Skyler Jang

"Seek you wisdom still?"
How the Medieval Viking Seeress Lost Her Voice

ABSTRACT: *This article analyzes how Viking seeresses were memorialized in text and how this representation shaped the scholarship on the topic. It discusses magic as a distinct women's culture that declined with the advent of Christianity by examining Old Norse literature through a feminist lens, by applying Edwin Ardener's model of the muted woman, and by exploring the interdependent nature of reality and representation. The author argues that the appropriation of the seeress's identity by the male-dominated Christian social order not only revealed the gendered anxiety of male scholars at the time but also reinforced the bias of modern scholars and limited their perspective.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; Scandinavia; Vikings; gender; women's history; magic; paganism; conversion; silencing; historiography*

Introduction

> She sat alone outside; the old one came,
> anxious, from Valhalla, and looked into her eyes.
> 'Why have you come here? What would you ask me?
> I know everything ...
> Seek you wisdom still?'[1]

These lines from the "Völuspá," the prophecy of the seeress and first poem in most collections of the *Poetic Edda*, reflect the theme of this article. Serving as an introduction to Old Norse cosmology, the poem summarizes the lore of the beginning and end of the world. It also serves as a tale of conflict between genders. Structured as a conversation between the Völva, the seeress who knows everything, and Odin, the god who seeks wisdom, the poem outlines an unequal exchange. The seeress who sits alone, communing with the spirits, has her ritual interrupted by Odin.[2] Sitting alone is a personal introspective practice, and her privacy is disrespected by a man who seeks to inherit her wisdom against her will. That the seeress is repeatedly asking—"Seek you wisdom still?"—is her attempt at resisting this transfer of knowledge. The prevalence in Old Norse literature of human and mythical women practicing magic suggests that the practice was a gendered phenomenon. The seeresses who practiced magic were women with real

[1] "Völuspá," in *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Patricia Terry, with an introduction by Charles W. Dunn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 1-10, here 3.

[2] "Sitting out" refers to the act of communing with spirits outdoors at night. This phrase is used in Old Norwegian and Icelandic laws banning pagan activities. It is interpreted as a form of divination and ritual that allowed the practitioner to channel both spirits and their inner selves. See Kees Samplonius, "From Veleda to the Völva: Aspects of Female Divination in Germanic Europe," in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 69-92, here 77.

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or symbolic power in Viking society.[3] This culture of magic, which was primarily a domain of women, drastically changed with the Christianization of pagan Scandinavia. The resulting shift in the characterization of magic, the only version of the story that has survived in the written record, impacted the way scholarship on Viking women has progressed.

The primary sources available for this research come mostly from the Icelandic sagas, the *Poetic Edda*,[4] and the *Prose Edda*.[5] Introductions to the basic concepts of the seeress and magic can be found in the "Völuspá"[6] and the "Ynglinga Saga,"[7] while "Eirik the Red's Saga"[8] contains some of the most detailed descriptions of magic rites. Several other Icelandic sagas illustrate the dichotomy between pagan and Christian, old and new, and evil and good, with some of them exemplifying a direct conflict between those who believe in magic and those who do not.[9] Written centuries after the events they describe, these stories often reveal a Christian influence, and they are assumed to be far from accurate with their fantastical events and characters.[10] The only contemporary account of the Old Norse attitude

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[3] People who performed magic are referred to by many different labels in both source material and translations, including, but not limited to, "seeress," "sorceress," "prophetess," "wise woman," and "witch." For the sake of consistency, and to avoid negative or positive connotations, "seeress" will be used in this article. The same applies to their craft: "witchcraft" is too negative, and the original Old Norse word, "seiðr," is translated differently by different writers; therefore "magic" will be used in its place. Certain scholars make a distinction between "sorcery" (weather spells, shapeshifting) and "prophesy" (fortune telling), but in this article both will be considered as belonging to the same category, namely, "magic." For a more detailed look at different types of magic and sorcery, see Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991).

[4] *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Patricia Terry, with an introduction by Charles W. Dunn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

[5] Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

[6] "Völuspá," in *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Terry.

[7] "Ynglinga Saga," in *Heimskringla or the Lives of the Norse Kings*, ed. and trans. Erling Monsen with Albert H. Smith (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), 1-35.

[8] "Eirik the Red's Saga," trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 1-18.

[9] "The Saga of the Greenlanders," trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 19-32; "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 5 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 1-120; "The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal," trans. Andrew Wawn, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 4 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 1-66.

