to refer to Hervör's namesake granddaughter, who is depicted as participating in the aforementioned battle, as "Germanic Hervör", while calling the character we are presently considering as "Viking Hervör". These blatantly anachronistic references are used to posit the "Viking Hervör" as a later invention/interpolation into the older legend to fill the generation gap, a reading which strikingly undermines her own singular importance and contribution to the plot (ibid: 98). Torfi H. Tulinius (2002) and William Layher (2007) follow Jochens in interpreting Hervör's role as bridging the generation gap in the (necessarily male) family legacy, concerned with issues of inheritance.<sup>6</sup> Layher reads the sword *Tyrfingr* as "emblematic of fallen patriarchy" (2007: 196–97); Angantýr's refusals to give up his sword are thus ascribed to unwillingness of patriarchal authority to recognize a female heir.

Hervör's cross-dressing in the Old Norse context has likewise been regarded as a mere fulfillment of a formal social function (Clover 1986). Hervör being an only child and with no male relatives who could claim

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<sup>5</sup> This is the so-called R version of the saga, on which Tolkien's 1960 edition relies and whose manuscript dates to early fifteenth century (Hall 2005: 1).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Jochens, however, Torfi H. Tulinius grounds *Hervarar saga* in the context of thirteenth-century Iceland where it was written, taking as a point of departure this saga's relevance to its contemporary audience and offering a reading of this saga (among others) as an expression of thirteenth-century Icelandic social and political concerns (Torfi H. Tulinius 2002: 73–114). Despite its limited focus on Hervör and a deficiency in considering the agentive power of the supernatural as depicted in this and other medieval narratives, this study remains valuable for its historiographic approach to saga literature and for its effort to reconcile the long-perceived gap between the Old Norse legendary matter and the Christian values of saga writers and their audiences.

her fallen father’s inheritance, Clover interprets her as assuming the symbolic role of a “functional son” in order to get what was hers: “So powerful is the principle of male inheritance that when it necessarily passes through a female, she must become, in legend if not in life, a ‘functional son’”(Clover 1986: 39).

This “functional son” model becomes inadequate, however, when the saga’s supernatural elements are taken into account. Hervör departs to claim her heirloom sword not towards a social assembly, but towards a dire, spectral island aglow with barrow-fires, and instead of presenting her legal case at court among witnesses and officials, she engages on that island in a battle of wills and verses with the dead whom she herself had raised, with no other witnesses save for some maggots and worms, perhaps: “Hervarðr, Hjörvarðr, / Hrani, Angantýr! / vek ek yðr alla / undir viðar rótum...”<sup>7</sup> Such images as *Hervararkviða* paints in the mind’s eye – the grave mounds gaping open, blazing with otherworldly lights, the warriors’ corpses still in their battle gear stirring back to life under the tangled roots of the trees, the flashes and thunder in the night that may be perceivable from very far away – such a place as this, where no one dares to linger after nightfall even for generous reward (cf. *Hervarar saga*, chapter 4) is so far removed from norm and daily reality, that the symbolic assumption of a “functional son” social role Clover suggests for Hervör does not ring true in the phantasmagoric context of *Sámsey*. Hervör furthermore identifies herself as the only daughter, and Angantýr repeatedly calls her that, among other feminine terms, thus rendering the functional son procedure redundant. It is evident in the poem that she gets the sword through her relentlessness and overpowers her ghostly father with her sheer determination and stubborn resolve – not through a formalized inheritance procedure.

It is remarkable that given the strong presence of supernatural elements in Hervör’s story – not to mention her cursed heirloom sword Tyrfingr – the scholarship on Hervör for the most part continues to divorce her from that broader magic context, including her cross-dressing activity itself. While John McKinnell’s recent study of *Hervararkviða* does engage the theme of raising the dead, he dismisses Hervör’s assumption of a male persona as mere “self-protection”, as she “presumably cannot afford to be recognized as a woman by her shipmates” (2014: 301). Given the saga’s account of Hervör becoming not just a member,

<sup>7</sup> Jón Helgason (1924:22). ‘Hervarðr, Hjörvarðr, / Hrani, Angantýr! / I awaken you all / under trees’ roots...’

but a chieftain of that viking group (implicitly, its most dominant alpha), such interpretation is more indicative of its author's uncritical assumption of female subordination than of particular circumstances afforded by the narrative. As with previous interpretations of Hervör considered above, she is taken out of the supernatural context of the saga as a pre-supposed archetype of an uncritically assumed womanhood transcending cultural variables. Without being re-interrogated as to the contemporary gendered conceptions that they employ, such readings only end up limiting the scope of their own analyses, contributing more spokes to the same wheel. The result is that such contemporary cultural vocabulary becomes discursively established as a pre-discursive point of theoretical departure in saga studies, with the assumption of certain universal attitudes and patterns of human behavior being present at all stages of history. "Descriptions of warfare in medieval texts", writes Megan McLaughlin (1990: 17), "were peppered with references to gender, references which equated fighting ability with virility". Yet if capability on the battlefield was equated with virility, then it could just as equally be that that each portrayal of a warlike female character is in fact endowing this female with the very same "virility", thus stretching or indeed negating the modern conception of separate fixed genders in a male-female polarized static dichotomy.

The oppositional binary approach to gender not infrequently enters the discourse hand in hand with other binaries: such as the socio-historical reality of medieval Iceland versus the literary fiction produced therein, as well as the oppositional placement of Old Norse paganism versus Christianity as two discrete entities – equating mythology and magic with religion and finding it incompatible with Christian society (a recurring tendency in medieval studies, as Víðar Pálsson points out (2008: 124)). How then can we attempt to look into medieval Icelandic culture from within itself, transcending these polarizing binary divisions, and how may these findings aid in (re)interpreting gender?

A nuanced direction has been proposed in approaching magic and the supernatural within the context of Scandinavian medieval culture: the concept of "magical reality" and its application to *fornaldarsögur*, as used effectively by Hans Jakob Orning in a recent article, where he argues that the importance of magic applies not only to *fornaldarsögur* but more generally to Old Norse culture as well (2010: 8). Yet this approach is not new to the field, as Orning revitalizes Aron Gurevich's reading of medieval popular culture. Instead of being a mere survival of the past in the medieval present, the magical worldview was absorbed and assimilated

into Christianity in the process of their interaction: “A unity arose from their encounter – a unity surely not devoid of contradictions and ambivalence, but one in which old magical beliefs and Christian teachings found meaning and function precisely in their mutual correlation” (Gurevich 1990: 91).

As an example of the popularly perceived “magic” in Christian context may be mentioned the ceremony of mass, whose theological interpretations tended to remain obscure to passive onlookers, as well as the cult of saints who, in medieval popular imagination, have developed from paragons of virtue into miracle workers (*ibid.*). To this may be added an observation by Dror Segev that the medieval cleric himself “was perceived as a magician, as his education and routine contact with the holy apparatus and instruments of worship ‘charged’ him with occult powers” (Segev 2001: 191). Instead of assuming an existence of an unbridgeable ideological gap between the clerical and the popular spheres, “the supernatural world of medieval reality was a subject for intellectual speculations and a part of daily life at the same time, and practicing magic was [...] a reaction to this reality” (*ibid.*).

This reading of the medieval mind and the magical worldview which it envisioned may be used to reconcile the “history versus fiction” debate in approaching the sagas for pieces of information regarding the past, as has been illustrated by Ármann Jakobsson in a study on *Bárðar saga Snæfellsás*. Despite its fantastical and supernatural content which may defy belief and credibility today, this saga – as attested by its inclusion in the Vatnshyrna manuscript with other *Íslendingasögur* – was nevertheless regarded as a factual history by its contemporaries, as a part of their own perceived reality which by no means has to coincide with ours (Ármann Jakobsson 1998: 53).<sup>8</sup> In recent years, as part of the resurgent scholarly focus on *fornaldarsögur*, there has been a pronounced interest in collapsing the long-perceived “natural” vs. “supernatural” binary, and both became increasingly regarded as part of the perceived magical reality of the medieval imagination.<sup>9</sup> Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir sums it up when she writes, “it should be borne in mind that the worldview that

<sup>8</sup> The oldest surviving manuscript of this saga is preserved in the so-called Pseudo-Vatnshyrna, but its intent as a historical work rather than recreational remains evident by its placement among other accounts of the Icelandic past: “the important criterion seems to be whether the author believed in what he wrote, not whether present-day scholars do” (Ármann Jakobsson 1998: 54).

<sup>9</sup> As addressed in a number of papers at the 13th International Saga Conference in Durham (preprint volumes ed. McKinnell and Ashurst 2006), whose theme that year had focused on “The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature”.

underlies and distinguishes the *fornaldarsögur* need not reflect historical facts in the Norse past but rather the notions people had about that past” (2006: 34).

Thus, while it would be highly suspect and ill-informed to claim that the sagas – both legendary and those dealing with settlement-era Iceland – are repositories of ‘authentic’ beliefs and events stemming from the past they are depicting, to dismiss them out of hand as mere literary inventions leading an autonomous existence outside of any cultural context is no less misleading. However fantastical in their depictions of magic and supernatural, they may yet provide glimpses into the attitudes which their authors and audiences have had regarding their own contemporary medieval Icelandic society.

With these caveats in mind, it may be possible to circumnavigate the polarizing “history vs. fiction” debate and look to sagas’ depictions and constructions of gender not as some abstract literary devices divorced from day-to-day existence, but as products of a medieval mind that are situated within its magical reality. As enmeshed as these depictions may be within supernatural, the said supernatural content is no longer an obstacle, but a part of a medieval Icelandic worldview and thus a no less dominant factoring agent which plays a part in the construction of gender, as it may have been envisioned.

The present article aims at expanding the current discourse on gender in the context of Old Norse texts by investigating the supernatural involvement in its negotiation, with an objective to develop a new method of approximating gender dynamics within the discursive matrix of medieval Iceland. The modern conception of oppositional gender binary, handicapped by its inflexible absolutism, is not to be pre-discursively assumed for these texts if we wish to go beyond the tautological cycle of self-constructed and self-limited gendered scholarship. The stance I adopt in the present analysis towards magic and supernatural is a recognition thereof as an integral part of the perceived daily reality as portrayed in the sagas, departing from the tendency in literary scholarship to interpret it as mere stylistic motifs or narrative elements inserted by authors within their creative fiction.

