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AUTONOMOUS POWER AND PROFOUND AGENCY: WOMEN AND MAGIC
IN THE ICELANDIC LEGENDARY SAGAS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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ABSTRACT

The Icelandic Legendary Sagas contain within them a unique representation of women's autonomy and agency, seen strongly in the ways women use magic. Scholars such as Jochens and Friðriksdóttir discuss women's representations most prominently in the Family Sagas, often brushing over the Legendary Sagas due to their fantastical and mythological nature which makes cultural analysis based on the texts difficult. The fantastical nature of the Legendary Sagas, however, presents the opportunity to thoroughly explore unique representations of women's autonomy. Other female archetypes often analyzed in the sagas are represented influencing male action, such as the inciter or whetter who encourages men to fight to regain family honor. However, I will argue in this thesis that the magical archetypes of seeress and sorceress act not as influences on male action but as mostly independent women. This thesis will describe the representation of female autonomy in the Legendary Sagas not just as an extension of the portrayal of women in the Family Sagas, but as a vision of new possibilities of thinking about women enabled by ancient ideas of magic.

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INTRODUCTION

Women in Icelandic Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) are represented as achieving a striking level of autonomy and agency despite many cultural inhibitors and literary biases against women in power. Scandinavian law and custom subordinated women to male authority, preventing women's autonomy and creating strong boundaries between male and female-dominated spheres of influence. Despite the boundaries portrayed in literature and 13th century legal documents, saga scholarship has long considered how, in the historical Icelandic Family Sagas (*íslendingasögur*), like *Njáls Saga* and *Laxdæla Saga*, women demonstrate profound vocal agency in the feuds that provide the structural backbone of the texts. The motif of the “whetting scene,” in which the wife or mother of a dead warrior incites a reluctant male family member to pursue revenge despite possibly dramatic legal repercussions or escalations in feuding, demonstrates the pivotal role women often play in Family Saga narratives. However, the roles of women in the more mythological Legendary Sagas such as *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* are less established, and perhaps for precisely this reason have attracted far less attention in saga scholarship. Our understanding of women in the Legendary Sagas is further complicated because, while later in date of composition than the Family Sagas, the Legendary Sagas tell stories that are much older and more difficult to relate to any historical situation. Scholars often value realism in place of the fantastical because they suggest that it provides an ability to analyze Icelandic culture in connection to representations in early literature. However, I argue that the Legendary sagas are vital in our understanding of Medieval Scandinavian literature and culture due

to their popularity and even specifically because of the fantastical content that has discouraged scholarship on these sagas. Whereas the powerful women of the Family Sagas are often counsellors and inciters, influencing male action, the autonomous women of these fantastic sagas include seeresses and sorceresses.¹ These representations project women's real social horizons, such as they were, into a metaphorical otherworldly space where fantasies of female power could be subversively explored through magic. I will argue that the magical archetypes of seeress and sorceress act not as influences on male action but as mostly independent women, in contrast to the traditional Family Saga archetypes of inciter and wise-woman, whose abilities are established in relation to their influence on male activity. This thesis aims to describe the representation of female autonomy in the Legendary Sagas not just as an extension of the portrayal of women in the Family Sagas, but as a vision of new possibilities of thinking about women enabled by ancient ideas of magic.

In order to contextualize the argument of this thesis, an explanation of the scholarly conversation surrounding the topic of women in Icelandic Sagas is in order. The scholarship on women and magic in Icelandic Saga literature is centered around women's magical practices in the Family Sagas. Other scholarship focuses on genre and style without analysis of the character's influence on the genre. Carol Clover's book *The Medieval Saga* is still considered a crucial source for considering Icelandic Saga

¹ Muslim author Ibn Fadlan, writing a narrative of his travels to the Scandinavian north, recounts the story of when he witnessed a Scandinavian burial-at-sea. This burial included the ritualistic sacrifice of the dead man's slave woman and was presided over by a female shaman who was referred to as the "Angel of Death." The female shaman presides over the burial rituals and performs certain key rites in the ritual sacrifice and burial including the actual sacrifice of the slave woman. (Fadlan 245-253)

literature as a genre, while Margaret Clunies Ross's many texts on Icelandic Saga literature argue about genre and style within the saga subgenres. Clunies Ross's *Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* acts as an outline and exploration of the history and genre of the saga, while her *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society* is an anthology that collects essays arguing about different facets of saga literature, such as mythological influence and historical perspectives. Carol Clover's work argues primarily about the saga genre, as seen in her book *The Medieval Saga*, which situates the sagas within the context of the literary medieval. Clover's scholarship also includes articles such as "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," which argues that scholars wrongly suggest that women had little power in the medieval Norse world, instead proposing that gender roles were not as clearly defined in the time. Friðriksdóttir, Jochens, and Kress each argue about different aspects of women in Icelandic literature. Helga Kress often argues for different aspects of women's speech, as seen in her articles "What a Woman Speaks," and "Gender and Gossip in the Sagas," where she argues that women used speech as a form of power, or that how women were received differently depending on how they use of their voices.² Friðriksdóttir's book *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* argues about different representations of women within the Icelandic Family Sagas, zeroing in on topics such as women's speech and women's use of magic in literature. Her focus on

² "What a Woman Speaks" suggests that women's voices and outlook can be seen primarily in texts that find their origins or influence in oral tradition instead of other spaces due to the erasure of women's voices by the male-dominated writing sphere. "Gender and Gossip in the Sagas" suggests that Icelandic medieval literature views women's speech as uncontrolled and dangerous, specifically seen in the Family Saga's representation of gossip, which she argues "is closely related to the categories of gender and the grotesque—two other and important sources for their narration" (192)

magic in Family Saga literature emphasizes the use of magic use as a literary device. Jenny Jochen's book *Old Norse Images of Women* argues about different female archetypes and roles that appear in poetic and saga literature, including the seeress and sorceress archetypes, an argument which she centers around the cultural implications. The critical conversation Jochens and Friðriksdóttir especially enter into analyzes the unique representation of women found within the Icelandic sagas. However, both Jochens and Friðriksdóttir's arguments about the Family Sagas neglect the exploratory nature of the Icelandic Legendary Sagas, which, though more recently composed, were inspired by much older and much more highly fictionalized stories. The fictionalized narrative structure allows for interpretation of women within the Legendary Sagas that specifically emphasizes a unique way of approaching the saga subgenres. The significance of this argument can be explained by exploring the gaps in the scholarship.

This thesis explores the significance of the Legendary Saga's representations of women. The Legendary Sagas exploratory freedom gives the subgenre the ability to represent women who are more thoroughly autonomous, reflecting the mythic and legendary inspirations for sagas. Though they may have originally been matriarchal,³ the mythic origins often reflect more autonomous and respected goddesses than other pagan pantheons, whose women, like Hera and Athena in the Greek Pantheon, are often portrayed as petty and spiteful women easy to fear and mistrust. Legendary Saga representations of magical women often show women using their abilities to take charge

³ Jochen's *Old Norse Images of Women* chapters 2-3 discuss the Nordic Pantheon, including the possibility of matriarchal origins.

of situations instead of influencing the men in their lives. When women do use magic to influence men, their power is established autonomously to the influence on men. The genre's ability to explore the fantastical representations of women creates strikingly positive representations of autonomous women who are both powerful and independent. Carol Clover's 1993 article "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe" argues that women could inherit land, practice "organized piracy" (3), or were otherwise far more powerful and autonomous than scholars originally suggested. Clover's argument could be used to further argue that the Legendary Sagas rely on real-world power women already had in their representations of powerful women. Both the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, which influenced both of the Legendary Sagas in question, represent magic-using women who have both power and agency, often as goddesses or other supernatural women. Because the Legendary Sagas are not limited by time but instead seem to exist in the realm of myth, they are able to pull from a wide range of representations and influences. In other words, the fictionality of the "lying sagas" or the Legendary Sagas allows them to explore more intensely issues of autonomy, independence, and power of magical women in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The two Legendary Sagas discussed here were chosen because they represent the mythic nature of the Legendary Sagas prominently and thus provide ample room for exploration of the mythic nature of magical women.