[10] Such influence can be detected in almost all surviving Old Norse literature. The concluding lines of the "Völuspá" mention a "lord who rules over all," which, according to the translator, betrays the "spirit" of the poem, as the rest of the poem is thoroughly pagan; thus, this phrase ("lord who rules over all") is believed to be an interpolation (or later insertion); see *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Terry, 10. Examples of more overt Christian influence can be found in "The Tale of Thidrandi and Thorhall" and "The Tale of Thorhall Knapp," which describe Christianity as a

toward magic is found in sources from outside the Viking world, which also have a strong Christian bias, but Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen* is at least somewhat less likely to be anachronistic as it records events that occurred while it was being written.[11]

This article references a wide range of scholarly works. Women's voice in history, one of the main foci of this research, is discussed on the basis of several studies about translation and editing,[12] and I will be using Edwin Ardener's model of gender as the central theme.[13] The fact that all written evidence of pagan Viking society was recorded after Christianity had come to dominate paganism triggered a debate whether one should interpret Old Norse works of literature as historical texts or literary texts. Scholars like Helga Kress (1990)[14] treat them as historical texts with literal and symbolic representations of reality. Kees Samplonius (1995)[15] and Jenny Jochens (1996),[16] on the other hand, contend that, while period texts dealing with the seeress and her magic may be based on reality, they are far too stereotypical to be used as reliable historical sources and can only be used to understand beliefs and attitudes. This article examines Old Norse literature with a combination of the two approaches. Magic, as it appears in these sources, does serve a function as a literary device and is most likely far from reality. However, reality shapes representation and vice versa. Neither exists in a vacuum, and it can be reductive to consider them as strictly historical or literary.

This article analyzes the historiography of Viking gender and magic through a feminist and anthropological lens to explore the role of the seeress as a figure of

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"better tradition" and a "true faith," the latter making this influence even more conspicuous by ending with "amen:" "The Tale of Thidrandi and Thorhall," trans. Terry Gunnell, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 459-462, here 461; "The Tale of Thorhall Knapp," trans. John Porter, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 462-463, here 463.

[11] Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

[12] Barbara Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 16-34; Amanda M. Leff, "Writing, Gender, and Power in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory* 20, no. 1 (2008): 28-47; Erin Michelle Goeres, "Sounds of Silence: The Translation of Women's Voices from Marie de France to the Old Norse *Strengleikar*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113, no. 3 (2014): 279-307.

[13] Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Woman," in *Perceiving Women*, ed. Shirley Ardener (1975; London: Dent, 1977), 1-18.

[14] Helga Kress, "The Apocalypse of a Culture: Völuspá and the Myth of the Sources/Sorceress in Old Icelandic Literature," trans. Peter Ridgwell, in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (The Seventh International Saga Conference, Spoleto, September 4-10, 1988), ed. Teresa Pàroli (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1990), 279-302.

[15] Samplonius, "From Veleda to the Völva."

[16] Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

feminine sovereignty and the metamorphosis of her role as a result of Christianization. My approach to the Viking seeress and her craft follows three main characteristics that also serve as chronological themes: independence, influence, and identity. In the discussion of independence, two questions are explored: If magic was a feminine culture, how did this association develop? And with this association in place, why did women choose to practice magic and become seeresses? The answer to both questions can be traced in women's lack of independence and women's search for independence. It was the women's position in society that drove them to magic, a field in which they found agency. After the seeress had discovered independence, she exercised influence, which is discussed in the second part of this article. With her power, with magic, a woman could be a part of the action rather than staying passive; she could influence both events and people. This influence sparked gendered anxiety from the Christian church which did not deem women in positions of authority appropriate. It is this anxiety that led to the last of the chronological themes, namely, the identity of the seeress and its subsequent recontextualization. The sagas and poems recorded in post-conversion Scandinavia reflect this identity shift, and this shift shaped the bias of modern scholars and the narrative they created.

I. Independence

Analyzing the seeress begins with an understanding of how she emerged. In this article, independence as it pertains to the Viking seeress is not about the autonomy enjoyed by existing seeresses, but rather about how the desire for independence turned regular women into seeresses. The social, cultural, and legal positions of women in society acted as catalysts for them to seek alternative ways to exercise agency. Women did this by creating their own domain, free of male control, in the culture of magic.

In Viking cosmology, magic was considered inherently feminine. In the "Ynglinga Saga," Freya, a goddess, is named as the "priestess [who] first taught the Asaland people [i.e., those in the region of Asgard] wizardry."[17] It was a woman who introduced magic to the gods. While Odin was also capable of wielding magic, his talent was later explained to have promoted "lack of manliness [...] so much that men seemed not without shame in dealing in it; the priestesses were therefore taught this craft."[18] Thus, there were male seers in Viking society and in the Old Norse worldview, but they were considered feminine and weak. According to Viking cosmology, the outer world was

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[17] "Ynglinga Saga," in *Heimskringla*, ed. and trans. Monsen with Smith, 3.