The main focus will be the magical complex of *seiðr* as the axis around which discussion of genders will rotate in the context of this study. I engage recent research on *seiðr* and *ergi* which challenges standard readings of these concepts, expanding *ergi* from mere “unmanliness” to the broader notion of “queerness” as sexually ambiguous and perverse magical otherness, and *seiðr* to supernatural empowerment. It is proposed



that a closer examination of the *ergi* complex will provide a platform from which a dynamic and fluid interplay of multiple genders could be observed – not as fixed dichotomous polarities as they appear in modern perspective, but as a polyphonic inter-gender continuum.<sup>10</sup> One’s positioning within this continuum, then, depends upon the extent of one’s immersion into the supernatural. The connotation of perversity and sexual abnormality lurking within the practice of *seiðr* – a distinct magical side-effect within the Norse imagination – will be of especial interest for this study as we explore in what ways it marks and alters those who immerse in it. From these observations, an apparatus will be constructed for approximating the dynamics of behavior and sexual abnormality of characters within that supernatural inter-gender continuum.

*Hervarar saga* will be used as a case study of how the inter-gender dynamics outlined above play out in Hervör’s situation, with a strong emphasis on the supernatural context of martial activity and its correlation with the hostile use of *seiðr*. The Sámsey episode will form a central part of this analysis as a pivotal point in her story, and the observations made along the way regarding *seiðr* and its various transformative aspects will come into play. It will be argued that her cross-dressing activity (taking up not only male clothing and male name, but internalizing that masculinity to the point that the saga narrator begins to refer to this character using masculine pronouns) is not ad hoc, but is crucial to her supernatural transformation into a wielder of power who can awaken the dead at Sámsey and obtain from them what she wants.

## I. The problem of supernatural empowerment

### I.1. *Seiðr* as a tool for approaching gender

It is opportune to begin an inquiry into the magic of *seiðr* by examining the range of activities which fall under its practice. This in itself has not been free of controversy in past and present scholarship as to its meaning and interpretation, given the lack of detailed information regarding *seiðr*

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<sup>10</sup> It must be emphasized that I do not consider Hervör to be sexually transgender in the way it is understood today (the term, with its modern context of identity politics, is becoming as congealed, restricted, and problematic as the feminist category of ‘women’); hence my preference for the term “inter-gender” for the purpose of the present inquiry. The usage of the term is only meant to illustrate the instability and fluctuation of the conception of gender at large, rather than create yet another category.

rituals in extant sources.<sup>11</sup> Snorri, however, does provide a summary of its range of uses in his *Ynglinga saga*, giving us a glimpse of how *seiðr* was imagined in thirteenth-century Iceland:

Óðinn kunnir þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttur fylgði, ok framði sjálfir, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna og óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mönnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mönnum vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skammlaust við at fara...<sup>12</sup>

From this description it becomes clear that *seiðr* was perceived as being used for divination and foreknowledge, as well as deployed against others for hostile and manipulative purposes. Taken together with Snorri's statements that directly preceded this quote – that Óðinn could also change his shape and send his spirit or mind out from his body in any form – has led to a widely held, yet hotly debated – view among scholars that “*seiðr* was an ecstatic kind of sorcery” (Heide 2006: 164), with certain links to shamanism (Strömbäck 1935, Price 2002, Solli 2008).

The term *ergi*, however, which Snorri connects closely with *seiðr*, has proven to be more troublesome in its potential implications for this practice, as well as for its practitioners. The interpretation of *ergi* has for a long time been generally accepted as denoting unmanliness and effeminate behavior, not least due to Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's (1983) classic study of unmanliness within medieval Icelandic social context as depicted in the sagas, and the Cleasby-Vigfusson translation of it as “lewdness” (1957: 133) adds to it a flavor of sexual perversion, as well as

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<sup>11</sup> The discourse and debate in *seiðr* scholarship, stemming from nearly one-and-a-half-century of focused interest in this subject, is outlined at great length by Neil Price (2002: 73–89) and François-Xavier Dillmann (2006: 289–301, summarizing the debate around *seiðr* from the standpoint of shamanism). Price notes that “sorcery for aggressive ends” has been one of the earliest focal points from which *seiðr* has been approached in scholarship (2002: 76), seconded by Dillmann who suggests that *seiðr* may originally have referred exclusively to such maleficent magic (2006: 137). Clive Tolley notes that the diverse mentions of *seiðr* usage in the sources demolish the notion that it was exclusively a prophetic visionary application, and broadly describes *seiðr* as “effecting a physical change by means of magic – in other words, spells” (2009: 141). Alaric Hall adds that this magic extends into the psychological dimension as well, “manipulation of targets’ states of mind” being among its intended uses (2007: 130).

<sup>12</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 9. ‘Óðinn knew the skill from which comes the most power, and practiced it himself, which is called *seiðr*, and from it he could know people’s fates and things yet un-happened, and also to cause people death or misfortune or ill-health, and also to take wit or strength from people and give to others. But from this witchcraft, when it is practiced, follows so much *ergi* that it was not thought unshameful for males to practice it...’

of obscene deviation from the norm. In recent years, however, there has been a departure from regarding *ergi* in its strict specificity as unmanliness, in favor of interpreting it within broader frames of transgression and perversion (Price 2002, Ármann Jakobsson 2008, Solli 2008). The still persistent trend in scholarship’s association of *ergi* with effeminacy rests squarely upon Snorri’s paragraph quoted above, yet its transparency may be misleading. All that it says there is that it presents a risk for men and was therefore relegated to priestesses, provoking an uncritical assumption of femininity for these latter figures, while this may just as equally suggest the opposite. These enigmatic priestesses, by the virtue of their craft, may already be so deviant that they could absorb *ergi*’s effects with greater ease than the uninitiated, however virile the latter may be. A word “queer” has been suggested as an alternative definition for *ergi* in its transgressive capacity as a deviation from the norm (Price 2002, Ármann Jakobsson 2008, Solli 2008). It bears emphasizing that this notion of queerness is not to be confused with homosexuality, as the latter belongs within the same oppositional gendered binary as the heterosexual matrix, of which it may be said to be a copy (Butler 1990: 125) – thereby losing the connotation of otherness that queerness suggests. As the extant Old Norse texts themselves do not attempt to grace this term with a precise definition, this broader transgressive reading of it is adequately fitting for Cleasby-Vigfusson’s loose translation without confining it to any one specific feature. Thus, we find mention of a *seiðr* act performed by a male practitioner in *Gísla saga*: “fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi og skelmiskap”, it says of his ritual, and the lack of further details as to what this act involved seemingly plays into emphasizing its unspeakable perversity.<sup>13</sup>

An accusation of being *ergi*, furthermore, was a severe insult in medieval Iceland (Strom 1974), and even the One-eyed master of *seiðr* was not immune to it in the Eddic corpus: Óðinn’s involvement with the magic craft is singled out in *Lokasenna* when Loki mocks him for working *seiðr* rituals on Sámsey like female sorceresses (“sem völor”) as well as for appearing like a witch (“vitka líki”) – thus, Loki concludes, “hugða ek þat args aðal”.<sup>14</sup>

In light of this “sexual stigma” (Lionarons 1997: 420) and shame that *seiðr* apparently brought upon its male practitioners, some scholars have been inclined to interpret *seiðr* as a distinctly female activity, gender-

<sup>13</sup> Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943: 56–57. ‘He carried out that witchcraft with all the *ergi* and devilry...’

<sup>14</sup> Finnur Jónsson 1905: 126. ‘I thought that to be *ergi* behavior.’

based (Higley 1994, Jochens 1996, Raudvere 2003). Eldar Heide connects the practice of *seiðr* to spinning and weaving – thus it becomes “certainly unmanly for men, because spinning was the most characteristic women’s work” (2006: 167). The connections that are drawn between *seiðr* and spinning are worthy of being examined more closely at this point, as we will build upon these observations further in the present discussion.

## I.2 Sexual perversion of *seiðr*, and what may cause it

In Heide’s interpretation, not only were the spells of *seiðr* brought forth through the literal or symbolic acts of spinning, but the nature of this magic itself was potentially perceived in spinning-like, thread-like terms. He argues that the magician, in sending out a projection of his own mind or spirit for whatever purpose, is actually “spinning a mind emissary”, and that “the sorcerer’s mind sent forth” – in shape of a wind or of another being – “could be conceived as something spun, a thread” (Heide 2006: 164–5). In support of this argument, copious examples from Scandinavian folklore are cited where magic projectiles take the form of whirlwinds: “whirlwind spins, it resembles a rope or thread, and sorcerers use it for attracting desired objects, like a magic lasso” (ibid). Another case for a mind projection emissary as something spun is found in late medieval Icelandic magic in the shape of *tilberi*, a magic creature that sucked milk from other people’s resources and brought it home to its master. This creature was made from a human rib with wool wrapped around it, and – as Heide notes – it looked like “a shuttle in the traditional, warp-weighted loom”, thus carrying a connotation of being spun. In Sweden and Norway, this same creature (albeit under a different name) looked like a ball of yarn, while in Finland it was made from a spindle with yarn still on it. The thread-like connotation of this magic milk thief is further reinforced by the nature of the milking activity: just as hand milking resembles pulling, a spun *tilberi* is deployed to draw out milk from the cattle as if the sorcerer is “attracting [the milk] by magic, invisible rope”. Heide comments upon the connection of this activity to one of the popular uses of *seiðr* in Icelandic tradition – namely, to attract (“*seiða til sín*”), to draw the object of the spell towards oneself, “as if the victim is pulled by an invisible rope” (Heide 2006: 164–5).<sup>15</sup> The associa-

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<sup>15</sup> However, in reducing *tilberi*’s magic role to a yarn-resembling thief deployed to steal the milk from others, Heide’s reading somewhat domesticates this creature and diminishes the horrific scope of its magic, as well as the expense at which it operates. As explored in Ármann Jakobsson’s 2009 article on supernatural parasites, *tilberi* bears a perversely sexual

tion of magic emissaries with spinning or spun threads thus appears to be a frequently encountered theme in Nordic folklore.

Heide takes this further by merging this interpretation with the perversity that *seiðr* can inflict on its male practitioner. Having argued that the *seiðr* mind emissary could be called *gandr*,<sup>16</sup> he notes that “the close derivation *göndull* could in Old Norse mean ‘penis’; and in Icelandic pornography, *gandur* is a common word for the same” (Heide 2006: 167). As an example of this symbolism occurring in magic context, Heide cites the word *næjtiendírre* from the eighteenth-century Saami shamans, which corresponds to *gandr*’s function as a magic emissary projectile. It translates as shaman’s phallus, and it was used by the Saami shamans against each other. Heide ties this symbolism to Sørensen’s concept of “phallic aggression” within Old Norse culture – “based upon the notion that one who penetrates in intercourse is the strongest” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 27). There are also some examples in magic context where ropes themselves resemble phalluses.<sup>17</sup>

This phallic interpretation of the spun magic emissary projectiles could spill upon the thread imagery of *seiðr*, and thus the act of spinning itself becomes charged with sexual symbolism and obscenity. Heide notes further that a distaff used for spinning wool was commonly held between the legs of the spinner,<sup>18</sup> and suggests that the excavated staves from numerous Scandinavian Viking Age female graves, which have recently and

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and parasitic relationship to its (female) creator and deployer, sucking on her breast and feeding off of her, and the fact that this creature is fashioned out of a human rib adds an additional tinge of morbidity, going well beyond the yarn spinning imagery into darker and more gruesome magic territories, such as reanimation and vampirism.