THE SAGAS

The Saga of Hrolf Kraki and *The Saga of the Volsungs* represent a medieval genre with unique genre conventions and origins in the Icelandic Saga tradition. Icelandic sagas

first appeared orally, as discussed by Margaret Clunies Ross in her *Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (15). When outlining the saga genres, she suggests that the sagas historically referred to as *lygisögur* or the “lying sagas” are “most plausibly identified with what modern scholars call *fornaldarsögur*, a term translated variously into English as ‘sagas of ancient time’ or ‘mythical-heroic sagas’ or ‘legendary sagas’” (28). Clunies Ross expounds on the history of the terms and suggests that the term *lygisögur* is a historical term that refers to the “relative lack of historicity, which, though entertaining, implicitly verges on the mendacious” (28). She explains that the some of the original audiences of the sagas would have viewed the Legendary Sagas as fictitious and lacking desired historical accuracy. Clunies Ross’s analysis of the historical reception of the Legendary Sagas elaborates on the complex nature and reception of these sagas.

The Family Sagas most often tell the historically based stories of drama and feuding surrounding specific families or heroes, while the Legendary Sagas tend to retell legendary stories. In this thesis, I will focus on two exemplary and canonical and Legendary Sagas in Icelandic Literature, *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, written between 1200 and 1270 (“Introduction” 3), tells the influential story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer. This saga may have been inspired by events from the 4th and 5th centuries CE, when “a seemingly endless series of skirmishes and wars were fought as tribes attempted to subjugate their enemies and to consolidate newly won territories into kingdoms and empires” (“Introduction” 2). Though this saga incorporates many connections to historical events or people such as

Attila the Hun, the narrative remains primarily fictional, twisting history to its own imaginative ends. Friðriksdóttir notes that, though the realm of the sagas is “an imagined space and as such obeys the laws of literary creations” (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 3) early saga authors rarely emphasized historicity, instead, “the schism between fiction and nonfiction, historiography and entertainment, and different genres, as perceived by modern scholars, was likely less important in the medieval period than today” (3). The divide Friðriksdóttir mentions here harkens to an interesting and significant facet of saga studies, namely that the divide between fiction and nonfiction is much less significant than may be suggested. Margaret Clunies Ross’ article “Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas” discusses authorial use of the fantastic, saying that “The fantastic mode in the sagas frequently occurs precisely where there is some uncertainty as to the nature of reality, or where the social norms of the culture are subverted, or where the present confronts the past...” (449). Clunies Ross’s argument emphasizes the importance of magic and the fantastical in the sagas, especially as the fantastical explains the subversion or uncertainty found in the narratives. *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*’s use of magic could readily be seen as subversion or working around societal conventions to allow women to gain more autonomy for themselves. Like the *Saga of the Volsungs*, *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* narrates the story of the rise and fall of a quasi-historical Scandinavian hero, Hrolf Kraki, an Arthurian-style king with a following of brave warriors who meet their demise at the hands of Hrolf Kraki’s supposedly evil half-sister, a half-elvish sorceress. Some of the stories and characters in this saga appear also in Saxo Grammaticus’ *History of the Danes*. Saxo Grammaticus’s text seamlessly blends

mythological and historical material and substantiates certain mytho-historical elements. The Hrolf Kraki saga thus appears to be one of the most prevalent sagas even before it was transcribed in manuscript form. This specific saga demonstrates how heavily the Legendary Sagas relied on myth and legend, especially when it comes to gender and women's roles. *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* deals with many different mythological characters and creatures, such as Odin and elves who encounter the heroes of the saga and alter their future or their perception of certain women within this narrative. *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs* fantastical nature, though viewed as too fantastical by some, allows for fascinating explorations of women's autonomy and independence in saga narratives.

TRADITIONAL FEMININE CHARACTERS

In Icelandic saga narratives, if a woman with any personal agency does not use magic, she often acts out one of two primary archetypes. The first archetype is the inciter—a woman who uses her words to incite the men to revenge or violence when the women see that the man is behaving in a manner that suggests weakness. Even women who do possess magical abilities act as inciters from time to time, demonstrating the pervasiveness of this archetypal role. The other archetype that appears in the sagas, as noted by Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir and Giselle Gos,⁴ is the role of the wise woman, or women who are seen by the men as remarkably wise and able to give good advice or

⁴ Gos's article "Women as a Source of *Heilræði*, 'sound counsel': Social Mediation and Community Interpretation in *Fóstbræðra Saga*" attempts to move the critical conversation away from inciting women and towards what she terms "sound counsel" or wise counsel.

good guidance.⁵ These two more realistic archetypes use their voices to gain or maintain power and therefore are easily comparable to the more fantastical archetypes in the Legendary Sagas, who at times use their voices to practice magical arts. Though the inciter and wise-woman archetypes are more easily connected to reality, the seeress and sorceress archetypes uniquely present women who, though not connected to reality, are able to independently establish their power. Jochens, in the introduction to her text *Old Norse Images of Women*, discusses the fact that many of these archetypes “may indeed have had a slim social grounding in the history of the Germanic tribes” (3) but suggests that the roles very quickly became mythical and one-dimensional images “exemplifying a single theme” (3). Jochens views the mythical nature of these roles as “one dimensional” and focusing on one idea or theme, suggesting that this is a negative trait. Though the inciter and wise-woman archetypes are seen throughout the Legendary Sagas along with or even in the same character as the seeress and sorceress archetypes, the magical archetypes are portrayed throughout the texts as much more autonomous and independent because they are not restricted to gaining power by influencing men.

GENDER AND MAGIC

Women were not the only users of magic in Icelandic Saga literature. The scholarly conversation has argued not about whether or not men used magic but about

⁵ Friðriksdóttir introduces the idea of the wise-woman as a contrast to the inciter role, saying that, while the Inciter is the most prominent female archetype, the wise-woman acts as a direct contrast to the inciter. Instead of inciting men towards violence, the wise-woman “incites” or prompts men to move towards peace instead. She associates the stereotypical archetype of the wise-woman specifically with the Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), saying that “so pervasive is this figure in the *fornaldarsögur* that she is arguably a stereotype associated with that genre” (*Women In Old Norse Literature* 25). Jenny Jochen’s *Old Norse Images of Women* focuses on the inciter archetype instead.

whether or not women used magic more often than men. Though relatively sparse, the historical evidence suggests that women were likely the first major practitioners of magic in the ancient times. Jenny Jochens supports this supposition against claims that early magical practices were evenly distributed among both men and women, writing that “the conclusion is near that from the beginning the entire scope of wisdom had been dominated by women” (120). By “wisdom,” Jochens is especially referring to the concept of prophecy or prophetic knowledge, and here argues that women actually dominated magical practice in the ancient Scandinavian world. The division of magical practice along gender lines could have had many purposes, however women’s consistent use of magic and the legal condemnation of most male practitioners suggests several possible implications. Perhaps magic was seen as a woman’s power, like midwifery was before the invention of the masculine medical profession.⁶ Another view is that magic was regarded with tolerant disdain, and therefore left to the women. This would explain why judgment was passed on men who resorted to using such a weak form of power to maintain their own. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, in her book *Women in Old Norse Literature* speculates that women turned to magic to maintain their honor, because “Widows and other independent women are more likely to use magic than those with husbands. By independent, I mean women running their own households, with a male patriarch absent” (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 54). Friðriksdóttir argues that such independence for women would not have been welcomed but instead feared as a threat to

⁶ Monica Green’s book *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine* covers the topic of women’s medicinal practices prior to the invention of the modern masculine medicinal field, discussing issues of literacy and illiteracy within the medical field and the impacts that the literate masculine community had pushing women out of the medical field.

the safety of the woman in question (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 54). Her suggestion is that magic was a strong way of maintaining power and autonomy when women had no one to protect them. If women were left alone and disenfranchised by the men in their lives, they were forced to resort to more unique means to maintain their own safety. Women were excluded from most legal documents of the era, which excluded them from representation in the governing body without a man and from holding any legal power. The legal document of Iceland, the *Grágás* or the “Grey Goose” describes the only situation in which women hold any power when discussing representation of women’s household saying that “The same men are rightly called on behalf of a household led by a woman as on behalf of the household of an unfit man” (Dennis 151). Women in certain instances were able to run their own households without a man but still required male representation in courts or the system of government and thus lacked any power for themselves. Jochens and Friðriksdóttir’s above arguments represent the majority of scholarship centered around female magicians. Friðriksdóttir’s article *Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the "Íslendingasögur"* notes that “People try to gain control of the world around them to further their own agenda by any means they hope to be effective” (414). Magic may very well have been used by real women to attempt to establish themselves as autonomous and independent of men when the legal standards of the time would not allow for such independence. The status of magic as a last resort for women without means may help explain how use of magic could be viewed as feminine or womanish, especially in the more realistic Family Sagas. Yet the two archetypes of magic-wielding women represented in the Legendary Sagas suggest little in

the way of condemnation. The seeress and the sorceress, in fact, play powerful roles in the legendary world, often more pivotal in the saga's narratives and power structures than those of their male magic-using counterparts.