[18] "Ynglinga Saga," in *Heimskringla*, ed. and trans. Monsen with Smith, 5. It is rather problematic, however, to interpret this to mean that magic was considered feminine in Viking society because of Norse myths. Myths do not write themselves; they are imagined by someone and always based on some aspect of reality. On the other hand, it also does not mean that feminine magic in Viking cosmology was purely a reflection of social reality. The most likely explanation is that myth and reality affected each other, evolving simultaneously.

inhabited by monsters and giants who were considered wild and uncivilized, yet they possessed a wealth of knowledge, which made them interesting and mysterious. Similar to his behavior in the "Völuspá," Odin, in the *Prose Edda*, obtains knowledge from Gunnlod, a female giant—this time by deceit. He assures Gunnlod that he will have just "three drinks of the mead," which would grant him knowledge of poetry, but he ends up drinking every last drop.[19] Instead of sharing knowledge, Odin flees and appropriates poetry solely for himself.[20]

According to Edwin Ardener's model, these and other tales from Old Norse cosmology exemplify magic as feminine. Ardener identifies the problem of women as being muted in society and discourse. Women living in a largely patriarchal society, like that of the Vikings, are confined to male modes of communication, which limits them to distorted expressions or outright silence. In Ardener's model, women are defined by what they are not. Since men base their understanding of self on mankind and culture, the women, the non-men, become synonymous with the respective opposites, namely, the nonhuman and nature. Women in this context are dualistic, linked to both culture and nature, which also means that they sit on the periphery of society. They are the residents of the outer world, just like the female seeress in the "Völuspá" and the giantess Gunnlod—both otherworldly beings who possess the knowledge of future and poetry, explanations for the inexplicable. Despite being banished to the edge, women found their own language and voice in magic, "the world of symbolism."[21] This enigmatic nature of the supernatural feminine, as well as the fact that, while they were on the periphery, women were still part of their society, led to the attempted subjugation of women. Helga Kress analyzes Old Norse literature to highlight the subordination of Viking women through violence and deceit, the same techniques used to conquer the seeress in the "Völuspá" and Gunnlod. According to Kress, Old Norse cosmology is largely a metaphor for the will of mankind, how the culture (the gods) tamed nature.[22] To resist this attempt of taming and conquering, women had to come up with their own ways to maintain independence.

Another factor that made magic feminine was its oral and domestic nature, a characteristic which was underscored even more with the decline of paganism. In sagas, magic is practiced primarily through enchantments[23] and prophecy,[24] and Odin and his priests are referred to as "song smiths" who created skaldic poetry.[25]

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[19] Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, trans. Young, 102.

[20] Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, trans. Young, 103.

[21] Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Woman," 5.

[22] Helga Kress, "Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature," in *Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 81-92, here 83.

[23] "Eirik the Red's Saga," trans. Kunz, 5.

[24] "Saga of the People of Vatnsdal," trans. Wawn, 14.

[25] "Ynglinga Saga," in *Heimskringla*, ed. and trans. Monsen with Smith, 5.

All of these are comparable to oral storytelling techniques, which were in the dominion of women. Women, especially old women, were the ones who passed down stories and songs to preserve local history. In "Eirik the Red's Saga," it was her foster-mother who taught Gudrid the enchantments that would eventually allow Thorbjorg, a seeress in Greenland, to commune with the spirits. Pagan magic was closely associated with "private home-based fertility cults," linking it to the domestic sphere.[26] When Icelanders converted to Christianity around AD 1000, their lawspeaker Thorgeir decreed that pagan rituals could continue to be practiced in private, despite the community's official conversion and baptism.[27] Thus, the domestic nature of magic was emphasized even more. With Christianization came writing, but literacy was confined to men at this time. This created a dichotomy between literate men in the public sphere and storytelling women in the domestic sphere.

The association between the domestic sphere, women, and magic is not just based on a theoretical framework, but also on historical and cultural reality. Women with supernatural powers are a phenomenon that is not unique to Viking society. In fact, it is rather universal across time and space. The earliest example of a magical woman in Germanic culture is Veleda, a seeress who used her magic to gain cultural and political power around AD 69 when Germanic tribes along the Rhine were rising up against their Roman neighbors. Even in Christianity, there is a presence of supernatural women in the form of virgin saints and bridal mystics. This seemingly universal relationship between women and magic is due to women's position in patriarchal culture, in which women are typically relegated to the domestic realm. According to Katherine Morris, women's roles in the domestic sphere as "midwives, nurses, cooks [...] keepers of the household [...] [and] mothers" framed them to be closer to the supernatural.[28] Morris posits that the roles of midwife and mother associated women with the knowledge over the cycle of life. The midwife, responsible for childbirth, might be seen as performing good or evil magic by delivering a baby that is either alive and healthy, or dead and deformed. Knowledge and use of contraception could easily have been interpreted as a woman performing a magical act to defy nature. Nurses and cooks, with their knowledge of herbs, could either cure or poison others. This dualistic nature of female roles reinforced women's position as both inside and outside patriarchal society, and it associated women, and thus the domestic sphere, with the magical.

