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A Literary Analysis of Magic: A Dissection of Medieval Icelandic Literature

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A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF MAGIC:
A DISSECTION OF MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC
LITERATURE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor in Arts
in the Department of English
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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to understand the realities of how magic was perceived during a Christianized Iceland, specifically during the medieval era when sagas and poems were recorded in Iceland. I accomplish this through literary analysis in conjunction with previous research on runic inscriptions and Old Norse mythology. I reveal that there is much more to be uncovered about the realities of paganism in medieval Iceland, and that the authors of Icelandic sagas had a large misunderstanding of pre-Christian paganism and magic. This argument is manifested through close readings of major Icelandic works, such as *Hávamál*, *Volsunga saga*, and *Egils saga*, coupled with other, minor works. In the first chapter, through understanding the usage of literary devices like metaphor and irony, I look at the inaccurate ways runes were portrayed in *Hávamál* and *Egils saga* as a means to separate Iceland from paganism while still retaining their cultural relevance. In chapter two, through the usage of queer theory, I elaborate on how characters in *Hávamál*, *Egils saga*, and *Volsunga saga* perpetuate negative stereotypes about practitioners of magic. Through these discoveries, this thesis calls into question the views of Icelandic saga writers as misunderstanding pagan magic, and further diversifies the discourse around medieval Icelandic literature as a whole. This project is done in hopes to educate Norse neo-pagans on the nuances surrounding the literature they hold so close to their pagan practices.

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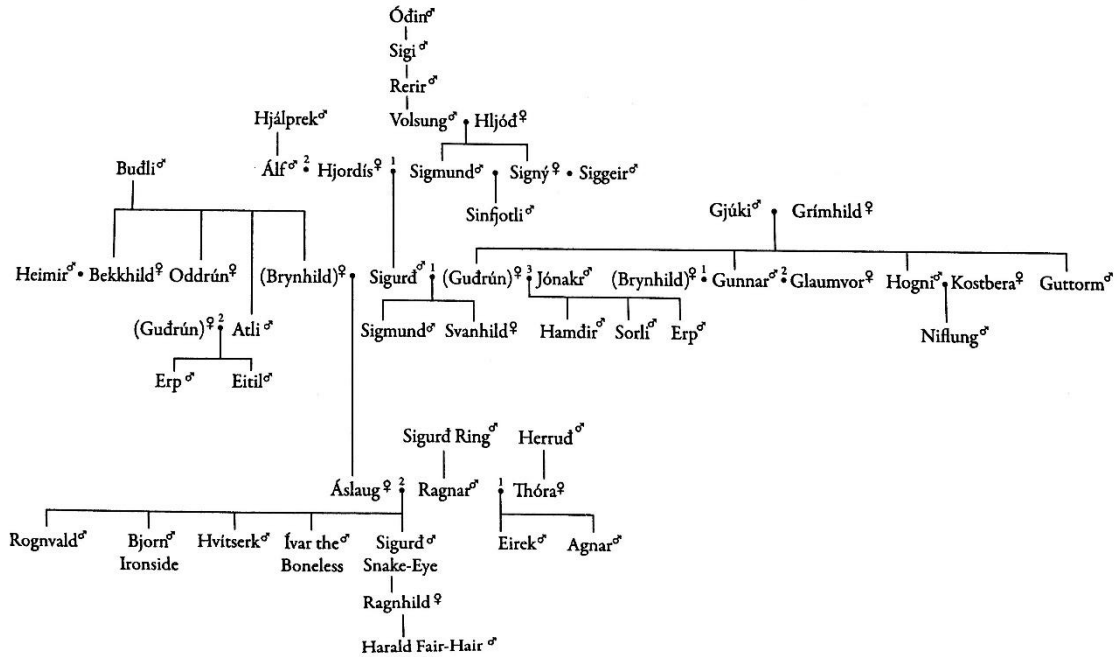