I will now discuss the two primary archetypes of magical women that appear in these sagas: the seeress and the sorceress. These two archetypes strive in different and unique ways to explore the power of female characters in the legendary sagas, specifically *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The seeress archetype uses subtle magic commonly associated with women to establish herself as a respected and honorable character in the eyes of men and women alike. The sorceress archetype, by contrast, cares little for the approval of society and instead strives to use both magic commonly used by women and magic more commonly utilized by male sorcerers to create a distinct autonomy and power for herself. Both archetypes are able to become honorable or independent in their own way, however they are painted by the saga authors (or transcribers) as either protagonistic or antagonistic depending on how much independence the woman strives to achieve. A more detailed analysis of these two archetypes will begin with an analysis of the seeress or prophetess role in the following section.

THE SEERESS OR PROPHETESS

One of the magical female archetypes in the Icelandic Sagas is the archetype of the seeress or prophetess. The Icelandic Sagas represent women in the archetypal seeress role using magic like *seiðr* to foresee the future or see hidden things. In the Legendary Sagas *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, these women are not

shamed for their abilities but are in fact honored and respected seeresses. The seeress archetype in the Legendary Sagas is predominantly female, as Friðriksdóttir suggests for the Family Sagas.⁷ The seeress archetype appears in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, primarily in Heid in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and Brynhild in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, two women whose prophetic powers appear during pivotal moments in the sagas. These two women demonstrate the significance of the seeress archetype in these two sagas by giving prophecies in a manner that promotes respect and honor of the seeress. The first view readers get of the Seeress archetype is towards the beginning of *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, followed by *The Saga of the Volsungs* portrayal of Brynhild in the latter half of that saga.

The first seeress appears at the beginning of *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*. *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* begins with the Danish king Frodi killing his brother King Halfdan and searching for King Halfdan's sons so that Frodi's usurpation would be complete. When King Frodi's searches turn up nothing substantial, he calls in seeresses and sorcerers to find them. After they cannot help, Heid appears.⁸ In the saga, Heid's prophetic abilities require ritualistic practices such as placing her on a scaffolding to be displayed as she prophecies. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Brynhild reveals seeress abilities, though she is not referred to with the title in the text nor does she participate in ritualistic practices like Heid does. Brynhild gives prophetic counsel to Sigurd and Gudrun and even directly

⁷ See Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's *Women in Old Norse Literature* page 52.

⁸ Jesse Byock's endnote at the entrance of Heid in the text says that Heid is also the name of the seeress in the Eddic *Voluspa*, however he does not provide a source-note for this. Hollander's *Poetic Edda* translation does not refer to the seeress in the *Voluspa* as Heid, nor does he give her any name.

prophesies to them both, though her prophetic powers are not displayed in the same way as Heid's more ritualistic practice.

The second major appearance of a seeress is in the latter half of *The Saga of the Volsungs* with the introduction of Brynhild. Brynhild in the *Saga of the Volsungs* plays a combination of the inciter, the wise-woman, and the seeress. She is able to make use of magical abilities to foresee the future and translate dreams, her ability to incite the men around her to take revenge for her, and her wisdom to guide Sigurd, Gudrun, and others in their quests. Finding the two more realistic archetypal roles alongside the fantastical seeress archetype all within the same character demonstrates the versatility of women in the Legendary Sagas and suggests that women were able to use multiple techniques to gain or create their power. Despite the demonstrated versatility, the seeress archetype contains a startling amount of power that enables the women who practice it to not only step outside of established inciter and wise-woman archetypes but also gives them more independence and autonomy, solidifying women's power in relation to themselves and not in relation to the influence they have over men.

The Legendary Saga representation of the seeress emphasizes the importance of the genre. Friðriksdóttir and Jochens focus their analysis of the seeress on how the Family Sagas seeresses represent real-world events, characters, and roles, analyzing the realistic nature of the Family Sagas and focusing on different ideas relating to real-world cultural analyses made possible by the Family Sagas. Though Friðriksdóttir and Jochens focus on the Family Sagas, the Legendary Sagas are full of representations of seeresses or female magicians, specifically magicians with a wide reach. The Legendary Sagas

representation of seeresses helps us to expand our view of genre and promote the Legendary Saga subgenre as fully capable of analyzing and exploring the representation of autonomous and independent women. The seeresses in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs* specifically demonstrate a profound ability to use their magic specifically to perform their own roles or pursue their own independent goals instead of being restricted to using their magic to influence the male authorities in their lives. The Legendary Saga seeress is seen as a powerful and significant presence before she even appears in the sagas, which can be seen in the reactions she gets from the people who encounter her.

Several instances of male prophecy appear in the sagas as evidence that women were not the primary users of said magic. the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *the Saga of the Volsungs* both represent several men with possible foresight: Sigmund the Volsung; Vifil, protector of Helgi and Hroar; and Svip, father of Svipdag, Beygad, and Hvitserk. Of the three men, Vifil barely prophecies and Sigmund only prophecies once at his death, leaving Svip perhaps the only actual practitioner of any real form of seeing, and that only seeing something unseen to him and not prophesying future events. At the beginning of the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, Vifil predicts that people are coming to search for Hroar and Helgi, the heirs to the usurped and murdered King Halfdan. The text, however, is extremely vague regarding *how* he predicts such an event and instead of saying he foresaw something, says that he noticed that “the air and the paths are alive with magic, and powerful spirits have visited the island” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 3). Though Vifil’s observations could be seen as some form of foresight, the text indicates merely clever

observations and not actual prophecy. The *Saga of the Volsungs* shows Sigmund performing what seems to be an actual prophetic event, however his prophetic knowledge comes at the end of his life. There are no rituals performed, and Sigmund clearly and directly states his prophecy for the future—that his sword “is intended for another. You are carrying a son. Raise him well and carefully, for he will be an excellent boy, the foremost in our line...” (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 54). Sigmund’s prophecy was far more straightforward than the prophecies of most of the seeresses, telling Hjordis exactly what she needs to know in as simple of terms as possible. Svip’s prophecy is closer to the traditional *seiðr*, as the vision he has comes to him in a dream, and he is able to translate the dream and relay the vision to his sons. Any sort of prophetic vocalizations men make in these two sagas are remarkably straightforward, lacking in poeticism or riddling of any kind. They have no need to be in any way indirect. However, the male prophecies in these sagas lack many of the qualities of traditional female *seiðr* prophecy. Perhaps this is due to the feminine nature of the magic form most often associated with prophecy. The magic *seiðr* was often seen as a feminine form of magic. Men were shamed or viewed as “contaminated by *ergi*, passive homosexuality that was considered highly shameful” (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 49). The archetype of seeress is thus highly gendered, and despite Odin and male saga characters practice of *seiðr*, the magic itself was viewed as demeaning or effeminizing. This forced any man with prophetic abilities to make them appear more masculine, giving them the freedom to be direct and straightforward in their prophetic vocalizations.