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[26] Siân Grønlie, "'No Longer Male and Female': Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives," *Medium Ævum* 75, no. 2 (2006): 293-318, here 294.

[27] Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, vol. 18 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2006), 9.

[28] Morris, *Sorceress or Witch*, 10.

Intrinsically associated with and thriving in women, magic was a feminine art that was a way to gain independence. If the aforementioned reasons why a Viking woman might become a seeress are cultural and speculative, the most practical explanation would be that she simply had few alternatives. Women in Viking society lacked legal and social independence. One of the most glaring examples of this can be found in the "Saga of the People of Laxardal," where Thorgerd, a widow who seems independent in character, travels to Norway by herself and chooses a new husband, Herjolf, but later finds her will disrespected by Hoskuld, the son from her previous marriage. When Thorgerd leaves an inheritance to both Hoskuld and Hrut, the son from her marriage to Herjolf, Hoskuld tells Hrut that "Thorgerd had not obtained his consent to marry Herjolf, and that he [i.e., Hoskuld] was legally his mother's guardian."[29] Since Thorgerd had not received consent from her legal guardian, her second marriage and its offspring were deemed illegitimate. Her independent wish to distribute her inheritance as she saw fit was ignored by her own son Hoskuld due to his legal power over her. Ironically, the saga mentions that, since Thorgerd was a widow, she was "free to decide for herself" to choose a husband.[30] Gudrun, another woman in the same saga, is courted by Bolli, and her father, Osvif, says, "Gudrun is a widow and as such she can answer for herself."[31] After saying this, Osvif pressures Gudrun to marry Bolli despite her reluctance with regard to the arrangement. In both instances, Thorgerd and Gudrun have the illusion of choice, but there is no independence in reality. The will of their male kin, Thorgerd's son and Gudrun's father respectively, takes precedent over these women's wishes. A woman could not represent herself in legal matters, and she had to rely on male kin to speak and act on her behalf.[32] With no other options to exercise her agency, women turned to magic, the one field that was not dominated by men. In his study of the Icelandic sagas, François-Xavier Dillmann has noted that female seeresses did not necessarily exceed male seers in number but were described as more prominent and skilled. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir explains this by stating that men had

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[29] "Saga of the People of Laxardal," trans. Kunz, 22.

[30] "Saga of the People of Laxardal," trans. Kunz, 7.

[31] "Saga of the People of Laxardal," trans. Kunz, 66.

[32] According to Samplonius, "From Veleda to the Völva," 70, "married women had a better social position" than unmarried ones, especially when they birthed a son. In Viking society, the social status of a woman was determined by her relationship to men, that is, her father, her husband, and her son. Consequently, a widow without a husband or son had no man to validate her position, rendering her the most marginalized member of society. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir points out that many seeresses in sagas are widows, those who had no male kin to speak or fight on her behalf: Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur'," *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 4 (2009): 409-436, here 427-428. Jochens, seeing the seeress as a genderbending figure who held a position of (masculine) authority, claims that this authority flourished "most effectively in the absence of the husband," who would take over her position if he were present. Without a husband, the widow seeress could assume both masculine and feminine roles as a leader and a sorceress: Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 214.

"more options available" to take control of their life.[33] Men had other means of being independent and thus had no reason to indulge in the feminine art of magic if they were not skilled at it, while for women magic was all that was wholly theirs.

Women in Viking society did not have many alternatives available to them to exercise independence. They lacked legal self-representation, and their social status meant that their individual wishes were routinely overshadowed by the needs of the men in their life. For some, especially those without male kin, the only option was to become a seeress. The magic practiced by the seeress was considered a feminine culture because it relied on oral traditions and was mostly performed at home. The conversion narrative of Iceland, in which Iceland became nominally Christian with individuals practicing paganism in private, firmly established the Christian church in the public sphere and relegated magic to the domestic sphere. This magic granted women who were both literally and symbolically outside the male-dominated community their own voice and led to the birth of the seeress as someone who was in control of her own destiny, as well as the destiny of others.