<sup>16</sup> This was the subject of Heide’s 2006 dissertation *Gand, seid og ándevind*, where the identification of *gandr* with the *seiðr* mind emissary is central to his argument (for Heide’s overview of the existing scholarship on this matter, as well as for his argument that *gandir* are in fact magic emissaries, pp. 79–155 may be cited). Heide follows the interpretation of *gandr* after Strömbäck 1975, who saw it as “something which is connected with the soul of a magician and can be sent out from him or her in ecstasy” (6–7).

<sup>17</sup> Such as the account of Isaac Olsen, cited by Heide: “When an early 18th century Saami shaman was in a trance, a girl brought him back out of it. In a sign of gratitude, the shaman tells her that ”she shall now possess and use his male member in accordance with her will and as it pleases her, and she shall now possess and make use of it as a tether ... and as a draught-rope, and drape it around her shoulders like an ornament, and she shall have it as an oar-loop and a sled-tackle and around her neck like a chain, and over her shoulders like a piece of jewelry and an ornament, and tie it around her waist like a belt” (Olsen 1910: 46–47).

<sup>18</sup> Heide 2006b, p. 298 – which includes an illustration of the distaff held by a woman between her legs, engaged in spinning action. The fact that this illustration comes from a church painting in Uppland, Sweden (ca. 1500), however, begs the question whether the subversive interpretation of this image with the staff is more likely to reside in the imaginative onlooker’s mind rather than in its intent.

convincingly been interpreted as *seiðr* staffs of the *völur* (Price 2002, Gardela 2009 and 2009b),<sup>19</sup> could potentially be regarded as ritual or cultic representations of distaffs (Heide 2006: 166–67).<sup>20</sup> Such staffs being quite phallic in their own right, it has been postulated that *seiðr* involved doing sexual or symbolically sexual acts with the distaff (Jochens 1996: 74)<sup>21</sup> – and certainly the spun thread-like penile magic emissaries deepen the obscenity even further. The male *ergi* has thus been explained through these allusions: while completely unnatural and perverse for men, “it should not be a problem that thread is spun by women” (Heide 2006:168).

While Heide’s observations are greatly stimulating, this conclusion is rather unsatisfactory, as it once again falls within the modern conception of the fixed binary gender system of male-female dichotomy, and rests rather largely upon a colorful imagination of its author in regard to the distaffs’ potential ritual use, while the medieval Icelandic sources on *seiðr* remain deeply ambiguous as to the nature of its rituals, as well as to the actual cause of male perversion; most of Heide’s sources come from relatively late post-medieval Scandinavian folklore.<sup>22</sup> That the practice of

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<sup>19</sup> Price 2002, as well as Gardela 2009 and 2009b. Writes Gardela: “Those ‘rods’, which in several cases were decorated with bronze knobs, are currently believed to be attributes of the ritual performers and labeled as *staves of sorcery* (a term first introduced by Neil Price in 2002. As Price argued, the staff was one of the main attributes of the Late Iron Age performers and there exist many sources which confirm that they were strongly associated with the practices of *seiðr* (2002: 175–180). Furthermore, an account from *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 76) suggests that the deceased seeresses were actually interred with their staffs. This piece of literary evidence strongly supports the archaeological interpretations of the graves with iron rods as belonging to *seiðr*-workers” (2009b, p. 286). The excavated staffs also bear a close similarity to the one that allegedly belonged to Þorbjörg litilvölva, in the narrative of *Eiríks saga rauða*: “var á knapp; hann var búinn með messingu ok settr steinum ofan um knappinn” (chapter 4). Gardela takes the connection he makes between the excavated staffs and the *völur* further by focusing on the staffs’ often bent, curving shapes and drawing a parallel between them and the similarly crooked staffs that belonged to magicians in Lithuanian and Polish folklore. Noting that “crookedness was considered a form of sacredness”, he remarks that the “crookedness of the staff (or its handle in shape of a twisted basket) would not only refer to the magical qualities of the object itself, but also to the supernatural (or divine) skills of the bearer”. (Gardela 2009: 203)

<sup>20</sup> This argument is based upon a visual resemblance of some *seiðr* staffs to the attested distaff artifacts (for a photograph of the distaff artifacts, see Heide 2006b: 252) – including a ring at the top of some staffs that could correspond to a strap for attaching wool.

<sup>21</sup> Noting that “objects other than babies pass in and out of women’s bodies” (ibid), Jochens seizes on the *gandr/göndull* connection to speculate that the perversity of *seiðr* consisted of the practitioner engaging in a sexual act with it, “but eventually only the staff remained as a symbol”.

<sup>22</sup> However, see Heide 2009 where he reviews the methodologies for approaching post-medieval folkloric sources for the purposes of Old Norse research and makes a case that late sources may still be useful and should not be dismissed out of hand.

*seiðr* for women was natural and unproblematic is taken for granted and left unchallenged. Resolving to stop its inquiry into *seiðr* along these polarized, ‘either-or’ gender lines, such an interpretation does not go further in considering the ramifications of what the involvement in *seiðr* could mean for women, and how they may be impacted by it.

Such explicitly phallic associations do not make female involvement with them any more normative than the male involvement. Handling and applying her ritual staff, the female *seiðr* practitioner makes it an extension of herself and her magic will, and indeed in sending out a mind emissary projectile that could be regarded as a phallus, she is in fact projecting a part of herself in this ubiquitously masculine form. This is quite far from an everyday female stereotype, and implies an increased masculine potency within such female *seiðr* workers. Marginalization of female magic practitioners in the sagas has been oft noted and interpreted – once more, from a modern perspective – as marginalization of females in Old Norse society along gender lines (Jochens 1996: 75, Lionarons 1997: 422, Helga Kress 2008: 21–49).<sup>23</sup> But is it not rather that they are depicted as marginal *because* of being magicians and *seiðr*-workers: ergo, not due to being women?<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is their association with supernatural powers that becomes the crucial factor in their otherness, not their female gender.

The weakness of the *seiðr*-along-gender-lines argument is that it can be turned the other way. Given the reasoning above, *seiðr* could just as equally be interpreted as a predominantly masculine activity, wherein

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<sup>23</sup> Jochens extrapolates that the teaching of *seiðr* practice to priestesses, in Snorri’s account, is a “misogynistic assignment” in itself, given the general “disapproval of *seiðr*” (1996: 75). That Freyja, in the same account by Snorri, had taught it to Óðinn in the first place appears to be conveniently forgotten.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth emphasizing that in his expansive opus on Icelandic magicians, Dillmann (2006) singles out all the named sorcerers in the sagas – and the ratio of the females to males is very narrow (he counts 38 female magicians and 32 male ones), shattering the frequently encountered view that magic in medieval Iceland was exclusively a female activity (157). The statistics gathered by Dillmann are very telling, and serve as a precaution against making a hasty generalization based on a single – or a handful of – text(s) while neglecting the others. How often the perceptions and interpretations of medieval Icelandic magicians are colored by such vibrant portrayals as those of Þorbjörg litlivölva from *Eiríks saga rauða* (chapter 4) or Katla from *Eyrbyggja* (ch. 16), while the no less capable (yet more obscure) male magicians like Hallbjörn Slikisteinsauga of *Laxdæla* (ch. 35) or Svanr of *Njála* (ch. 10) remain more or less in the dark. Dillmann elaborates further that being female (or, for *seiðr*menn, being male) is not to be seen as a pre-condition for working magic (158). Indeed, in following this argument it may be said that gender may not have been a dividing line when it came to magic practice, thereby dispelling the notion of a strictly “gendered” magic activity.

female magicians – not being biologically endowed – compensate for their phallic lacking by the use of symbolic attributes like the (di)staffs. It is worthy of note that just as their name implies, the staffs of the *völur* are wielded exclusively by females in the extant sources; for a male *seiðr* worker, an external phallic attribute would be redundant. Instead of being defined along clearly drawn gender lines, *seiðr* rather seems to affect its practitioners both ways, “otherizing” and marginalizing its wielder no matter the previous gender. It transforms and alters something in that person, marking him or her with a certain degree of sexual abnormality. Although *ergi* as used in the texts appears to imply male shame and unmanliness, the lack of a female counterpart for this term does not have to mean that the female sort of perversion did not exist – or could not have been imagined – within the Old Norse mind. In fact, the *Grágás* law code is quite egalitarian in its frown upon any kind of “otherness”: the male wearing of female clothes as well as female wearing of male clothes are both sufficient grounds for divorce,<sup>25</sup> and thus female and male abnormalities are weighed equally.

### I.3 Battle magic: *seiðr* and supernatural aggression

We may investigate what transformative effect *seiðr* could have exercised on females by concentrating upon the hostile, aggressive applications of this magic for inflicting or projecting violence. In keeping with Heide’s sexually-charged imagery, a magic *seiðr* attack may be perceived in terms of phallic aggression against a victim. A woman involved with *seiðr* for such hostile purpose is thus attaining increased male potency, as she takes on the role of a phallic aggressor in this act. When *seiðr* is deployed in the context of battle, this becomes even more so: as has been noted in previous scholarship, war and battle are traditionally regarded as male spheres of activity (McLaughlin 1990: 17, Jochens 1996: 87, Præstgaard 2002: 302–303).

An illustration of such transformed, nonstandard female beings may be found in the poem *Darraðarljóð* which is included in *Brennu-Njáls*

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<sup>25</sup> Kirsten Wolf 1997, citing *Festa-Páttir* section of *Grágás*, p. 155 (Kónungsbók; ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852). On the features of clothing, as described in the sagas, see Jochens 1991, where she analyzes the two divorce-provoking cross-dressings in *Laxdæla saga*, noting that male and female clothing was sex-specific in that each may have been made to accommodate the respective anatomies, especially the male and female pants. Given the design features she discusses, cross-dressing becomes more closely linked with sexual abnormality.