The Legendary Sagas gather much inspiration from mythic sources, especially when approaching the subject of magic. When discussing women's magic in the Legendary Sagas, it is important to briefly acknowledge the significant influence mythological figures played in the inspiration for these women's powers due to the significance of the fictional mythic in establishing the genre and gender exploration. Since the magical archetypes come from myth and legend, inspired by goddesses whose independent nature is easily visualized, it is important to understand the influential texts. Freya's power has been discussed by scholars such as Friðriksdóttir and Neil Price, who both suggest either that Freya was the originator of *Seiðr* magic or that *seiðr* was specifically feminine magic⁹. Freya's power influenced primarily the fictional and real-life representations of seeresses, who use *seiðr*, primarily an oral tradition focused on trance-like state and women's vocalizations. Neil Price suggests that though Odin was undisputedly a master of *seiðr*, "the sagas nevertheless make it abundantly clear that this kind of sorcery was conventionally the province of women" (69) and that the sagas tend to describe the magic with overtones of Freya's influence. Friðriksdóttir also emphasizes that *seiðr* was "specifically associated with Freyja, the Vanir goddess who first taught this kind of magic to the Æsir" (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 49). The specific type of magic known as *seiðr* was primarily acknowledged as women's magic despite Odin's supposed claim to the magic. This association of *seiðr* with mythical women inevitably genders the specific magical practices associated with any usage of the *seiðr* prophetic

⁹ Neil Price's text *The Viking Way* and Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's *Women in Old Norse Literature*, chapter 2 specifically, both address Freya's influence and the femininity of certain magical practices, especially focusing on the femininity of prophecy.

magic. The feminization of prophecy is easily seen in the mythological of magical women that inspired the Legendary Sagas.

. Women's voices have a special significance both historically and within scholarship on Icelandic saga narratives. Even when writing was a part of the society, women in most cultures often did not have access to education and tools to learn how to write¹⁰. Friðriksdóttir notes that "magic relies on verbal utterances, verses, charms, formulaic phrases, or curses" (*Women in Old Norse Literature* 50). Magic was not only a method of power, it was a way for women to practice using their voices to maintain and gain power for themselves. Helga Kress's "What a Woman Speaks," emphasizes the importance of women's speech and says that the seeress "places great weight on her words, which turn out to come true" (Kress 7). Kress's argument points out the significance of the words coming out of a seeress's mouth. If the prophecies come true, those listening or calling on the prophetess to speak have reason to listen to and respect her. Though Kress's analysis emphasizes real-world implications in the Family Saga's representations on women, her emphasis on the weight of words and vocalizations is significant to our discussion of women's imagined voices within the Legendary Sagas. Prophetic speech therefore plays a part in the power seeresses are able to hold for themselves.

One example of the power of women's prophetic speech in these two sagas is Heid's speech in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*. Throughout Heid's prophecy scene in the *Saga*

¹⁰ Jenny Jochens, in *Old Norse Images of Women*, suggests that women may have played a part in the creation of runes and writing in early Scandinavia. For more information, please see *Images* page 127.

of *Hrolf Kraki*, she speaks in poetic riddles, often making it hard to discern the meaning of her prophecies. The prophecy that starts the scene creates both a clear but confused image of not the future, but the present,

Two are the men

I trust in neither,

they the excellent ones

who sit by the fire's side. (*Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 6)

The riddling speech here is likely supposed to be cryptic and confusing and strengthens Heid's hold over the situation. King Frodi is forced to ask her what she means, and she is under no obligation to give him an answer. Heid's prophecy acknowledges two men, whom the reader knows is Helgi and Hroar, the brothers that Frodi is searching for, but Frodi clearly does not catch on. We the readers know that the boys had been running about the hall in front of King Frodi, though only their sister and her husband knew who they were. After acknowledging two men, Heid says she trusts in neither, a fact which further confuses the prophecy and demonstrates Heid's power. Why does she not trust them? Especially as, in the very next line, she names them "the excellent ones" (6).

Though Heid's prophecies seem to be both cryptic and obvious, she strategically uses and manipulates the words emerging from her mouth as a tool. The entire prophecy is true, as seen in Heid's explanation of the unseen past and the events that transpire immediately after her prophecy. Her entire prophecy carries on in the same manner as the above segment, seeming to be both clear and convoluted. Without her prophetic words, Frodi will not find the boys and his fragile power will slip away. But despite Frodi's desperate

attempts to hold onto his power, Heid only seems to wield power in this scene. Her prophecies in essence set in stone the future he feared. In the end, “Her mouth gaped wide, but the spell became difficult,” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 7), which could signal a lack of control over her prophecies, or it could demonstrate the overwhelming nature of Heid’s power. Heid’s powerful prophecy wrenches her jaws open and forces words out of her mouth. Frodi’s demise now seemingly set in stone, Heid must flee in order to preserve her life from the rage of a king whose power is slipping from his grasp due to the power of a woman. Heid’s use of speech in this scene directly reflects the notion that women’s voices are particularly powerful.

The way female magic users in general are perceived or received in the sagas varies greatly depending on the particular magic they use. In contrast to Kress and Jochens, I argue that the archetype of the seeress is one that, for the most part, is portrayed positively.¹¹ Jochens suggests that women magic-users are portrayed infrequently and unfavorably throughout the Legendary Sagas (*Images* 126). However, the *Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* both represent several women who viewed favorably who practice magic. The seeresses in these two sagas appear to advise or share prophecies with other characters in the saga—sometimes but not always the heroes. Women such as Brynhild seem to hold a sort of moral ambiguity in their position as seeress, however no seeress in either *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* or *the Saga of the Volsungs* is portrayed as an absolute villain. Signy, from *The Saga of the Volsungs*, has the gift of foresight and is viewed as a hero in her saga, for example. Even though these

¹¹ See Jochens *Old Norse Images of Women* or Kress “What a Woman Speaks.”

sagas were written down in a post-Christian Icelandic culture, the prophetic women were not automatically shamed or villainized in either saga. This could be reminiscent of ancient beliefs about seeresses coupled with Christianized ideals about prophets serving God.¹² The respect these women held in their societies even went to the top of their social castes, even the respect of kings. King Frodi himself held Heid in high respect, calling upon her and setting up stage needed to for prophecy, preparing the location for her needs.¹³ Gudrun and her maidens traveled far to hear the prophetic wisdom of Brynhild and Sigurd calls her the wisest woman he has ever met.

The seeress's unique reception can be seen first in Heid, the seeress in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* who plays the most significant role in the saga narrative. The primary seeress in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* is Heid, the prophetess who appears in the third chapter when King Frodi is still searching for his nephews, the usurped King Halfdan's sons. King Frodi does not call on Heid—she simply appears, right after King Frodi announces that he would “show great honor to the man who could tell him something about the boys” (6). Almost as soon as King Frodi announces the honor he will bestow on the man who finds the boys, Heid comes to claim that honor. She is already confident that she, a

¹² When discussing the presence of magic in Icelandic literature, scholars such as Jochens, and Kress both discuss the appearance of Christianity as it influences the representation of magic-using women in the sagas. Since the Legendary Sagas were written well after the appearance and establishment of Christianity in Iceland, this is an entirely relevant and important insight to take. See Helga Kress “What a Woman Speaks” and Jochens *Old Norse Images of Women* pp 113-131, or Margaret Clunies Ross's *Prolonged Echoes: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* for more information on the influence of Christianity on myth, magic, and women.

¹³ Stefanie V. Schnurbein's article “Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: A Theory Between Ideological Camps” argues for the presence of shamanism in the Old Norse tradition, discussing the use of *seiðr* and the *seiðhiallr* or “a high frame on which the *Völva*, or seeress, sits” (117). The passage in the saga narrative shows Heid on a *seiðhallr*, which, according to Schnurbein's article connects Heid's ritualistic magic to shamanistic practices.

woman, can claim honor promised to the “man” who finds the boys. When she arrives in Frodi’s hall, she already has a certain level of respect which strengthens her claim to the honor offered. He immediately prepares a feast for her and has her placed on a high throne platform for everyone to see (6). She is the guest of honor and the forefront of everyone’s attention. Frodi either genuinely compliments her or attempts to appease her with compliments, saying that he knows “much will be made clear to you. I see that there is great luck in you” (6). He views her with respect because he sees that her abilities are genuine. Heid is well-known in the surrounding world of the text, it would seem. If, as Byock suggests in his endnotes, Heid has the same name as the seeress in the Eddic *Voluspa*, this renown would not be surprising, and may back up the suggestion that Heid in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* is the same seeress seen in the *Poetic Edda Voluspa*. If anyone can find the boys King Frodi is looking for, it would be her—especially if she is the same seeress Odin approaches in the Edda, and Frodi honors her preemptively for something he is confident she will be able to do. Heid’s reception in this scene is revealed in the way the other characters react to her appearance and her presence.