II. Influence

Once a woman immersed herself in magic and became a seeress, she was considered to be wielding supernatural powers and prophetic visions that determined the fate of men. These newfound abilities allowed her to influence events and people around her, manipulating the odds to leverage her position in society. Such feminine authority sparked gendered anxiety in transitional and post-conversion Scandinavia, and this anxiety led to a narrative contrasting pagan women and Christian women that was more reflective of male perceptions of gender than of any real gender roles.

The influence that a seeress gained from magic made her into a respected—and at times feared—figure. In "Eirik the Red's Saga," Greenland is struck with famine, and Thorkel invites the seeress Thorbjorg to deliver a prophecy. To receive her, "preparations were made to entertain her well [...] food [was] prepared for the seeress [...] she was given the hearts of all the animals available there," despite it being a "very lean time" with "poor catches."[34] Thorbjorg is a distinguished guest, and the community gives her everything it can afford in the hope of a good fortune. She is treated with respect, and even Gudrid, a Christian woman who initially refuses to take part in the pagan magic, ends up helping Thorbjorg out of respect for the community who believes in the seeress. In contrast to this veneration of a pagan seeress, the magic-wielding shield-maiden Hlegunn in "Star-Oddi's Dream" gains her influence primarily through fear. The daughter of a governor in Gotland, Hlegunn is a warrior and thus defies traditional gender roles, leading her father to banish her. She leaves with a ship and men to "carry

[33] Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons," 410.

[34] "Eirik the Red's Saga," trans. Kunz, 5-6.

out Viking raids on land and sea, [winning] fame and fortune."[35] She is respected by her army as a brave warrior and leader and feared as a violent marauder by the victims of the raids. She wields magic on the battlefield, making herself invisible and shapeshifting into a "she-wolf."[36] The influence that Hlegunn gains by magic manifests itself in victories, booty, and prestige. In Viking society, magic was considered the primary tool for women with goals and ambitions. Both Thorbjorg and Hlegunn, albeit through very different methods, gained control of their surroundings and influenced events and people. What makes the seeress, the magic-wielding Viking woman, noteworthy is the fact that she is an agent in the story: she triggers events instead of merely suffering them.[37]

That there were women who held positions of power in which they were independently in control was considered "unseemly" to many Christians.[38] One example of an influential pagan woman who offended the sensibilities of post-conversion Scandinavians is Freydis, the daughter of Eirik the Red. In the "Saga of the Greenlanders," Freydis is a domineering woman who actively provokes events and is only concerned with her own gain. She journeys to Vinland with the two brothers Helgi and Finnbogi, with whom she ends up quarreling, and she lies to them that she will return to Greenland in peace. After this conversation, she manipulates her husband into attacking the brothers and their men, fabricating a story about how Finnbogi had "struck [her] and treated [her] very badly," and that he (i.e., her husband) would be a "coward" should he not defend her honor.[39] Once everyone except for the women has been killed in the ensuing fight, and no man wants to continue the slaughter, Freydis takes an axe and kills the women. Although there is no explicit mention of her performing magic, the characterization of Freydis has many parallels to that of a saga seeress. She initiates events, she uses words to influence the people around her, and she takes a masculine role by killing the women. The Vikings may have viewed a woman like

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[35] "Star-Oddi's Dream," trans. Marvin Taylor, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 448-459, here 449.

[36] "Star-Oddi's Dream," trans. Taylor, 455.

[37] For an exploration of the idea of a seeress using magic to further her agenda, see Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons;" and Jenny Blain, "'Now many of those things are shown to me which I was denied before': Seidr, Shamanism and Journeying, Past and Present," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 34 no. 1 (2005): 81-98.

[38] Dante Alighieri revised a "historical" (i.e., biblical) narrative to conform to his worldview that a woman should not speak before a man does. *Dante: De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Stephen Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8-9: "But although we find in scripture that a woman spoke first, I still think it more reasonable that a man should have done so [...] Therefore it is reasonable to believe that the power of speech was given first to Adam, by Him who had just created him." Dante was more concerned with maintaining the male-dominated social order than presenting (biblical) "history" accurately. Ironically, it was, in fact, Adam who spoke first in the Bible (Genesis 2:23). In his attempt to suppress the female voice, Dante inadvertently revealed his anxiety about women with authority.

[39] "Saga of the Greenlanders," trans. Kunz, 31.

Freydis as magical for doing what could be interpreted as a type of spell casting when she manipulated the men around her. Although subject to a negative portrayal in the text (likely already due to the fact that the sagas were recorded in writing only after the Christianization of Scandinavia), Freydis was undoubtedly a powerful woman who was in direct control of her life. In "Eirik the Red's Saga," a revised, later version of the "Saga of the Greenlanders," Freydis's presence is minimal. This new version of the story chooses Gudrid as the female character to emphasize. Gudrid is a Christian and, while she does not lack autonomy, she only uses her autonomy for the good of Christian values.[40] This revision provides an insight into what the male Christian writers at the time deemed an acceptable version of femininity. Referencing Birgit Sawyer's research, Kees Samplonius claims that women in the sagas "represent the writer's concern with issues of *his* own Christian time, rather than a reliable tradition about pagan times."[41] The narrative created, then, offers more information about the writer and his possibly anachronistic agenda than about the past itself.