*saga*. Having set up a grotesque weaving loom where human heads serve as weights, human entrails serve as warp and weft, bloody spears are spindles and arrows are reels, twelve women begin to chant and work this macabre device, singing of battle and of their evidently supernatural empowerment in influencing this battle’s progress: “vindum, vindum / vef Darraðar... / látum eigi / líf hans farask / eigu valkyrjur / vals of kosti”.<sup>26</sup> While spinning wool was indeed a part of the daily social reality in medieval Iceland, this activity is depicted here in unwholesome and gruesome tones, as it is linked to gore and violence of war. As these women weave their battle spells, the loom itself becomes “an apparatus of sorcery employed for projection of destruction” (Price 2002: 331). The hostile magic context of this activity changes the way in which it is perceived, and transplants this seemingly familiar daily reality – women weaving – into an “other” dimension (sic). The weaving in this poem takes on a feminine and masculine aspect at the same time: a seemingly feminine work translated into masculine terms and performed with bristling, gore-besmeared weaponry meant to invoke the bloody chaos of war. This cannot but leave an impact on these weavers themselves.

The allusions to *valkyrjur* in *Darraðarljóð* has led many scholars to postulate that the poem depicts its magically potent weavers as being *valkyrjur* themselves (Price 2002: 334). Perhaps the most stereotyped female creatures of the battlefield in public imagination, the *valkyrjur* have often been cast within a framework of fixed gender boundaries – the fate, as seen above, shared by female *seiðr* practitioners at large within some scholarship. The Old Norse sources’ depiction of these supernatural beings of destruction in female shapes, as well as the resulting disregard for the modern conception of clearly defined gender boundaries, posit a difficulty for viewing these characters through the prism of the latter framework. Jenny Jochens, attempting to explain their existence and function, reduces *valkyrjur* to objects of male desire: “forced by nature of their expeditions to be away from home and women”, the sex-deprived viking men “consoled themselves by fantasizing about women” and “indulged in pleasant notions of female winged companions hovering above them during battles” (Jochens 1996: 111) – thus ironically constructing the very same misogynistic attitude towards women in Old Norse sources that she stands in criticism of. Just as in the case of female *seiðr* workers, such an interpretation only polarizes and freezes them in a narrow role

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<sup>26</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1944: 457. ‘We wind, we wind / web of spears / we oughtn’t let / his life be lost / *valkyrjur* have choice of [who is] slain.’

within a pre-supposed male domain, but as noted above, there is more to inter-gender dynamics of *seiðr* than this static male-female framework can allow.

Neil Price notes that the image and poetic representation of *valkyrjur* started undergoing transformation even during the Viking Age itself: by mid-tenth century, skaldic poems already were picturing the *valkyrjur* in the way that would be recognizable to Wagner's audiences nine hundred years later: armed and armored maidens on horses, the choosers of the slain for Óðinn's hall. The fact that the Eddic heroic poems tie the *valkyrjur* to mortal heroes, thus humanizing these female creatures, adds to this evolving medieval notion of perceiving them in tragico-romantic light (Price 2002: 334–5). Focusing on the aggressive use of *seiðr* magic in battle context, an alternative view of *valkyrjur* may be constructed which is in line with the present discussion of *seiðr*'s abnormality effect upon its practitioners.

Price compiles an extensive list of names of the *valkyrjur* from the known sources, pointing out that the meanings of these names have to do with battle to varying capacity. In particular, most of the names stand for the chaotic noises and sounds that any Viking age battlefield would be rife with – names such as *Randgniðr*, “shield-scraper”; *Hjalmþrimul*, “helmet-clatter”; *Tanngniðr*, “teeth-grinder” (339–40).<sup>27</sup> Such violent and aggressive depictions of these female creatures have led Price to suggest that the *valkyrjur* “once possessed a more terrible aspect as female demons of carnage” that haunted the battlefield (334).

These battle noise connotations of *valkyrjur*'s names bear significant implications for these creatures' ties with the hostile use of *seiðr* in battle context. Taken together with other names of *valkyrjur* such as *Herfjötur*, “host (war) fetter”; *Hrist*, “shaker”; and *Mist*, “cloud/mist” (all three occur in *Grimnismál*, stanza 36), there arises an intriguing correspondence with Óðinn's magic abilities as outlined by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*, including infliction of confusion or terror upon his enemies in battle (“Óðinn kunnir svo gera, að í orustu urðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir [...]”, 17). Based on these parallels, Price suggests that the *valkyrjur* “were in some sense embodiments of Óðinn's powers, representing the same skills”: clouded disorientation in the mind, freezing/fettering the limbs (hesitation in battle), and causing panic. *Darraðarljóð* vividly brings this idea to life in depicting the weavers at work:

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<sup>27</sup> The names themselves are taken by Price from among the heiti for *valkyrjur* from *pulur* that supplement *Skáldskaparmál* in Snorri's Edda.

Gengr Hildr vefa  
ok Hjörþrimul,  
Sanngriðr, Svipul  
sverðum tognum;  
skapt mun gnesta  
skjöldr mun bresta,  
mun hjalmgagarr  
í hlíf koma.<sup>28</sup>

As if deployed in particular formation, each of the named weaver-*valkyrjur* steps up to their gory apparatus to contribute her share in the working of the magic, part of an orchestrated effort that escalates the chaotic swirl of violence even more. Once again we find these names reflecting the clamor and turbulence of battle, each with its own particular aspect, and the *valkyrjur* could thus be interpreted as projections of Óðinn’s will on the battlefield, whom he dispatches to perform specific magic actions.

Interestingly, one of the more frequently encountered *valkyrja* names in the sources – as well as making an appearance in the above poem – is *Göndul* (stanza 5). Recalling Heide’s observations on the sexual imagery of *seiðr*, this word carries a phallic ramification in no uncertain terms, as outlined above. Yet this still remains the name of a female *valkyrja*, blurring the gender boundaries even further, if not collapsing them. Taking the meaning of her name into account, she herself becomes a phallic magic emissary projectile of aggression in battle, yet at the same time retaining some semblance of a female guise, as she is still apparently a “she” – but to what extent?

The *valkyrjur*’s supernatural, terrifying, and magically potent nature quite divorces them from being thought of as feminine, or even female, and thus the element of dread around them. They are not male, but in their supernatural aggression they are not female either, but rather liminal beings terrifying in their undefinability.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, Óðinn – who engages in acts of war and aggression, and is thus seemingly rooted within adequately masculine behavior – by the power of his involvement

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<sup>28</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1944: 455). ‘Goes Hildr to weave / and Hjörþrimul / Sanngriðr, Svipul / with drawn swords; / spears will shatter, / shields will burst, / helm-hound will / come into the shelter [sword will rend into shield/armor].’

<sup>29</sup> A comparison may be made to other supernatural “beings of destruction”, notably in female form, that haunt the battlefields in Old Norse imagination – monstrous ogresses and trollwomen deployed in battles who shoot out arrows from their fingers, aggressively emitting magical projectiles – such as Þórgerðr Hólgabruðr encountered in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (on whom see McKinnell 2002), and others in *Örvar Odds saga*. Once again, such characters may hardly be considered feminine at all.

with *seiðr* attains certain degrees of effeminacy, as he sends out aspects (or magical projections) of himself in the female forms of *valkyrjur*.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, this implies that these female beings then contain aspects of maleness from Óðinn himself. Thus we may observe how genders, instead of being fixed, are intertwining, intersecting, and interlooping.

#### I.4 Magic transvestism, and its supernatural gender ramifications

This magically induced gender blur has been further explored by Lotte Motz (1994) in a study of gold bracteate pendants from Migration-age southern Scandinavia, particularly from Denmark, dating between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D. Motz draws attention to the bracteates' value as insights into early cultic practices of Old Nordic religious rituals, the former's find context suggesting their magical function and connection to Germanic beliefs. They were frequently discovered near sacred sites and "appear to be votive offerings or grave gifts" (1994: 5). The particular bracteates that interest Motz have a running theme, depicting a single bearded figure with two sets of concentric circles on his chest, his legs being in movement while his arms are positioned in a particular manner – one hand raised upwards towards the chin while the other is touching or covering the genital area. Based on the decorative styles of depicting humanoid figures in Migration-age Europe, such "cup-like elevations on the human chest almost universally mark a female being", while facial hair universally suffices to denote masculinity (ibid. 10; but see also 8–9 where the images of bracteates in question are provided).

In the light of these bracteates' connection to cultic sites, Motz interprets these strange bearded and prominently nipples figures in a shamanic ritual context, suggesting that these may be images of sexually abnormal beings in performance of a magic act (ibid. 12). Given the symbolic and schematic style of bracteates' visual portrayals, the fact that these evidently male figures are depicted with enlarged and prominent nipples must bear some significance. Motz notes further that "some form of sexual perversion in the context of magical or religious activity" is encountered as a topos throughout ancient and modern cultures"

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<sup>30</sup> Curiously, one of Óðinn's many names is *Göndli*, which occurs in *Grímnismál* stanza 49 as well as *Gylfaginning* stanza 20, and which has been translated as "controller of the valkyrja Göndul" (Tolley 1995:69). Of course, given Óðinn's numerous erotic adventures and conquests, we should not assume that this name refers only to the wielding of the *valkyrja* and nothing else.

(ibid. 13), and offers an extensive account of cases in shamanic practices worldwide to defend that claim – such as the belief found among indigenous Siberians that “a change of sex increases a shaman’s powers”; myths found among the Koryaks wherein “a transformed shaman may even give birth to children”; ritual male-to-female transvestism among Yakuts and some Native American tribes, as well as among ancient Akkadian, Greek, and Indic societies – and many other instances of similar cultic sexual abnormalities (ibid. 14). The liminality resulting from a deviation from the norm and the blurring of gender lines was regarded as source of sacred power, and – as Motz writes – pointed towards a belief “that a union of male and female elements in one person would create a superior being” (Motz 1994b: 596).

Motz is far from being the only one to have elaborated upon this gender-blurring pattern in supernatural activity in Nordic contexts. Neil Price (2002: 271–2), in analyzing burials of magic practitioners in late-Iron Age Scandinavia, includes a description of a man buried in female clothes, together with unusual items thought to be magic paraphernalia. The “tendency for shamanic practices to involve systematic gender transgression” has been noted by Alaric Hall (2007: 143), while Clive Tolley observes that “sexually liminal position brings with it supernatural powers” (2009:149). In a recent archaeological study, Brit Solli (2008) explores the so-called “holy white stones” associated with Early Iron Age Scandinavian burials from a queer perspective, pointing out that the stones simultaneously resemble both male and female genitalia. When it comes to supernatural creatures of both genders, each appears to have appropriated qualities associated with its opposite. Hence the discussion of the (female) *dísir* as warlike and potentially violently aggressive by Gunnell (2000) and Lionarons (2005), as well as the discussion of (male) *álfar* as “optimistic, gentle, and tender creatures of great brightness and goodness” by Ármann Jakobsson (2006: 237).