Heid’s speech is very convoluted and confusing: a feature which is used throughout the scene to reveal her power and authority. This intentionally confusing language begins to anger the King, who is forced to question Heid or directly announce his confusion during her prophecy. Seeing that other people may be understanding what Heid’s prophecies mean after Signy throws a gold ring at Heid to bribe her into silence only further angers and confuses the king, whose reaction to Heid grows more hostile by the minute. After the seeress almost steps down prematurely, until King Frodi threatens

her and says “I still do not understand any better than previously what you are saying” (7). Heid’s prophecies seem to be a struggle by the end--“her mouth gaped wide, but the spell became difficult” (7)—however her power over the crowd does not seem to diminish. Though in the end, she must flee King Frodi’s presence for fear of his murderous rage, she maintains a level of authority over the room, seen in the reactions of those around her. Heid’s prophetic abilities are powerful. Her mouth gapes open when she speaks prophecies, chants seem to emerge from her mouth. Instead of simply sharing prophetic ideas, Heid’s magical abilities are clear. She does not simply have some gift of foresight, but actual magical seeress abilities that enable her to see things others could not. She knows things that she should not have known, and uses this knowledge as a form of power, acknowledged before she even walks into the room and respected by the majority of those she comes in contact with. Though after her prophecies she flees the hall, Frodi does not chase after her, instead sending his men after the two boys who just fled the hall. Though Frodi likely ignores Heid because he now has his target and has no need of her, it is equally likely that, though she fled for her life to escape a tyrant’s wrath, she held enough respect and honor in the eyes of the people to prevent Frodi from easily targeting her. After she flees, there is no more mention of her in the text, however much can be learned in the brief space she appears regarding the honor and autonomy she had as well as how those around her perceived her. Her powerful abilities enabled her to both be autonomous and honored. Though Heid’s speech influenced or incited men in the room, her power was not sparked by such incitement. Heid is not the only seeress in the

two sagas, and her reception differs slightly from the reception of Brynhild, the other major seeress in the sagas.

The Saga of the Volsungs reveals yet another powerful seeress in its pages. Brynhild is the second major seeress in the two legendary sagas in question, playing a significant role in the plot of the saga. Her character appears in many iterations of the Volsung legend and is therefore discussed by scholars such as Jochens and Grimstad and Wakefield in relation to her role in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Nibelungenleid*.¹⁴ Scholars that do focus on Brynhild in the *Saga of the Volsungs* focus on primarily her archetypal roles as a warrior woman or an inciter. Since her introduction in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is identical in almost every way to the Eddic *Sigrdrífumál* lay introducing the valkyrie Sigrdrífa, it is not surprising that most scholars focus on Brynhild as a valkyrie or warrior-woman. The *Poetic Edda* “Lay of Sigrdrífa” or *Sigrdrífumál* shows Sigurth (Sigurd in the *Saga of the Volsungs*) heading towards Frankland or Frakkland and seeing a bright, high-burning fire. After heading towards it, he discovers a woman sleeping in full armor and helmet. Once he removes the helmet, he realizes it’s a woman and that she seems trapped, so he then cuts off the armor, which was supposedly too tight for her and had almost grown into her skin. It is after this that she awakens and teaches Sigurth much of her wisdom (Hollander 233-240). This story is nearly identical to Brynhild’s introduction in the *Saga of the Volsungs*—the only significant difference being that the Eddic text names the woman Sigrdrífa and in the saga she is Brynhild. The *Poetic Edda*

¹⁴ For more information, see Jochens *Old Norse Images of Women* Chapters 4 and 7 and Grimstad and Wakefield’s “Monstrous Mates: The Leading Ladies of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsung Saga*.”

refers to Sigrdrífa and Brynhild as two different people, although the Saga text conflates them. Though this easily connects Brynhild to the valkyrie imagery, Brynhild also embodies certain imagery associated with the seeress, and is able to see the future and interpret dreams. Brynhild is not just a Valkyrie-inspired character, instead revealing multiple archetypes within one person.

Brynhild seems to embody multiple archetypes within one person. Brynhild, because she is easily combined with valkyrie-imagery apparent in the Poetic Edda, embodies the archetype of the warrior-woman, the inciter, the wise-woman, and the prophetess all in one person. However, her wisdom at times stems from her prophetic abilities and attempts to guide Sigurd towards paths that will not end in his death. After Brynhild has given Sigurd poetic wisdom, Sigurd declares that “Never can there be found a wise woman in the world than you” (71) and asks her for more wisdom. It is after he asks her for more wisdom that her wisdom begins to reveal insights into the future. She advises him to “not swear a false oath, because hard vengeance follows the breaking of truce” (71), a paragraph before he swears an oath to marry her and only her. Sigurd will later break this oath due to witchcraft from his future mother-in-law, and Brynhild’s vengeance will destroy his entire family line. She also advises him “I see only a little of your future life, yet it would be better if the hate of your in-laws did not descend upon you” (71). Brynhild later in the text incites her husband, Sigurd’s brother-in-law, to hate and murder Sigurd in his sleep. Earlier in this same section, she advises Sigurd to “Beware of ill dealings, both of a maid’s love and a man’s wife; ill often arises from these” (71). Because of Gudrun’s love his memories are stolen from him and he forgets

Brynhild, who later, in her vengeful wrath tricks Sigurd and lies to her husband, saying that he dishonored her, in order to get Sigurd killed. All of these prophetic sayings come addressed as “wise counsel,” even though they appear instead to be prophecies. Brynhild even acknowledges that she can see Sigurd’s future, though she says she can only see a little of it. Because of her prophetic wisdom, Sigurd falls in love with her and desires to marry her. He sees her as an honorable, wise woman whose counsel and wisdom make her most worthy of marriage. Though she later directly prophecies, her earlier and more subtle prophecies give her much power and honor in the eyes of the story’s main hero. Brynhild’s prophetic abilities are only beginning to reveal themselves, subtly at first, but more prominently as the saga progresses.

Brynhild and Sigurd meet again, when she directly prophecies that “you will marry Gudrun, the daughter of Gjuki” (75), which Sigurd immediately disbelieves. Sigurd’s devotion to Brynhild causes him to in this moment ignore her wisdom and prophetic abilities, even causing him to renew his oaths to her—oaths which she had earlier advised against, foreseeing that it would only end in trouble. However, after this second encounter with Sigurd, Brynhild’s true prophetic abilities come to light. During her meeting with Gudrun, the daughter of Gjuki whom she had just prophesied would marry the man who just swore oaths to marry her instead. Her prophetic insight in this instance comes in the form of dream-interpretation, where she simply and directly lays out for Gudrun what will happen in her future. Gudrun’s respect for Brynhild can be seen before they even meet. Gudrun describes Brynhild as someone who has wisdom and foresight to interpret her dreams, saying “I will visit Brynhild; she will know” (76).

Brynhild's prophetic abilities seen under the guise of wisdom are known far enough around the saga-world that Gudrun knows of her abilities and goes to visit her. Brynhild's abilities are less shamanistic, perhaps muddled by Christianized writing. However, her words are at times clearly prophetic, disguised as wisdom sayings. Her prophetic abilities are respected world-wide as wisdom, but the supernatural nature of her "wisdom" speaks to greater power that is misinterpreted as wisdom, but nevertheless allows her to assert herself in more than one way as an independent and influential woman. Brynhild, like Heid, embodies a seeress whose reception is largely positive throughout her time in that role.