Just as Freydis's portrayal in the sagas reflects the dichotomy of what could and what could not be tolerated, several, mostly female, characters in the sagas are juxtaposed to emphasize differences. Examples of such juxtaposition narratives include Freydis and Thorbjorg against Gudrid in the "Saga of the Greenlanders" and "Eirik the Red's Saga," and Gudrun against the dead seeress in the "Saga of the People of Laxardal." Such accounts seem to indicate an abrupt break in women's culture that made Christian women and pagan women fundamentally different. However, this is a reductive way of analyzing the transitional period. Most saga narratives portray women as more resistant to conversion than men and showcase the authority enjoyed by seeresses. This resistance from women raises the question of the "curious silence" of female converts.[42] The transitional period was most likely a religiously syncretic time in which Scandinavians were neither fully pagan nor fully Christian, a development in which the women would also have taken part.[43] The juxtaposition narratives of "Eirik the Red's Saga" and the "Saga of the People of Laxardal" can be interpreted this way. Siân Grønlie argues against Kress that the exchange between Thorbjorg and Gudrid is not so much about the absolute death of paganism but more about the "continuity between the old faith and the new."[44] Gudrid, albeit reluctantly, helps Thorbjorg with her ritual, and Thorbjorg tells Gudrid a fortune of a good future in return. There is no sharp division or resistance here. The older pagan culture embraces the newer culture, and the newer culture provides new opportunities for women; Gudrid is

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[40] Such as when she initially refuses to help Thorbjorg in her ritual: "Eirik the Red's Saga," trans. Kunz, 6.

[41] Samplonius, "From Veleda to the Völva," 71 (my italics).

[42] Grønlie, "No Longer Male and Female," 294.

[43] Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons," 418-419.

[44] Grønlie, "No Longer Male and Female," 308.

described as taking charge of her household after her husband's death to lead a "prosperous clan."[45] In the story of Gudrun and the dead seeress, Gudrun interprets a dream for her granddaughter to discover the corpse of a seeress under her church. Katherine Morris uses this excerpt to interpret Gudrun as a representation of "both the continuation of tradition [dream interpretation] and the end of an era [dying paganism]."[46] Gudrun represents a Christian-era seeress, relying on the pagan tradition of dream interpretation, but in a Christian context. The influence enjoyed by Viking seeresses provoked anxiety in the male-dominated Christian social order which tried to shape the narrative of a hostile break from paganism, but it is likely that the change from one generation to the next was much more gradual and amicable than we have been led to believe.

Women with influence were a highly problematic topic for Christian writers in the High and Late Middle Ages—the time when nearly all primary sources for the Vikings were recorded in writing. Male writers revised stories and interjected their viewpoints to shape the narrative in a way that was the most acceptable to them. The inexplicable power of the seeress, a source of respect for the pagans, was transformed into a subject of suspicion and disapproval toward the "undeserved" influence enjoyed by women. This gendered anxiety and the male perception of what gender should be is what recontextualized the identity of the seeress.

III. Identity

The gendered anxiety that began as a reaction to the influence of the seeress eventually developed into a full-scale recontextualization and appropriation of her identity. This last phase in the life of the seeress as a cultural phenomenon is what has shaped the narrative of the seeress and magic from the moment it was written down all the way to modern scholarship. The objective of this last section is to examine how this narrative was constructed and what that implies for scholars.

The fact that most seeresses in the sagas are depicted as old women is a clear reflection of the attitude toward magic at the time the sagas were written down. The premise here is not simply that old women were passing down oral histories and traditions to younger generations. In fact, there was no more passing down. Magic was now stuck with these old women, and it became a relic of the past, a dying culture. The seeress in the "Saga of the People of Vatnsdal," invited by the older generation, prophesies to her visitors. Ingimund, one of the younger guests present, tells her that he does not think that "[his] future life lies at the roots of [her] tongue."[47] He is essentially silencing her by stating he has no reason to hear her predictions. While the older men hold onto their pagan beliefs and respect the seeress, younger men actively silence her, resisting the inheritance of the feminine knowledge. Thorbjorg, in "Eirik the Red's Saga," "was one of ten sisters, all of

[45] "Saga of the Greenlanders," trans. Kunz, 32.