Seen within this broader context of magic androgyny, it is tempting to interpret Motz’s bearded and breasted figures on bracteates as the early Scandinavian equivalents of sexual abnormality that later came to be associated with *seiðr* and its *ergi* (Motz 1994b: 596). The bracteate figures’ hands that grip or cover their genital areas certainly account for an element of obscene sexual practice, and with their enlarged nipples those figures themselves appear to be sexually perverted, transfigured within the ritual practice of this magic. As early Scandinavian societies and religious belief systems underwent considerable development and dynamic change through the centuries leading to the time of the written Old

Norse sources, the attitudes towards sexual abnormality within cultic context could not have remained unchanged. What may have once been regarded as sacral could eventually have become taboo and led to being regarded as obscene and perverse.<sup>31</sup>

If there is indeed a parallel between the bracteates in Motz's study and *seiðr* with its *ergi*, then it carries noteworthy ramifications for the discussion at hand. Liminal androgyny in a ritual act may be the target state for the practitioner wherein he or she attains enhanced magic potency and becomes empowered to work the sorcery towards a desired result. This may explain the perverse nature of *seiðr*, as it does not leave the practitioner unmarked – as well as explain why the females are pulled towards increased masculinity while the reverse is the case for males who engage in this craft. Furthermore, androgyny implies a certain sense of balance. Too much of either extreme may be liable to defeat the purpose of this magic inter-gender liminality as it would only thrust the practitioner too far into his or her opposite, prompting the achieved equilibrium to collapse.

## I.5 Supernatural inter-gender continuum

Having thus traced the inter-gender variability and dynamism inherent in the *seiðr* complex, a diagram may be constructed in an attempt to express this dynamic nature of varying degrees of sexual abnormalities encountered in the above examination of the sources.

The limitation of this diagram, dictated by its static graphic medium, is to be addressed at once. The spatial connotation of liminal inter-gender “otherness”, represented as the oval-shaped continuum, would be more appropriately imagined as a three-dimensional sphere, thus multiplying exponentially the amount of possible locations and variations within it. The intent is to illustrate the sizable ‘gulf’ of gender ambiguity lying between the Old Norse conceptions of masculine and feminine within the discursive space of *seiðr*'s supernatural empowerment.<sup>32</sup> Rather than be-

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<sup>31</sup> On the dynamic development and variation within Old Norse belief systems, and the changing religious attitudes caused by the passage of centuries (and not the least, by the Christian conversion), may be cited McKinnell's *Both One and Many* (1994) where these perspectives are explored at great length.

<sup>32</sup> The term ‘discursive space’ in relation to the *seiðr* complex is meant to underline that the latter encompassed an inclusive spectrum of variable conceptions and understandings in medieval Icelandic textual sources. It was more than the sum of its parts (which were themselves obscure) and, as noted by Neil Price, “by the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when many of the *fornaldarsögur* were composed, *seiðr* had become incorporated into the general stock of fantastic magical phenomena” (Price 2002: 67).

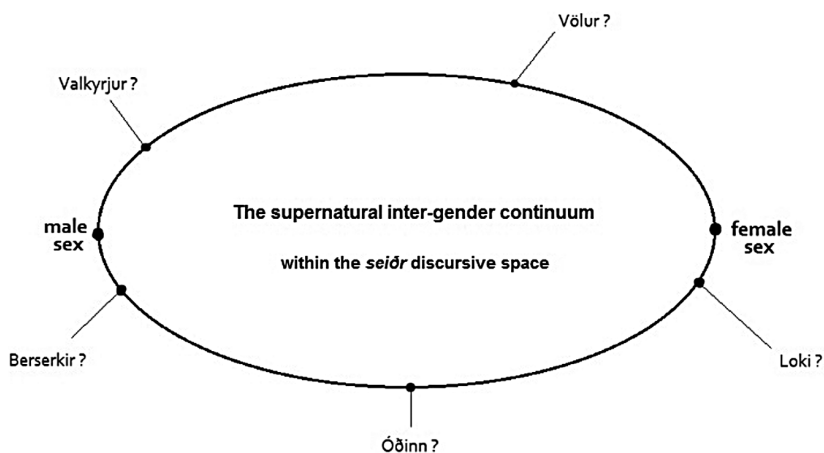


Diagram 1. Dynamics of sexual abnormality in characters within the *seiðr* discursive space.

ing seen as binary either/or, they are but points on the inter-gender continuum, and thus they are themselves more relative than this two-dimensional representation allows. It is impossible to altogether avoid categorization in enforcing graphic structure on such dynamic and variable conceptions, and what appears in the diagram as polarization, namely the placement of male and female magic activities near the stereotyped gender polarities, is meant precisely to illustrate how stretchable and fluid they can be, for they are not at all limited to the singular male and female points on the diagram, and it is rather unclear where one ends and the opposite begins. For example, a stereotypically masculine magic activity of an aggressive outward projection of an emissary could at the same time be regarded as female activity of birth, bringing out or indeed expelling a certain part of oneself, thus externalizing it – depending on the context and on the performer.

Men cannot be made more masculine by *seiðr* as it would not result in liminal potency, and thus when they employ it in the sources (like Óðinn’s battle tricks or a *seiðmaðr*’s malicious spell on Gísli) it is to work things in a more subtle way; to manipulate events into happening not bluntly or straightforwardly, but as if from behind the scenes, to orchestrate situations and bring desired outcomes into being. The rather feminine (in our modern normative conception) capacity to perceive, contain, and notice such delicate subtleties around them could be the very result of *ergi* and sexual abnormality that they undergo in performing their magic acts – such abnormality then is no mere side effect, but the central

enabler. The female parallel of this magic use resulting in perversion in the opposite direction we have already explored at length in our consideration of magical female weavers and *valkyrjur*.

Of course there are also instances of *völur* engaged in prophecy and foreknowledge, such as Þórbjörg lítillvölva in *Eiríks saga rauða* – thus females within female spheres. But there may be noted a different attitude in the sources towards the *seiðr* women who are engaged in beneficial, and indeed nurturing (feminine) uses of magic – they are regarded with respect and even admiring awe, but not with terror. Yet even these benevolent *völur* conduct themselves with a degree of commanding authority, and coupled with their phallic ritual staffs, these are in no way stereotypically delicate feminine women – thus belonging to yet another gender dimension within *seiðr*. It is only the females which use magic for hostile, violent, and aggressive purposes who are marginalized in the sources and regarded with terror: contrary to their feminine nurturing inclinations, such beings of destruction are female in but a name.

Although they do not fall within a strictly supernatural magical context, it may be noted that the *meykóngar*, or maiden kings, in *riddarasögur* conduct themselves in accordance with this diagram.<sup>33</sup> They govern their kingdoms in sovereign authority and may fight in campaigns to preserve their rulership, but they do not stay maiden kings forever: they marry themselves off to appropriate suitors and become wives, thus redressing their acute masculine bend with a strong bend in the opposite, feminine direction, balancing themselves out.<sup>34</sup> It must be stated that the

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Wahlgren, in his pioneering 1938 study on “maiden kings” which was responsible for coining this term, distinguishes them as a distinct literary motif, popular in Icelandic romance literature to the point that the imported queen characters became re-stamped as *meykóngar* in many *lygisögur* (1938: 20–21). The distinguishing characteristics of the maiden king formula is summarized by Marianne Kalinke: “1. the desired bride is the sole ruler, *meykóngr...* of a country [...]; 2. she disdains and mistreats all suitors; 3. like other suitors, the hero is humiliated and rejected...; 4. the hero returns to engage in a battle of wits and wiles with the misogamous ruler; 5. only after the hero has discerned the woman’s major flaw is he able to outwit and then marry her” (Kalinke 1990: 36). For a recent discussion on the development of the *meykóngar* narratives in medieval Iceland vis-à-vis the *fornaldarsögur*, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Hervör has been featured alongside maiden kings in multiple gender-themed studies that sought to reconcile maiden warrior figures with their femininity (Wahlgren 1938, Clover 1986, Helga Kress 1993, Jochens 1996, Normann 2000, Layher 2007). Given that Hervör is not a sovereign ruler of a country before her marriage but an active campaigner in a band of vikings, she does not qualify for Kalinke’s above-quoted paradigm and I do not consider Hervör as maiden king within the scope of present study. *Hervarar saga* never refers to her as *meykóngar*, and neither is she ever called a ‘shield maiden’, unlike her granddaughter of the same name.



positioning of characters within the diagram is not meant to be definite, fixed, or conclusive, and is only intended as an approximation for visual purposes.

## II. The case of Hervör

### II.1 Exposition

It is now time to approach *Hervarar saga* through the previously established prism of magic gender dynamics and *seiðr* transfiguration. This is a saga thoroughly saturated with supernatural otherness – more notable in the Hauksbók manuscript version,<sup>35</sup> which begins with painting a mental geographic map of the known regions to set the scene – the said regions extending to “Jötunheimar norðr í Finnmörk”, where giants and their wise king Guðmundr “lifðu marga mannzaldra”, spelling immortality for anyone who arrives to that place.<sup>36</sup> Hauksbók’s thematic compilation points to an interest in geography and historiography, and *Hervarar saga*’s inclusion among such texts as *Landnámabók*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, and *Völuspá* (with the latter’s own cosmological and spatial preoccupations) suggests that it was seen by the compiler as belonging to the same reality as its vellum neighbors.

In light of this, there need not be an explicit mention of *seiðr* in Hervör’s story for the audience to be able to perceive her in terms of deviant transfiguring “otherness”: even her very name *Hervör* already suggests it, which she shares with a *valkyrja* from *Völundarkviða*. A more unique name could have been chosen for this memorable mortal heroine to single her out more in the minds of the audience, and the use of this valkyric association could scarcely have been unintentional. Already from birth, the name she carried contained a blueprint of her life: *her-* denoting an army host or a retinue of warriors, and *-vör* implying caution or warning, perhaps with the sense of battle readiness or a warrior’s sharpened awareness (Price 2002: 339).

True to the gender-blurring liminality and terrible aspect of her valkyric namesake, Hervör already in her early days shows a strong affinity for

<sup>35</sup> This is the oldest extant version of *Hervarar saga*, dating to the first decade of fourteenth century (Hall 2005:2).

<sup>36</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 1. ‘Jötunheimar north of Finnmörk’ – whose denizens ‘live [for] many ages of men’.

violent activities rather than to feminine pursuits, and even spends time in the forest as a highwayman (*stigamann*), killing travelers for their possessions.<sup>37</sup> Hervör's violent behavior stems from yet another supernatural source: it is to be remembered that her father, Angantýr, was a *berserker*, and a theme of offspring inheriting their parents' characteristics is a recurring one in the sagas.<sup>38</sup> The forest outsider motif is strongly reminiscent of Sigmundr and Sinfjotli's time spent in the woods as magically transformed wolves who kill travelers in *Völsunga saga* (yet another example of a child following in his father's footsteps). "Fæðisk úlfr í skógi", quoth an Old Norwegian rune poem,<sup>39</sup> and Hervör's murderous forest adventure – in light of her father's character – now takes on an even darker dimension. She too undergoes a shape-shifting, albeit not animalistic but gender-based. She quit being a regular girl long ago – and may have never been one to begin with.