The two primary seeresses discussed in this section use their power of foresight or *seiðr* to create and maintain their authority and autonomy over their world. The other minor appearances of seeresses within these two Legendary sagas, women at the end of the *Saga of the Volsungs* who dream of their husbands demise as well as random references to seeresses throughout both sagas, further emphasize the importance of these powerful archetypes and their prevalence both in mythological texts and more realistic saga narratives. Heid and Brynhild are able to use their abilities as seeresses in order to hold power over the present or future events. The seeress has a remarkable amount of pre-established respect that enables the characters to step into a powerful place in the narrative. This respect and honor seen in these two Legendary Sagas contradicts Jochens's suggestion that all magic-using women were portrayed as evil, trollish people. Friðriksdóttir's focus on prophecy as primarily a literary device also undermines the autonomy these women held for themselves. The seeress, however, is not the only

magical archetype appearing in the sagas, and the portrayal of the sorceress uniquely contrasts the portrayal of the seeress.

SORCERESSES AND SORCERY

The Legendary Sagas not only portray the fictional archetype of the seeress, but also women embodying the archetype of sorceress. The sorceress's magic differs from the magic used by seeresses in many ways, although Jochens and Friðriksdóttir do not separate the roles of seeress and sorceress, focusing primarily on prophetic abilities.¹⁵ However, sorceresses in the Legendary Sagas are remarkably powerful women whose magic allows them to be autonomous and independent, which is likely why several of them are villainized. The saga's representation of the sorceress differs from the representation of the seeress in more than just the descriptions of their different abilities, but also in the character's perceptions of the sorceress.

The sorceress and the seeress, though both magic-using women characters, are represented in different ways and having different abilities. The difference between the seeress and the sorceress becomes clear upon a quick analysis of their powers. The prophetess is able to see the future, translate dreams, or see hidden things, as demonstrated earlier in this thesis. The sorceress, in contrast, is not able to prophecy, but performs much more complicated and sometimes violent magical acts, such as shape-shifting, conjuring, body-switching, potion-creations, rune-carving, and performing

¹⁵ Friðriksdóttir's *Women in Old Norse Literature* simply focuses on the "motif of women using magic" to argue that "Its appearance in the *Ísendingasögur* primarily serves a narrative function; it was used for literary purposes" (57). She does not use any space in her chapter on women and magic in Icelandic Family Sagas to distinguish between the seeress and the sorceress. Jochens chapter in *Old Norse Images of Women* on women and magic is called "The Prophetess/Sorceress," although she does not adequately distinguish either role as separate or distinctive.

curses Most sorcery seems to involve some level of shape-shifting into or conjuring animals, which could represent early shamanistic or religious beliefs and practices and may more strongly relate the practice of sorcery in Icelandic literature to early pagan religious practices.¹⁶ Because of the powers they display, the sorceresses who appear in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *the Saga of the Volsungs* are represented as morally ambiguous. Jochens discussion of female magicians in the Legendary Sagas suggests that the Legendary Sagas “strengthen the new tendencies found sparingly in the older sources that imply greater male involvement and the association of magic with evil” (Jochens 126). Though Jochens suggests that any and all magic is looked down upon in the Legendary Sagas, I suggest that the sorceress archetype is specifically painted as an evil character type in contrast to the positive perception of the seeress due to the sorceresses represented autonomy and independence. The perception of sorceresses specifically as evil or villainous, in contrast to the seeress, may not only reflect the Christianization of Iceland, but may also reflect the masculinity sorceresses took upon themselves by practicing magic less feminized than prophecy. Since *seiðr* was traditionally feminine magic, anything outside of *seiðr* is more easily accessible by men and thus more easily masculinized. Women who practiced sorcery, for example, often practiced a much more

¹⁶ Odin, Loki, Freya, and other figures in the Nordic pantheon were able to transfigure themselves into animals or other beings or had strong connections to animals. Loki is one of the primary examples of a being who could shapeshift, exemplified throughout the Prose Edda, such as the tale of Idun and her apples, where Loki asks Freya to “lend him a falcon shape of hers” (60) and then proceeds to kidnap the goddess Idun, whose charge was the apples of immortality the gods ate. Such tales suggest that shapeshifting was a common theme in Scandinavian myths. Shapeshifting is also seen in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, where Sigmund and Sinfjolti put on wolf skins and are transfigured into wolves. Not every instance of shapeshifting involves donning a skin of the animal in question, such as Sigurd and Gunnar’s shape-switching later in the saga.

violent form of magic than seeresses. Skuld, for example, conjures evil and violent creatures from Scandinavian mythos to take part in her army. The magic that Skuld and the other sorceresses practice includes magic also practiced by men in the sagas, such as King Adils, Bodvar Bjarki, Vifil, Svip, and even Odin, who appears in both sagas under different disguises and interferes in the lives of the heroes of the saga. Though men practice sorcery in the sagas, the women who practice sorcery are uniquely represented in a variety of characters.

Men who practice sorcery in the sagas are not few and far between, nor are the male characters represented as entirely villainous. Bodvar, Vifil, Svip, and Bodvar's brothers all are at the very least portrayed positively if not viewed as heroic figures within their respective sagas. The different ways women and men were perceived when practicing magic suggests an interesting dichotomy that explores the relationship between gender, magic, and power in these fictional saga narratives.

The men who practice sorcery are received differently than the men who practiced prophecy and are even represented differently than the women who practice sorcery. Though King Adils is described as an evil antagonist, most of the other sorcerers are seen as heroic and capable men whose magic contributes to their power and greatness—such as Bodvar Bjarki. However, the most proficient male sorcerer, King Adils, is described as “a heathen sacrificer” who “sacrifices to a boar, and I scarcely understand that such a monster can exist” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 63). This practice of sacrificing to some sort of god associates the practice of sorcery with ancient pagan or shamanistic practices, which may in part explain why Christianized Iceland looked down upon this specific

magical abilities over other forms of magic. Bodvar Bjarki is another male magician in the sagas, however he appears not as a villain but as a protagonist. Unlike Adils, whose powers are connected to his sacrifice to a pagan god, Bodvar Bjarki's powers are inherited, coming from his father, who was cursed to turn into a bear by the evil witch Hvit, and his mother Bera (whose name literally translates to "female bear"). Though Bodvar Bjarki is not the only man who practices magic as a force for good in these two sagas, he is the most prominent, the others only appearing sporadically throughout these two sagas. The positive perception of male sorcerers directly contrasts the negative role that sorceresses are often portrayed in. Women who use sorcery practice powerful magic that has powerful effects on the sagas plotlines and story arcs. The sorceress, however, serve more than just a plot-device function. The sorceress also acts as a masculinized villain whose portrayal can easily explain why Jochens believes that the Legendary Sagas portray women magic users as evil and corrupt trollish people. However, the Legendary Saga portrayal of sorceresses is actually much more nuanced than Jochens would have us believe, instead suggesting that, though sorceresses are often villainized in some respects, the portrayal of sorceresses is often startlingly positive considering the role the archetype plays.

The first appearance of significance of the sorceress presents the often villainous presentation the sorceress receives throughout saga literature. One of the first appearances of a sorceress in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is near the beginning of the saga. A she-wolf who attacks the captured Volsungs at the beginning of the text, for example, is rumored to be a sorceress, the mother of the evil king Siggeir, who "had assumed this

shape through witchcraft and sorcery” (*Saga of the Volsungs* 42). The assumption is never directly confirmed, but the saga already seems intent on suggesting that she is indeed King Siggeir’s mother. If she is his mother, she is already associated with evil—since her son is so violently hated and so violently hates the Volsungs. King Siggeir’s mother-wolf’s punishment is to die by Sigmund’s teeth—he bites out her tongue and she bleeds out. Such violent punishments are certainly fitting for a woman who, in any form, attacks and kills such noble men as the Volsungs. The introduction to sorcery may be an attempt to blame the unfortunate circumstances of the Volsung’s demise on something magical, an attempt to explain away the oddity of each of them being eaten by a wolf. The author’s vague approach to the possibility of the wolf being a sorceress could indicate that this is merely a plot device, attempting to explain some strange facet of the story, as Friðriksdóttir suggests.¹⁷ Or it could merely be how the story was passed down through time. The concept of a sorceress turning herself into a wolf and devouring the Volsung clan is morbid and disgusting, and immediately paints a picture of sorcery as an evil and perverted form of magic used only for villainy.