[46] Morris, *Sorceress or Witch*, 56.

[47] "Saga of the People of Vatnsdal," trans. Wawn, 14.

whom had the gift of prophecy, and was the only one of them still alive."[48] Magic used to be a common, flourishing culture, but Thorbjorg is the last one with the gift, and when she, too, passes, it will die with her. The imagery of a culture in decline is emphasized even more by the fact that nobody except Gudrid knows how to recite enchantments, and she has learned them from her foster-mother, another old woman. Gudrid, however, is a Christian and has no desire to participate in magic rites unless absolutely necessary. Her inheritance of magical songs is rendered pointless since she will not pass these songs on to the next generation. The death of the seeress is most explicit in the "Saga of the People of Laxardal." Gudrun, now a Christian, is told by her granddaughter of a dream in which the latter saw a woman who was asking Gudrun to stop praying. Upon digging under the church, they discover bones buried with "a large magician's staff," suggesting it was a corpse of a seeress.[49] The seeress is literally buried under the new religion in order to be forgotten.

These images of a frail, dying culture may have been a reflection of paganism in decline or of ideological propaganda intended to suppress the continuation of magic. Whatever the cause, their significance lies in their effect on the written word. Amanda M. Leff, whose investigation of the *Confessio Amantis* explores why and how women's voices get suppressed, claims that the account of a woman always manifest itself as "the story of a woman as understood by a man."[50] According to her, letters have a permanence that the spoken word does not, and in the end, it is the male mode of communication, writing, that is remembered. It is not as important to evaluate whether or not paganism really was a culture relegated to old women as it is to acknowledge that this is how the narrative was memorialized; this uncertainty is all scholars are left to work with.

While the nature of magic itself seemed to be a problem for Christianity,[51] gender was unmistakably the main factor why magic was shunned. Magic was

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[48] "Eirik the Red's Saga," trans. Kunz, 5.

[49] "Saga of the People of Laxardal," trans. Kunz, 117.

[50] Leff, "Writing, Gender, and Power in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," 33. Similar explorations of women's voices interpreted by men are Barbara Newman's study of the *Vita S. Hildegardis* and Erin Michelle Goeres's study of the *Strengleikar*. Both works examine how the female speaker's/writer's self-identification is disregarded to fit the male writer's/translator's interpretation. Newman discusses that Hildegard found identity in comparing herself to Biblical prophets such as Moses because she was anchoring her self-understanding on the acts and accomplishments of a person. However, her male scribe, preoccupied with her gender, made an effort to find specifically female role models. See Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers;" Goeres, "Sounds of Silence."

[51] According to Adam of Bremen, Olaf Tryggvason decreed that "soothsayers and augurs and sorcerers and enchanters and other satellites of Antichrist [...]must be pursued in order that [...] the Christian religion might take firmer root in his kingdom" and that "no one should be spared who either would persist in sorcery or would not become a Christian." Practitioners of magic were associated with the Antichrist, and they were considered the antithesis of being a Christian.

intrinsically associated with women, and the seeresses possessed independence and influence. The fact that a woman held a position of power and authority in society was problematic for the Christian church. Hence, it retaliated by redefining magic as masculine. In the *Prose Edda*, recorded in the thirteenth century (i.e., over two hundred years after Iceland's conversion to Christianity), after stealing the mead of poetry by tricking Gunnlod, Odin gives it to the gods and men, and poetry is referred to as "Odin's catch, Odin's discovery, his drink and his gift."[52] Thus, in the *Prose Edda*, the traditionally oral (i.e., feminine) art of poetry is redefined as belonging to Odin, despite the fact that he had stolen it from the giantess who was guarding it. The outer world, the wild, is conquered by the male god. In his eponymous saga (first recorded in the 1190s), Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway just before AD 1000, visits a male prophet, guided by the "spirit of the Almighty God," who predicts Olaf's future and baptizes him.[53] In this account, magic is made acceptable by transferring the context from female to male and from pagan to Christian, and when the supernatural power of prophecy is attributed to a man, it becomes holy. There are also subtle changes in word choices that indicate masculinization. Adam of Bremen recorded Archbishop Adalbert's decree that "magicians and fortune tellers and *men* of that sort must be punished with death"[54]—in the original Latin (which, granted, is a language in which masculine is the dominant grammatical gender anyway, but which does frequently contain female labels for male equivalents): *maleficos et divinos et eiusmodi homines sepe iudicaret morte esse multandos*.[55] Even though the statement is describing magic as something worthy of punishment, it attributes its power to men. The Christian church could only fathom men in "positions of power and authority, whether good or bad."[56] These shifts in words and narratives over time gradually phased out women and emphasized men engaged in magic, and thus men successfully appropriated the women's culture as their own.