Having learned her deceased father's true identity and lineage, Hervör sets out to the terror-haunted barrows of Sámsey to claim the magic sword Tyrfingr that is buried with her *berserker* father and uncles.<sup>40</sup> The cross-dressing that she undertakes at this point – changing not only into male clothes, but into the male name Hervarðr as well – transports her even deeper into the inter-gender space, and I suggest that her cross-dressing, in the light of its gender-blurring liminality, functioned as preparation for the supernatural encounter that awaited her at Sámsey. She equips herself as if for battle, expecting a confrontation (could this yet again be her name's meaning reflected in her actions?), and by the virtue of undergoing such a deep-rooted deviation from the norm, she attains

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<sup>37</sup> The mention of *stigamann* does not occur in the Hauksbók version, but it occurs in Tolkien's edition whose earlier chapters are based primarily on the R redaction (1960: 10), or in Jón Helgason's edition which does include both redactions (1924: 15, line 6).

<sup>38</sup> A similar darkly violent streak, as well as precocious bloodthirstiness, may be found in Egill Skallagrímsson, who inherited it from his father as well as from his shape-shifting grandfather. Meanwhile, Hervör's own granddaughter will inherit not only her name but her affinity for battle-arms as well. The Hauksbók version of the saga takes this familial legacy to a darker level by elaborating on the circumstance of Hervör's birth: "þótti flestum ráð, at út væri borit, ok sögðu, at eigi mundi konuskap hafa, ef föðurfrændum yrði líkt". (Jón Helgason 1924: 14. 'It was thought advisable to most that it [the child] be exposed, and they said that it would not have female disposition if it were like its father's relatives.') Considering the deeply supernatural genealogy which this saga version provides for her, extending all the way to Hergrím, who was "risi ok bergbúi" (ibid: 1. 'a giant and a mountain-dweller'), this fear may come as no surprise. Hervör's *berserker* father and uncles, furthermore, were mythic enough to be listed in *Hyndluljóð* stanzas 25 and 26.

<sup>39</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson 1957: 668. 'A wolf grows up in a forest.'

<sup>40</sup> Contrary to the puzzling claim in Norrman 2000, Hervör's motivation has nothing to do with avenging her father's death.

enhanced magic potency to face the horrors of the island as well as the dead in their mounds, and to get from them what she wants. The power of Hervör’s deepening abnormality is made all the greater by the fact that she requests her mother to prepare her for her journey “sem þú son myndir” – thus, in effect, asking of her matriarch to undergo a full rebirth in this new guise.<sup>41</sup> Hervör/Hervarðr’s affiliation with a group of vikings she encounters on her way – not only succeeding in seamlessly blending into their seasoned battle-hardened ranks but also assuming authority and command over this weathered crew – pushes her even further into the masculine dimension of inter-gender space. It is crucial to note that after Hervör’s cross-dressing takes place, the saga narrator proceeds to refer to this character as Hervarðr, using masculine pronouns – implicitly suggesting that she succeeds in crossing so deep into the opposite as to become male in all but biological terms.

## II.2 The Sámsey confrontation

But what occurs on the island itself, and how does Hervör’s gender-blurring transformation figure into the equation? This is where the magic begins. Having worked herself into this utterly warlike and masculine state of being, she is unfazed by the otherworldly terrors which are enough to send even her viking companions into flight. Striding across the island full of blazing barrow-fires, “óð hón eldana sem reyk”<sup>42</sup>: so strong is her unyielding resolve to get to her destination that she does not even appear to feel the burning heat of those flames, driving herself onward as if in a trance, oblivious of any pain or terror.

Having worked up the sense of dominant authority to perform the magic act of summoning the dead, standing there before them as a full-

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<sup>41</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 17. ‘...as you would [prepare] a son.’ The extended exchange of verses between Hervör and her grandfather jarl, wherein she learns of her father’s identity, as well as the verses she speaks to her mother prior to her expedition are absent from the Hauksbók manuscript version, wherein the scribe fills in Hervör’s motivation to depart in a more straightforward way: “brott vil ek heðan, því at ekki fæ ek hér ynði”. (ibid. ‘I want [to go] away from here, because I will not gain here delight.’) The fact that she is still heading for Sámsey and is aware of her lineage, without having been told of it in this specific text, may indicate a lacuna of the abovementioned verses, that the scribe prosaically patched over to keep the narrative moving. Within the specific context of the Hauksbók version, however, the absence of the verse exchange with the jarl (as well as the thralls’ accusation of a base descent which leads up to the revelation of Hervör’s true parentage) may have led Hauksbók’s audience to consider that Hervör’s lineage may not have been hidden from her in this particular text.

<sup>42</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 21. ‘She waded [through] fire like smoke.’

fledged warrior in battle gear, aggressive and determined, it is however her female name “Hervör” that she uses in her invocation, as well as the word “daughter” – setting the tone for Angantýr’s response where he will also call her by these female names: “Vaki þú, Angantýr, / vekr þik Hervör, / eingadóttir [sic]...”<sup>43</sup> Suddenly we are faced with another negation of clear-cut gender identities in our modern sense. As immersed into the realm of masculinity as Hervör is at this point – indeed, as noted above, she seems to have reached the veritable critical limit of it – she refuses to let it define her entire being and thus pin her into a single-sided gender polarity from which she strove to free herself in the first place. Thus, by using her female name in her male guise, she balances out the male and the female within her, and maintains her liminal androgyny by blurring the gender lines yet again. Having reached her opposite male “otherness”, she swings the scale back to maintain a certain state of “otherness within otherness” – neither fish nor fowl – wherein she attains enhanced magic potency, just as other supernaturally empowered androgynous beings that we discussed.

It is this coveted inner state of indefinable magic inter-genderness that allows Hervör to turn her supernatural aggression up a few notches and threaten the following: “Ek vígi svá / virða dauða, / at þér skuluð / allir liggja / dauðir með draugum / í dys fúnir...”<sup>44</sup>

This magical empowerment to impose one’s ruinous devastating will over the addressee and bind him under one’s control is fully within the spectrum of hostile *seiðr*, as we have seen from the previous chapter, and as *seiðr* enters the scene, so does the sexual abnormality that goes along with it. The use of her female name and female connotations notwithstanding, Hervör’s aggressive threat of working a violent spell turns her into a supernaturally-empowered projector of destruction, and leads her into yet another dimension within the magic inter-gender continuum, especially coupled with her male clothing: what is inside that armor is indeed far from female, leading Angantýr to remark:

Kveðkat ek þik, mærgung,  
mönnum líka,  
er þú um hauga  
hvarfar á nóttum  
gröfnum geiri

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*: 22. ‘Awake, Angantýr, / Hervör wakes you, / the only-daughter...’

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*: 28. ‘I ensorcel thus, / dead men, / that you all shall lie / dead with the ghosts / in rotten grave...’ Hauksbók is the only redaction which preserves this and the following stanza.

ok með Gota málm,  
 hjálmi ok með brynju  
 fyrir hallar dyrr.<sup>45</sup>

Even the ghostly slain *berserker*, himself a liminal creature summoned from a world beyond, wonders at Hervör’s sexual abnormality and otherness that marks her even visibly – and perhaps, with the insight of a *draugr*, reminding her of this increasing terrifying alteration as a hint to cease before it becomes too late. Hervör’s response is double-edged, bearing at once an apparent negation of the *draugr*’s remark while at the same time containing a darker meaning: “Maðr þóttumk ek / mennskr til þessa, / áðr ek sali yðra / sækja réðak...”<sup>46</sup> *Til þessa*, she singles out, referring to the present “now” of her quest, which may in equal measure be construed as an acknowledgment of the transformation already taking effect within her.

Her supernatural empowerment escalates, as does her unrelenting obsession with laying claim on Tyrfingr to the utter disregard of all the warnings and dire prophesies uttered by her father. When Angantýr finally unveils the sword as it lies wrapped up in the hellish barrow fires (judging by this climactic placement within the poem, a revelation intended to cause the greatest mortal terror) and gloats that he knows no maiden who would dare to take it, Hervör’s proclamation of will to do exactly that – “Ek man hirða ok í hendr nema...” – is double-edged once again.<sup>47</sup> On one hand, it is a forceful statement of defiance and intent to prove him wrong; and on the other, with her supernatural empowerment, male war attire, and yet maintaining a female name and terms of address within this dialogue, she becomes a being not limited by any gender at all, thus enabling her to circumnavigate the *draugr*’s stated condition in the way that it was formulated.<sup>48</sup> Here is that *berserker* madness

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* ‘I do not declare you, young maiden, / human-like, / as you walk about / the mounds in the night / with engraved spear / and with Goths’ metal / with helm and with mail / before the door of the halls.’

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* ‘Human enough I seemed until this, ere your halls I decided to seek...’

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*: 29. “Liggr mér und herðum / Hjálmar’s bani, / allr er hann útan / eldi sveipinn; / mey veit ek enga / moldar hvergi / at þann hjör þori / í hendr nema.” (‘Hjálmar’s bane lies under my shoulders, it is wrapped in fire all about; nowhere on earth do I know a maiden who that sword would dare in hand to take.’ – To which Hervör responds, ‘I will keep and take in hand...’)

<sup>48</sup> When it comes to magic matters, a concern for precise wording in formulating pre-conditions for the magic to take effect is a common folkloric theme across many cultures, as any loopholes in such wording may be exploited (as may be seen in Higley 1991:138 – wherein a Welsh spell with elaborate pre-conditions is discussed in the comparative context of Norse magic).

fully awakening in her, and her verbalized intent to throw herself into the barrow's fire to grasp the sword – having reached this magically empowered ecstatic state<sup>49</sup> – is what causes Angantýr's paternal instinct to take over and relinquish the weapon, for the sake of preventing her reckless death.<sup>50</sup>

### II.3 I Dovregubbens hall

Due to Tyrfingr's curse to take a life each time it is drawn, Hervör's taking possession of it translates into always having this physical magic attribute at her side that links her to the masculine realm of war and aggressive violence. Now that the scale has been tipped significantly towards this masculine dimension, threatening to upset the liminal balance of Hervör's potent androgyny, it is tempting to view the remaining episodes of her story as her conscious efforts to maintain that balance within her. After the supernatural confrontation at Sámsey, the saga relates that she still went on viking expeditions under the name Hervarðr as before – but with a powerful magic attribute of the masculine dimension weighing considerably upon her, she now needed something that will trigger her proportionally just as much into the female dimension. The saga narrative goes on to describe Hervarðr's visit at king Guðmundr's court,<sup>51</sup> and as it serves as a turning point in this hero(ine)'s career it is worth quoting in full:

<sup>49</sup> Hervör's claim that “þegar loga lægir, / er ek lít yfir” (Jón Helgason 1924: 30, ‘immediately the flame sinks as I look upon it’) at this point may be read as a testimony to the magnitude of her supernatural empowerment, but this does not exclude sheer madness-driven recklessness.