Despite this grim and startling introduction to the idea of sorceresses in this saga, the very next page reveals a sorceress who assists Signy the Volsung in some rather morally questionable activities of her own. Signy uses the sorceress to swap bodies or physical appearances with the sorceress (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 43). After swapping bodies with the sorceress, Signy, visiting her twin brother under the guise of the

¹⁷ Friðriksdóttir’s *Women in Old Norse Literature*, says that “In many sagas, magic is used to explain misfortunes and tragedies that would otherwise seem inexplicable accidents or natural disasters and simply part of the hardships of life; magic serves to rationalize these occurrences” (52).

sorceress, gets herself impregnated with her brother's child in order to produce a child "very like the Volsung stock" (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 43). Though incest is strongly rejected by most Scandinavian societies, this act of incest produces the perfect Volsung to gain revenge for his family. He embodies the "best traits" of the Volsungs. The sorceress in this tale is unnamed, appearing only to swap places with Signy, and then disappears, though her appearance is described by Sigmund as "a fine and handsome woman" (43), bringing to mind the idea of sorceresses being villainized through their sexuality.¹⁸ The fact that the sorceress's magic was used to promote incest only exacerbates the matter. Though she is described as a very beautiful woman and her body is used to facilitate incest, she participates in Signy's revenge plan for her family. Though her appearance is brief and she remains unnamed, and the sorceress seems to act as little more than a plot device yet again, the sorceress here acts as a positive view of a sorceress's role in Icelandic sagas. The seeress plays a significant role in the ensuing revenge-plot against King Siggeir, a major point of the plot throughout *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

The final sorceress to appear in the *Saga of the Volsungs* is Grimhild, the mother of Gudrun. The text refers to Grimhild as "a woman well-versed in magic" (75) at first introduction, indicating that Grimhild will probably play both a significant role in the plot and will be morally ambiguous at best. She is not described as a seeress, but as someone who uses magic, a distinction which further emphasizes the divide between the seeress and sorceress. Grimhild is a far more subtle sorceress than the other two discussed so far

¹⁸ This idea of the sorceress as a "fine and handsome woman" is discussed by Katherine Morris in "The Lascivious Witch," which appears in her book *Sorceress or Witch?: The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* pp. 129-153.

in this thesis. Grimhild's magic, though acknowledged by the text itself as powerful, is not dramatic and violent, instead appearing more subtle, manipulative, and thus feminine and at least slightly more acceptable in the text. Though Grimhild teaches shape-shifting magic to her son and Sigurd later in the text, she is most often represented using more feminine types of sorcery, brewing potions and tricking people in a manner not unlike the common stereotypes of the witch.¹⁹ Her specialty seems to be forgetfulness potions brewed to manipulate marriages and love. She gives Sigurd a potion to make him forget Brynhild and Gudrun a potion to forget that her brothers had killed her husband. Both instances of Grimhild's meddling create chaos and the eventual destruction of the Volsung line. Her first potion causes Sigurd to forget Brynhild, the vengeful and intense warrior-woman/seeress whose magic and inciting abilities cause the death of Sigurd. Gudrun slips him this drink secretly, saying "It is a great joy for us that you are here and we wish to set all good things before you. Take the horn and drink" (78). She puts the potion in the drinking horn and gives it to him as a high honor, neglecting to inform Sigurd that the potion would make him forget Brynhild and leave him available to marry Gudrun. Though Grimhild's actions may have been intended to help Gudrun and provide a better future for her, the actions inevitably caused the destruction of the Volsung line—the heroes of the saga and a family of legend.

¹⁹ Katherine Morris also discusses the negative perception of the sorceress/witch in her book *Sorceress or Witch?: The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe*, chapter 2 pp 59-92. Valerie Flint's *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* chapter 8 also discusses forbidden magics in Christian medieval cultures, giving further insight into the nature and perception of sorcery. Pages 232-233 specifically refer to love-potions, including an example from *Njals Saga*.

The Saga of Hrolf Kraki also contains sorcery that was viewed in a darker light than other magical roles. The first major encounter with a sorceress is Hvit. The initial reference to her as a sorceress is very subtle, however it becomes readily apparent that Hvit was no ordinary woman, nor was she simply an angry woman or a “Potiphar’s wife” to Bjorn’s “Joseph.” The King’s men encounter Hvit in Finnmark, a location that housed the Saami people, and as Jesse Byock endnotes, “had a reputation for magic and witchcraft. The name ‘Finn’ is often used synonymously with ‘sorcerer’” (“Notes” 82).²⁰ Lindow supports such a claim by saying that “Shamanism was certainly known in medieval Scandinavia, for it was practiced by the Sami people with whom, as I mentioned, the Scandinavians long had contact” (99). Original audiences would have likely seen that the King’s men were in Finnmark and immediately assumed some sort of magic may take place. After Hvit marries King Hring, who by this point is well advanced in years, her true character begins to reveal itself. She attempts to seduce Bjorn, the King’s son, suggesting that since the King was away they had the opportunity to “share one bed” (36). Bjorn angrily slaps her at this suggestion, an affront which immediately prompts her anger. She “struck him with her wolfskin gloves, telling him to become a cave bear, grim and savage: ‘You will eat no food other than your own father’s livestock and, in feeding yourself, you will kill more than has ever been observed before. You will never be released from the spell, and your awareness of this disgrace will be more dreadful to you than no remembrance at all’” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 37). Hvit speaks a

²⁰ See John Lindow’s essay “Cultures in Contact”(pp 89-109) or John McKinnell’s essay “Encounters with Vǫlur” (110-131) in *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society*, edited by Margaret Clunies Ross for more information.

curse on Bjorn which is confirmed in the very next chapter. Hvit's use of magic to curse a man who rejected her advances would automatically classify her as an evil sorceress, easily confirmed by Katherine Morris's analysis of the Lascivious Witch or the Sorceress in her book *Sorceress or Witch?*, which suggests that witches or sorceresses were villainized by presenting them as wildly sexual beings in contrast to the Church's teachings regarding virginity and sexuality. After this event, the men in the saga refer to Hvit as "a great troll" (*Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 38), "this cowardly witch," and "this ogress" (*Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 43), confirming the men's perception of her as evil and ugly.

Jochens actually discuss the use of the word "Troll" as a descriptor of sorcerers and sorceresses in the Icelandic Legendary Sagas, saying that "the word *troll* became more frequent, describing both men and women, with *trollskapr* employed for the concept of magic...Great size, strength, and ugly appearance are characteristics of both male and female trolls" (126). Jochens analysis enforces the condemnation of Hvit seen here.

However, Hvit is the only woman magician in either *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* or *The Saga of the Volsungs* who is described with such language. This singling out of Hvit could be the result of her attempt to seduce her step-son, or it could be ethnic—her connection to the Saami may contribute to her description as trollish. The indictment of Hvit as trollish or an ogress "other's" her, separating her from the heroic people by monsterizing her. Friðriksdóttir analyzes the monstrous women seen in saga literature, emphasizing the giantess as "unruly opposites: immodest, sexually aggressive, physically active, defiant, and grotesque" (76). Hvit is not a giantess nor is she a troll, however the men attempt to monsterize her, seeing her as different and "other." Though Hvit's magic

punishes Bjorn for rejecting her unwanted advances, her curse can be seen not only as the vengeful retribution of a monstrously sexual woman, but an attempt to salvage her honor so that she is not disgraced for her advances. Her powers are exercised only at extreme moments in the saga, where her advances on Bjorn were denied, and she was threatened after such an event. Hvit is then killed in a rather violent manner as punishment for the curse she performed on Bjorn. Kress notes that “In the Icelandic Sagas, women are only ever killed if they are skilled in magic and seid, the only sphere to which men have no access” (“What Women Speak” 13). Kress’s comment here completely ignores that men actually did have access to magic and in fact, Bjorn’s son Bodvar is one of the major male practitioners of sorcery in the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*. Women such as Hvit and King Seggeir’s mother were, however, killed for practicing magic that directly cursed or harmed heroic male figures in the saga. The violence is not done against women who simply practiced magic. The sagas represent a significant number of women who are not harmed or murdered for their practice of magic. However, sorceresses are often represented as villainous and worthy of death because their magic specifically enforces autonomy and independence from men and holds no sway over them. This representation in the Legendary Sagas is one of the key pieces that separates seeresses from sorceresses and establishes the Legendary Saga’s ability to explain different practices that women used to gain access to autonomy.