Figure 1: Volsung Family Tree

INTRODUCTION

Background

Icelandic sagas are the subject of frequent investigation and analysis in Nordic and Medieval Studies. Most of them are written after the Viking Age, notably during the thirteenth century when literacy in Iceland was very high.¹ High literacy rates fueled the sagas' popularity and interest in Iceland's rich cultural history. These prose tales existed in a range of genres, including sagas focused on local Icelandic families (Sagas of the Icelanders), sagas about kings (konungasögur), and sagas about the legendary past (fornaldursögur).² Today, they are revered as texts showcasing Iceland's literary and historical abilities. In recent years, there has been an incredible focus on medieval Icelandic texts in the Norse neo-pagan community, often calling themselves "traditionalists" in that they follow the guidelines of these texts as truths. This project explores the problems directly and indirectly associated with equating these texts to genuine pagan practices.

Historically, out of all the Scandinavian countries, Iceland has proved to be a remarkable case study in cultural stability. Even with the introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia being precisely dated to 999AD, pagan traditions in Iceland did not stop. While the frictions between pagans and Christians were peaceful overall, later sagas writers exaggerate, portraying more elaborate conflicts.³ Various authors worked around the negative reputation of pre-Christian ideas by acknowledging or adding Christian influences on their pieces. The majority of texts were written anonymously, but some notable authors come from this era. The intention of these sagas is clear: to preserve the stories of their history, including upper-class Icelandic traditions of

¹ Joseph Harris "Romancing the Rune: Aspects of Literacy in Early Scandinavian Orality" in *Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), 332; Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York City: Garland Publishing, 1993), 561.

² Pulsiano and Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 561.

³ See Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* for a detailed description of these events.

magic, so that they will not be lost forever. The upper-class traditions these writers aimed to record can be somewhat controversial to the modern reader. Noblemen tended to follow Odin, favoring strong men as warriors and distrusting women on anything they say, regardless of their accuracy in predictions. They placed importance on protecting the family line by all means possible, whether that be through deceit, theft, or murder. Many texts advise paranoid behavior of trusting no one and seeking revenge for treachery. However, they favored hospitality, justice, and poetic talent, which can be considered positive traits.

Because noblemen followed Odin's teachings, the perceptions of magic within medieval Icelandic society were often less antagonistic than would be assumed by Christian writers. Odin is the only male god who can practice magic. While there are different kinds of magic in Norse society, almost all of them are marked as feminine practices, with the notable exception of berserkers, though their use of the traditional idea of magic is not apparent. There are a few words in Old Norse, *argr* (adjective *ergi*) and *nið* specifically, that depict men who practice magic as unmanly, queer, or even perverted.⁴ Men avoided being seen as *ergi* – their appearance as *karlsmennska* (manly) must be kept in-tact. A man can accuse another of being *ergi* by constructing a *níðstöng*, or pole, sometimes covered in runes, to showcase to the entire community – a devastating blow to anyone's reputation. The women that did practice magic are normally older women, with about a 50/50 chance of being either revered by their community or shunned as a hag. Magic's obvious feminine traits calls into question the nature of Odin as a character and the differing relationships certain groups had with magic.

⁴ Ármann Jakobsson "Two Wise Women and their Young Apprentice: A Miscarried Magic Class" in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 85-6.

Thesis

The goal of this project is to understand the ways in which magic was viewed in thirteenth-century Icelandic culture through a literary analysis of sagas. Specifically, this analysis will examine saga attitudes towards pagan gods, runes, and people who practice magic, typically older women. These attitudes are solely reflections of the authors who wrote them and the times in which they lived. The ideas posed in these narratives are not reflective of attitudes towards paganism during the time it was widely practiced, nor is it reflective of the entire nation's attitude towards paganism. While many people shared the thoughts and feelings the authors demonstrated, they are by no means an umbrella for all of Iceland, let alone all of Scandinavia.