<sup>50</sup> “Heimsk ertu, Hervör / hugar eigandi, / er þú at augum / í eld hrapar. / Ek vil heldr selja þér / sverð ór haugi...” (ibid: ‘Foolish are you, Hervör, possessing courage, that you open-eyed rush into the fire. I will rather yield to you the sword from the mound...’)

<sup>51</sup> The court of Guðmundr receives no detailed description in *Hervarar saga*, apart from attention given to it in the episode quoted on the pages. Guðmundr, however, appears to have been a known – yet at the same time, enigmatic and obscure – legendary figure in multiple medieval sources. Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, in her study of journeys to the land of the dead, notes that “a realm closely connected with the dead seems to lie beside his, and sometimes his own land is given a supernatural character also, when we are told that in it lies Óðainsakr – the ‘land of the not-dead’” (1943:185). In the account of Saxo Grammaticus, Guðmundr's realm lies in the far north, and beyond it is only the darkness-enfolded land of death and decay (Saxo: Book 8). Ellis Davidson also cites *Þáttr Þorsteins Bæarmagnis* as another source on this enigmatic king, this time casting Guðmundr himself, whose gigantic stature is given notice (as a ruler of Jötunheim, why not make him a giant?), in the role of a traveller to the dark lands in the far northern beyond. Here too is mentioned that “*Guðmundr* is said to be a title adopted by each of the kings of Glasisvellir when they as-

Ein dag, er Guðmundr lék skáktafl ok hans tafl var mjök svá farit, þá spurði hann, ef nokkurr kynni honum ráð til at leggja. Þá gekk til Hervarðr ok lagði litla stund til, áðr Guðmundar var vænna. Þá tók maðr upp Tyrfing ok brá; þat sá Hervarðr ok þreif af honum sverðit ok drap hann ok gekk út síðan. Menn vildu hlaupa eptir honum. Þá mælti Guðmundr: “verið kvirrir!, ekki man svá mikil hefnd í manninum sem þér ætlið, því at þér vitið ekki, hvern hann er; man þessi kvennmaðr yðr dýrkeypt, áðr þér fáið hans líf.” Síðan var Hervör langa stund í hernaði ok varð mjök sigrsæl, ok er henni leiddiz þat, fór hón heim til jarls, móðurföður síns; fór hún þá fram sem aðrar meyjar, at vandiz við borða ok hannyrðir.<sup>52</sup>

A question may be asked: what really gave away Hervarðr’s identity? The positioning of the board game advice directly next to the slaying of a man who drew Tyrfing suggests that they have something to do with each other. One, or both, of these activities provided Guðmundr with a clue to recognize that his guest was in fact female. It may be supposed that the renown of Tyrfingr was such that many knew of its previous berserkr ownership and that Angantýr had only a daughter – but if the sword was so instantly recognizable, then the question of Hervarðr’s sex would have never arisen, thus negating the very purpose of the male guise. Could there be anything in the board game activity, then, that may be regarded as revealing?

The nature of the game advice is an advice from behind the scenes, having first taken in the whole picture of the situation on the board and then devising particular moves or stratagems for the active player to follow. Since the game of *tafl* is representational of a table-top battle – complete with a king game piece that needs to be attacked or defended – was

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end the throne”. What these multiple accounts of Guðmundr appear to have in common, then, is the placement of his domain in the far North, “and in emphasizing the fact that the way to reach it is through mist and darkness and intense cold” (189). A very different reading emerges for this episode in *Hervarar saga*, when the aforementioned is taken into account, as Hervör – once again as Hervarðr – proceeds from the liminal zone of Sámsey and ends up in a place on the edge of the known legendary world, which is no less fraught with supernatural wonders, and may be even more difficult and perilous to reach.

<sup>52</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 33–34. ‘One day, when Gudmundr played chess and his pieces were much beset, he asked if anyone could offer him advice. Then Hervarðr went forward and advised for a little while, ere Gudmundr’s situation improved. Then a man took up Tyrfing and drew it; Hervarðr saw that and grabbed the sword from him and killed him, and afterwards went out. People wanted to run after him. Then said Gudmundr: “Be calm! One would not get as much vengeance from the man as you think, since you don’t know who he is; this woman would be dearly-bought for you ere you take his [sic] life.” Afterwards was Hervör for a long time in military campaigns and was much victorious, and when it wearied her she went home to the Jarl, her mother’s father; she carried forth there like other maidens, at work with weaving and embroidering.’

it not Hervör's rather *valkyrja*-like intervention in this "battle", not to mention manipulating it towards a desired outcome and ensuring victory – that gave her away? The manner in which the advice has been served, moreover, positions it more within the feminine sphere of activity with its indirect, behind-the-scenes instruction (versus a direct and dominant involvement that is more of a masculine sphere feature). That Hervör voluntarily came forward to offer such advice in precisely this rather feminine manner could be regarded as her means of balancing out the violent direct masculinity that Tyrfingr brings out in her. The positioning of these two scenes next to each other certainly juxtaposes Hervör's opposite magic-empowered dimensions; it is as if the sword, dooming its wielder to kill each time it is drawn, has by now become a heavy anchor that constantly poses a threat of inner misbalance. Viewed in this light, Hervör's offer of advice could even be regarded as a provocation to be unmasked – a way to begin regaining her liminal equilibrium that Tyrfingr's curse has thrown into disorder. Leaving the sword unattended, thus inviting it to be picked up and unsheathed by any unsuspecting admirer, may be seen as another such provocation, as it is this killing which has directly triggered the revelation.

Once perceived as a female – even within the above-quoted words of Guðmundr (who, after calling her a "kvennmaðr", still finishes the sentence with a masculine pronoun referring to her)<sup>53</sup> – Hervör's "otherness" returns and she is once again within the balanced inter-gender space, being both a reputedly fierce warrior and a female to boot. Hervör's subsequent expeditions are now undertaken in the text as the saga narrator resorts to the usage of female pronouns in describing her<sup>54</sup> – which

<sup>53</sup> Although Guðmundr is being grammatically consistent (the word "kvennmaðr" is grammatically masculine), his usage of this particular word to denote Hervör as a female effectively adds to gender trouble inherent in this episode, given the context. As the legendary king of "otherness" – and a liminal being himself – which he may well be, given Glasisvellir's position on the very periphery of the known world, it may not be a surprise at all that he is able to recognize who Herverðr is, even under (or perhaps, because of!) the increasingly heavy effects of alterity that immersion into *seiðr* is taking upon her. As a king of Jötunheimar, his may be the vast knowledge of occult lore and other cosmic mysteries that are accessible to its denizens – as evidenced by the eponymous *jötun* sage of *Vafþrúðnismál*, and as argued by Lotte Motz (1988) in her study of giants in their capacity of being magic teachers and initiators.

<sup>54</sup> In the previously-cited quote detailing Hervör's return home ("...Síðan var Hervör langa stund í hernaði ok varð mjök sigrsæl, ok er henni leiddiz þat, fór hón heim til jarls..."), the Hauksbók manuscript contains the masculine name "hervarðr" [sic] in place of "Hervör" in the above sentence. All printed standardized editions of the saga (including Jón Helgason's and Tolkien's) substitute the feminine "Hervör" name in its place, on the basis that *sigrsæl*, *henni*, and *hón* follow it (Jón Helgason 1924: 34), with the obviously feminine gender of these words (which are all unambiguously present in the Hauksbók



by now in no way obstructs her from keeping within her degree of inter-gender liminality, being counterweighed by her far-reaching reputation as well as by the dark violent potential of magic Tyrfingr.

The analyses of Hervör in previous scholarship tend to stop at the point of her return home, considering it a conclusion and a closing chapter to her story (Helga Kress 1993, Jochens 1996, Norrman 2000, Tulinus 2002, Layher 2007, Kozák 2009). But she is not out of the saga just yet, and neither is the supernatural impact upon her may be said to be over. Anatoly Liberman has written on warrior figures – albeit strictly focusing on the *berserkir* – in the context of *Íslendingasögur*, with a particular emphasis on their apparent inability to fit within the framework of society around them, approaching them from a sociological perspective as displaced soldiers who find themselves out of action (2003: 340).<sup>55</sup> For Hervör, herself a veteran returning home after spending a long time in military campaigns, and in possession of a magic weapon to boot, it is somewhat difficult to imagine a seamless and instantaneous integration into the household where she had not been an integral part before.<sup>56</sup>

The saga reports that she now immerses in feminine pursuits and patterns of behavior, just like other maidens. After having gone through such heavy and deep-reaching transformations as she did while being Hervarðr – culminating in the supernatural terrors as well as the magic that she engaged in at Sámsey (and considering her *berserker* lineage and valkyrie connotations), Hervör would never be “sem aðrar meyjar.”<sup>57</sup> The extent to which she now immerses in the feminine sphere is only an indication of how profound an effect her years spent as Hervarðr have had upon her – and not the least because she still has Tyrfingr in her pos-

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manuscript – fol. 74v). Without attempting to guess in futility whether this gender mismatch is due to a scribal slip, this sentence – when taken as it appears in the manuscript – may be seen as an added gender blur. Hervarðr’s/Hervör’s positioning within the inter-gender continuum is shifting before the audience in mid-sentence, and after Guðmundr’s revelation, Hervarðr begins to attain femininity by degrees.

<sup>55</sup> “With the end of the viking epoch, professional warriors found themselves unemployed. ... Displaced soldiers typically became urban riffraff. Unused to resistance, irascible, and thoroughly unhappy, former vikings often developed psychoses that plagued the middle ages (cf. St. Vitus dance, flagellants), the violent analogs of depression, the scourge of our time [...] The very word ‘berserkr’, like the word ‘víkingr’, acquired highly negative connotations. Gangs of such outcasts (young, unmarried, destitute men in their prime) became the bane of farmer’s life in Norway, and later in Iceland” (Liberman 2003: 340).