The final sorceress this thesis shall look at is Skuld, the daughter of King Helgi and the cursed elfin woman who comes to visit him in the night after he lost his beloved wife-daughter Yrsa. Skuld is described as a sorceress of immeasurable power and

“vicious temperament” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 23). Her half-elf heritage is only brought up in conjunction to her violent and vicious nature, suggesting that Skuld is a vicious woman because of her elfin heritage. Ármann Jakobsson’s “Beware of the Elf!” article suggests among other things that the elf was a morally ambiguous figure, so confusing that Snorri Sturleson created two types of elves—dark elves and light elves—in the *Prose Edda*.²¹ The saga describes Skuld’s sorcery as powerful, saying that because of her elfin heritage “King Hrolf and his champions would pay” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 70). Skuld’s major appearance begins with an attempt to incite her husband too regain his honor, saying “what a weakling you are...to accept whatever shame is handed to you” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 70). However, she quickly turns from incitement and influencing her husband to taking charge of regaining their honor on her own—with him as her sidekick. She does not need his help to accomplish anything—instead she takes the fight into her own hands, and is left remarkably unscathed in the sagas descriptions of the event. The language to describe Skuld throughout her assault on Hrolf Kraki is remarkably tame, describing her having “the fierceness of the Skoldungs”(72). The only direct insult to her is after the battle, when it is said that “she ruled poorly and only for a short time” (78). However, the reference to Skuld having the “fierceness of the Skoldungs” would certainly have been a complement for a man, since the Skoldung clan was renowned and well-respected throughout the ancient North, appearing in *Beowulf*, for example.²² The manner in which Skuld is described is therefore almost heroic in

²¹ For more information, see Jakobsson, Ármann. “Beware of the Elf! A Note on the Evolving Meaning of ‘Álfar.’”

²² Jesse Byock, in his introduction to *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, discusses the Skjoldung clan as it relates to this saga (pp xiv-xviii).

nature—she even comments on the honorability of her brother, the very man she is building an army against—saying that “King Hrolf, my brother, is unlike all the others, and the loss of such men is a dreadful misfortune” (73). Skuld, though in the very next sentence described as King Hrolf’s enemy, does not seem to hold the same villainous descriptions Hvit or other sorceresses held. Her cause, it seems, may be considered in some way just, even though it goes against the saga hero. The villanization of Skuld is thus a bit more subtle and appears not in the form of insults to her character but in descriptions of the type of magic she performs—summoning “vile creatures” (71), waking the dead (76), sitting in a black tent on a witch’s scaffold (76), and sending “a storm of enchantments” (78) upon the heroes. Skuld conjures a massive army, and then primarily incite them to do her bidding. She steps in with spells and enchantments, having been restrained from performing magic by Bodvar for a time, but for the most part seems to step back. Her villainy, or lack thereof, in this particular legendary saga is thus a strange analysis of women’s autonomy, perhaps subtly works against the traditional stereotype acted out by Hvit and the other sorceresses discussed above of sorcery being an evil magic misused by women to take control of something they had no right to control. Though Skuld does not rule well, she does rule for a time after Hrolf dies. After she is tortured and killed, the kingdom passes to Hrolf’s daughters. Skuld is described as an evil witch because she, contrary to the saga authors intent, appears less as a demonic force for evil and more as an independent woman using her magical abilities to reclaim her husband’s honor. Her husband’s honor had been stolen from him by her half-brother Hrolf when he tricked Hjorvard into being subjugated by an old adage (the story is

simply that Hrolf had to pass bodily fluids and handed Hjorvard his sword while he did so. He then cited an old adage that said that whoever “holds the sword of a man who is undoing his belt, will from then on be the lesser of the two” (*The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* 34). Skuld saw the affront to her husband's honor and dignity and rightly sought to reclaim his honor when he had deemed it not worth recovering. Skuld more than the other sorceresses captures in one character the nuanced representation of the sorceress easily seen when comparing all the representations.

The sorceress role in the *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs* is represented in a much more morally ambiguous manner than the seeress. Despite the moral ambiguity, the women who are represented in these two legendary sagas as practicing sorcery are able to achieve a surprising level of autonomy and agency unseen even in the seeresses discussed earlier. Women who practiced sorcery, like Hvit, Skuld, and Grimhild, did not need the men in their lives in order to stand up for themselves or for those they loved. Hvit married a very elderly man who was likely nearing the end of his life, thus would be unable to protect or care for her effectively. Skuld's husband quickly bowed down to the will of Hrolf Kraki and did not work to maintain his own power or autonomy under King Hrolf. Grimhild sought only what was best for her daughter, though it meant using magical trickery and ended up putting an end to the Volsung line. Though each woman mentioned here is described in the sagas in at the very least a morally ambiguous light, if not characterized as downright vicious or evil, further analysis sees them as autonomous women seeking to maintain or create a space for their power or authority in a predominantly patriarchal world where they had no legal power.

Most women in these sagas who practice sorcery are in some way wronged or mistreated prior to being portrayed as sorceresses. Skuld was forgotten by King Helgi until her mother abandons her at his doorstep. Hvit was married to an elderly king who could not care for her. Grimhild saw Sigurd as the perfect way to protect her daughter from any wrongdoing. These two sagas' representation of these women thus attempts to represent the Legendary Sagas as both fantastical and exploratory, able to speak in a nuanced manner about the issues of gender, autonomy, and independence seen throughout Icelandic literature. These two sagas representations of independent and autonomous women with moral ambiguity causes audiences to question the nature of the honor and power these women were able to achieve for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have long been focusing on different facets of women and magic in the Icelandic Sagas but have neglected the ability of the fantastical nature of the Icelandic Legendary Sagas to explore women's autonomy through the fantastical and mythical abilities of magical women. Though *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of the Volsungs* originated from ancient texts or ancient stories, they were transcribed in the middle of a Christian-era Iceland and carry with them some early Christian ideas of morality and women's roles that are simultaneously contrasted and further engrained in culture by the magic-using women in these sagas. The sagas portray women who either act as protagonists of their own, helpers to the protagonist, or intense antagonists to the sagas heroes. Women who are represented as antagonists, however, are able to call into question the reason for their antagonistic role and inevitably allow readers to sympathize

with them instead of viewing them as evil creatures. These women, though often described as “evil” or as an evil magical creature such as a troll, are often given some reasonable explanation for their antagonism. Skuld, for example, though sometimes painted as a violent, unwomanish, and antagonist, fights against Hrolf primarily because she and her husband were dishonored and is not entirely painted as an evil figure despite her antagonism. In a society that values honor above many things, Skuld must fight for her family's honor, even if it means fighting her half-brother. The seeress, though typically portrayed as a protagonist or assistant to the protagonist, sometimes betrays the hero or turns against the heroic figures. Brynhild's seeress abilities, for example, hide the part she plays in the horrific end to the Volsung clan. Brynhild, incited by Sigurd's unintentional betrayal, destroys the Volsung clan. The seeress and the sorceress archetypes are used in the narratives to demonstrate socially acceptable and unacceptable ways for women to achieve autonomy and independence from men. These two Legendary Saga fantastical archetypes, often neglected in scholarship, are represented in ways that demonstrate women's ability to stand independently from men. The use of the fantastical allows the authors to comprehensively explore the seemingly impossible independence of women.

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