The fact that nearly all written documentation of pagan Viking society was recorded after the Viking age has complicated scholarship on the Vikings considerably. Old Norse texts are problematic even without this issue because there are virtually no surviving original manuscripts, meaning that even the medieval documents available to us are later copies. These copies went through multiple stages of transmission, translation, editing, and corruption, not to mention the initial process of "omission and selection during their creation" when

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According to these texts, one cannot practice magic and be a Christian simultaneously: Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Tschan, 94, 97.

[52] Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, trans. Young, 103.

[53] Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson, Islandica, vol. 52 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 55.

[54] Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen,* trans. Tschan, 170. My italics.

[55] Adam von Bremen, *Hamburgisches Kirchengeschichte,* ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, 3rd ed. (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917), 209 (book 3, chapter 63).

[56] Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 129.

oral tradition was translated into written words.[57] During this process of translating from the oral, feminine mode of communication into the written, masculine mode, women's voices were already pushed out, and the male or Christian perspective that was added further distorted and recontextualized these voices. This distorted representation, along with scholars' cultural and personal biases, has hindered the meaningful study of Viking women. Scholarship on Viking women tends to focus on their legal status.[58] This is a curious development since women had limited self-representation in law, and the Vikings' legal world was predominantly a male sphere. So, why is this area, where women had not much to offer, more interesting than the area in which they were actively involved? The answer is that scholars approach Viking women by using men as the point of reference. The questions scholars ask are framed accordingly: How did women's roles differ from men's roles? What rights did women have, or not have, relative to men? Here the problem of women as explained by Ardener is relevant again: woman are not being defined on their own terms and on the basis of their accomplishments, but by what they lack. Thus, the self-representation and identity that Viking women found in magic, a fundamentally feminine sphere, has been largely forgotten and overlooked.

Magic—which had once given the seeress her identity and voice—was taken away by redefining that very voice. The gendered nature of magic remained, but the gender was switched from female to male. Even though magic was largely deemed a negative phenomenon, the power it granted its users was too dangerous to be left to women. Whenever women were allowed to retain that power, it was because they were already old or weak or dying. It is impossible to say with authority whether these new contexts were shifts in real life or merely the male writers' perceptions. However, what I can assert here is that this new masculine domination of magic has shaped the very narrative on which scholars have relied and has led to the memory of feminine magic being repressed.

Conclusion

The Viking seeress found her voice in society through magic, and she lost it when her identity was hijacked and redefined. Banished to the sidelines of agency due to a lack of maleness, Viking women were the subject of male domination. With little legal and social autonomy, they had few options to gain independence. What they therefore turned to was the world of the supernatural, the one realm where men had no domineering presence. In it, women created a culture that was uniquely theirs. The seeress used this authority over her own domain to gain influence. Just as women sat on the border between culture and nature, the seeress sat on the border of respect and fear. Either way, she was a source of significant

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[57] Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Introduction," in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 3-30, here 6.

[58] Samplonius, "From Veleda to the Völva," 70.

anxiety for the Christian church. The power she wielded was a threat to the male-dominated Christian social order, and the church made several attempts to strip her of this position. Magic was treated as un-Christian and religiously backward while being declared conditionally acceptable when practiced by a man in the name of Christianity. Even pagan magic, it appears, was less threatening to the church if it was practiced by men rather than women. Thus, the Viking seeress who had found her voice in magic, something that was uniquely hers, had her identity appropriated by the male-dominated Christian social order.

Once male Christian voices controlled the written narrative of Viking history, governing almost all facets of life, they somehow still saw women with a single source of agency—magic—as a threat and took it from them. The seeress of the "Völuspá" is a representation of this unjust theft of identity and independence. She resists the transfer of knowledge to the male god. This transfer reflects the way magic was made masculine to become more suitable for the authority it granted its practitioners. For the woman pressured to agree to it, this transfer also spells the loss of self-governance in her own domain. The seeress of the "Völuspá" resists and resists, but Odin eventually gets all the knowledge, and the seeress simply "sink[s] down."[59] The biases of modern scholars, shaped by male-oriented Western society and by documents filtered through the male perspective, have largely obstructed scholarship on Viking women with regard to their own accomplishments and worldview. Future scholarship should acknowledge these biases and critically examine why they exist. Such introspection would be enhanced by taking an interdisciplinary approach to Viking studies. By working with scholars familiar with feminist theories and literary criticism, we can attempt to unearth the seeress from her grave and restore her voice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Skyler Jang of La Mirada, California, earned her B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2019), where she is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). Her article printed above originated in a senior research seminar offered by CSUF's History Department.*

[59] "Völuspá," in *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Terry, 8.