<sup>56</sup> As quoted earlier, Hervör’s reason for leaving home in the first place had been “því at ekki fæ ek hér ynði.” (‘because I will not gain delight here.’) – Thus the Hauksbók version (Jón Helgason 1924:17). Or, as Hervör acknowledges to her mother in other redactions prior to her departure, “satt eitt mun mér / í svefn bera, / fæ ek ekki hér / ynði í næsta.” (‘A truth was borne to me in sleep, I will gain no delight here now.’ Tolkien 1960:13)

<sup>57</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 34. ‘...like other maidens.’

session, and thus a gateway into the sphere of violence and aggression, which she needs to keep in constant balance.

There is a change of setting, however, as Guðmundr's son Höfundr receives Hervör's consent to marry her, and takes her home with him.<sup>58</sup> (Presumably they had seen each other at Guðmundr's court, when Hervör was still Hervarðr, so he knew what he was getting). In keeping with the Hauksbók manuscript version's opening geography, it must be inferred that Höfundr is taking Hervör back to his home in Jötunheimar on the world's periphery, where Guðmundr's court had been, a liminal place perhaps more in line with Hervör's own alterity.<sup>59</sup>

The after-effects of supernatural martial immersion continue to flicker in the background, embodied by her son Heiðrekr who follows in her early footsteps in doing more ill than all the good done by his brother.<sup>60</sup> There may be more to the fact that he is singled out as her favorite (*ibid.*) than her own dark undercurrent: as she confronted her dead father on Sámsey, he singled Heiðrekr out as her son who is destined for greatness as Tyrfingr's future inheritor (*st.*18). As has been repeatedly noted in studies of the otherworld in Old Norse context, the dead are known to possess prophetic insight (Ellis Davidson 1943, Price 2002, Bonnetain 2006, Gunnell 2006). While it is beyond the scope of this study to engage in the complicated question of whether the otherworldly foresight actually manipulates events into happening, it is enough to say at this point that Angantýr's forecast from beyond the grave may well have contributed to Hervör's particular relationship with Heiðrekr.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps both the daughter and the father in that Sámsey encounter are the "victims of a predetermined fate", as John McKinnell recently suggested, "of which Hervör is the ignorant, headlong agent, while Angantýr can foresee but is powerless to prevent it" (2014: 309).

The last glimpse we have of Hervör in the saga, mirroring her entrance into it, is in the context of weaponry – when she hands the sword Tyrfingr to Heiðrekr before he departs, acquainting him with the weapon and its magic features and instructing him in its use. In passing on the

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* "...ok fær ok flytr heim."

<sup>59</sup> On a note more mythological than legendary (there may have been, after all, multiple different conceptions of Jötunheimar in circulation), Jón Karl Helgasson points it out as an outside place perceived to be beyond the social norms, gender included. (2002: 161)

<sup>60</sup> Jón Helgason 1924: 34. Heiðrekr's transgressive nature and disregard for social norms carries an air of Óðinnic deviance, and Óðinn's interest in him in the later part of the saga comes as no surprise.

<sup>61</sup> To quote Sarah Connor from the 1984 film *The Terminator*, "Well, at least now I know what to name him".

legacy represented by the sword to her son, she is more of a father-figure in this scene than a “meek” queen as some believe her to be (Jochens 1996: 99) – retaining her gender ambiguity in her actions, if no longer in her assumed name.

## II.4 Between the worlds

To illustrate Hervör’s liminal gender-blur, as well as her ongoing balancing act to keep within the state of supernaturally empowered androgyny, the following diagram may be constructed of her early life, starting at her childhood and moving counterclockwise around to her return home and marriage (the Hauksbók manuscript’s single – and singular – non-sequitur occurrence of the name “Hervarðr” after the Guðmundr episode is discussed in footnote 54 above).

Instead of being conceived of as polarizing opposites, both the male and the female sex in this representation carries within it certain elements of the other, and a question of where one ends and the other begins is out of place in such a dynamic and fluctuating organism. Instead of interpreting Hervör from a modern fixed framework of male-female dichotomy, exploring her story from the supernatural context of *seiðr* has yielded a perspective on the innumerable possible locations, variations, and fluctuations within the inter-gender continuum.

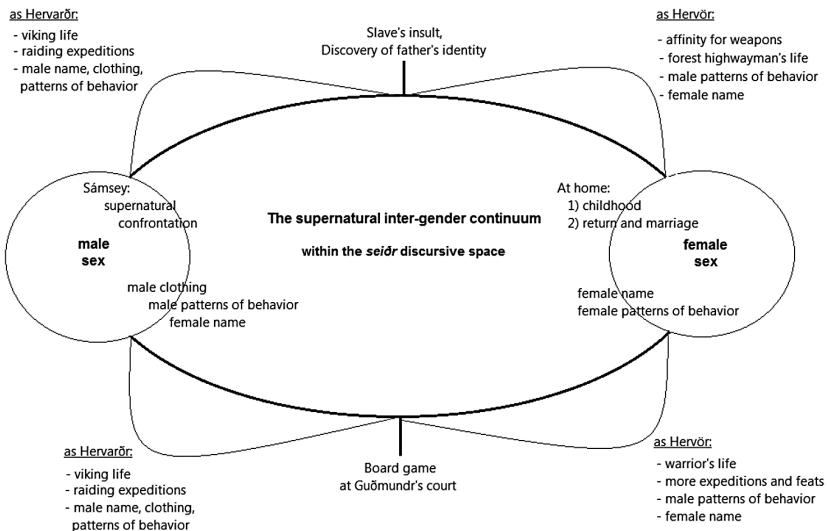


Diagram 2. Dynamics of Hervör’s navigation along the inter-gender continuum.

The Hervör narrative in her eponymous saga is interested in the question of whether it is possible to achieve empowerment through the gender equilibrium, as well as achieving that gender balance itself, without irrevocably and irreparably trapping oneself within the transgressive and antisocial otherness associated in medieval Norse imagination with extended exposure to supernatural forces. While engaging those forces brings empowerment, there is an implicit sense of risk to such activity. The deeper one's immersion in – and exposure to – the supernatural empowerment of aggression, the harder it becomes to maintain control over it and mediate between its extremes, and the harder it becomes to pull back from those alterity-inducing supernatural powers. In other words, maintaining that liminal gender equilibrium becomes a controlled act of counterbalancing and resisting the progressive alterity brought upon the individual by contact with these powers.

Hervör, with her *berserker* heritage, comes perilously close to overstepping that equilibrium on Sámsey,<sup>62</sup> prompting Angantýr to remark upon her transgressive otherness and evoking an acknowledgment from her of that increasing transformation into an other-than-human entity. As if sensing her proximity to trapping herself within the *seiðr* complex, she knows when she has reached her limit and pulls out of her military career in favor of homecoming and marriage. Perhaps in doing so she is seeking to avoid the violent and socially disruptive fate of *berserker* veterans in *Íslendingasögur* (after Lieberman 2003), who are unable to reintegrate into peaceful society due to their oversaturation in aggressions of war. Yet the after-effects of Hervör's close and extended exposure to the supernatural powers linger on, as may be seen from the dark anti-social streak inherited by her son Heiðrekr. Rather than her marriage becoming a termination of her previous life chapter, it becomes a continuation, Heiðrekr himself being a direct result of the Sámsey venture: as Angantýr forecasts, he is destined for the future as Tyrfingr's inheritor after his mother. The supernatural confrontation on that island thus becomes even more of a central turning point, not only in Hervör's own gender dynamics, but also for her progeny.

It bears to emphasize that in the above referrals to social norms and social integration, this study does not seek to gender these concepts as an oppositional binary of 'female' subordination and 'male' authority. Through the course of this analysis, such categorical and mutually-exclu-

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<sup>62</sup> The island on which Óðinn himself had allegedly practiced *seiðr* on an obscure occasion, as per Loki's suggestive allusion to it in *Lokasenna* 24.

sive gendered polarizations have been extensively questioned. As has been demonstrated, femininity may be achieved through the masculine channel, just as masculinity does not have to belong exclusively to men. Characters can be female, and yet not be female at the same time. There may be many varying degrees of “genders” on the continuum, human as well as supernatural, and being referred to as a “she” for a magic creature does not guarantee femininity as it is commonly understood; nor does being referred to as a “he” guarantee that the character in question is biologically male.

As the perceived boundaries between the genders collapse, so do the boundaries between the socio-normative and supernatural spheres as the latter begins to leak into the former. In the wake of dynamic mutabilities of supernatural identities observed above, the category of humanity itself is thrown into question as an established category. Instead of reducing Old Norse depictions of the ambiguously gendered supernatural entities to readings of mere misogyny or misandry, it may be noted that the texts’ disposition appears to be biased rather against an unhuman, terrible kind of otherness, whatever gender it may assume. In the same vein, instead of reducing the latter to readings of mere xenophobia, it appears to rather be a manifestation of uneasiness that stems not from some distant outside other, but from perception of the everyday life as unstable and potentially other, within the cognitive space of medieval Scandinavia which allows for the existence of supernatural forces as part of its magical reality. It is a fear of the familiar which the medieval saga authors, compilers, and audiences try to project away from themselves and externalize: the otherness within, the dark and violent potential which, if no effort is put into harnessing it and keeping it in balance – internally, socially, politically – is prone to cause destruction and ruin. The tendency to project fears of the darker side of human psychology upon the supernatural ‘other’ has been a long noted subject in folklore studies (Ármann Jakobs-son 2009). The struggle of facing, and ultimately integrating, that internal otherness may be seen as coming to terms with the heritage of the perceived pagan past, whose worldview and values differed from the contemporary Christian(ized) society within which the sagas were committed to vellum. “Culture”, writes Torfi Tulinius, “is continually reinventing itself, both in its relationship to the cultures of others but also in relationship to itself as other” (2009: 213).

From the texts considered earlier in this study, there may be observed a pointed interest in fluid gender negotiations in medieval Iceland, itself a “mutating periphery”(Jóhann Páll Árnason 2009) undergoing dynamic

cultural and social transformation, in search of a balanced reconciliation between the indigenous Scandinavian beliefs of its settlers, and the continental European Christianity of the contemporary times, which has opened Iceland's doors to many new influences and imported concepts, not the least of which is courtly hierarchy, with its invariable impact on gender, and the subsequent emergence of romance literature (Kalinke 1990, Bagerius 2009, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013).

It has been remarked that “the past is a foreign country”,<sup>63</sup> and this statement holds no less true for the minds of those residing in that past, out of whose imaginations have sprung the texts examined above. It is a country that cannot be visited, and its realities are bound to remain out of reach. But recognizing the otherness of the medieval past and refraining from colonizing it with contemporary biases and value systems may nevertheless bring us closer to glimpsing the potential for diverse interpretative possibilities contained within its narratives.

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<sup>63</sup> Although originally appearing in the prologue of a novel by L. P. Harvey (1953), the phrase has found considerable resonance in scholarship on cultural history (Lowenthal 1985, Stark 2006, Schiffman 2011). The full quotation reads, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

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