In conjunction with this project, I plan to create a taxonomy of Old Norse magics. On the surface, it aims to distinguish magic between the gods and mortals, from magical uses of runes and secular uses of runes, from masculine and feminine magic. On a grander scale, it aims to identify different social spheres within medieval Icelandic society in which these opinions were held. While other scholars have compared the attitudes of Norse pagans historically and modern pagans,⁵ this project focuses on the historical and highlights the overarching messages that were conveyed about magic via the fantastic and sometimes distorted representations of magical practices found in medieval Icelandic texts.

Summary of Texts Involved

While this project incorporates a multitude of texts, the three main pieces that will be analyzed are *Hávamal*, and *Volsunga saga*, and *Egils saga*. These texts were chosen because they provide an in-depth portrait of magic during the medieval period. They exemplify the most thorough analyses on magic during the thirteenth century. Other sagas and poems that will be

⁵ Evans focuses his thesis on the differences in classical Norse pagan and neo-pagan (Ásatrú) rites and rituals.

included are *Lokasenna*, *The Saga of Harald the Fair-Hair*, and other skaldic and runic poems will provide additional contexts for their inclusions of magic.

Hávamál

This poem is broken up into five sections by prominent scholars. While the sections are not rubricated or marked, the poem is set apart by name based on general content and who they address: *Gestapattr* (“Guest’s Portion”), *Dømi Óðins* (“Odin’s Examples/Judgements”), *Loddfáfnismál* (“Words of/for Loddfáfnir”), *Rúnatal* (“Count/Account of Runes”), and *Ljóðatal* (“Count/Account of Songs”). The first three are much of the same: giving advice to Scandinavian men, mainly in issues such as hospitality and trust. What sets each section apart is tone and narrative. The first section is a general guide on what sets a fool and a wise man apart in the world. The second talks of tales of visiting men and women and his advice based on those experiences. Jackson Crawford notes that it is also named “Odin’s Love Adventures” because it details the mistrust of women who are often unfaithful to him.⁶ The third section switches often between first and second person, with Odin addressing the reader as “Loddfáfnir.” While Crawford indicates that the origin of the name Loddfáfnir is lost, the name seems to be used as a term for a general audience, somewhat like a “you all” or “Jack.”⁷ In Carolyne Larrington’s translation, she suggests Loddfáfnir is a mocking term for someone who has yet to learn the rites of “arcane knowledge.”⁸ The fourth section recounts how Odin created and sacrificed himself for the runes. In *Rúnatal*, it is fairly explicit in the importance and sacredness of the runes – they are not something that just anyone can learn. They are meant to be carved with utmost care, as

⁶ Jackson Crawford, “Introduction” in *The Wanderer’s Hávamál* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2019), xiii.

⁷ Crawford “Introduction,” xiv.

⁸ Carolyne Larrington, “Sayings of the High One” in *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Pr., 2014), 47.

stanza 144 asks questions about the readers' knowledge of how to use the runes properly.⁹ The final part of *Hávamál* notes eighteen spells that Odin knows. It does not go into detail of how to perform the spells, but it does indicate what they are used for. Some of them are vague, like healing others; some of them are as specific as giving courage to elves.¹⁰

Overall, the poem demonstrates not only insight to the pagan practices of Norsemen, but also an insight into Odin's internalized misogyny, highlighting the irony of his counsel of Valkyries. His advice was more than likely taken into the highest regard amongst his followers, specifically kings and other male members of the ruling class. This misogynistic ideology transfers to the way that warriors would disregard the often-truthful advice of the women around them and then blame them for their failures. This project aims to use this poem in chapter one in order to dissect Odin as a character and compare this version of him in other texts where he is less involved. In chapter two, this project will identify how runic practice is described in *Hávamál* and how that compares to descriptions from other literary sources.

Volsunga Saga

This saga is a history of a legendary noble family and how they rise and fall from power in various circumstances. It starts with Sigi, a descendant of Odin and the creator of this family tree. From there, it follows each member, focusing more on a few key characters in the tree, and their often-bloody encounters with enemies and themselves. Below is the family tree as depicted by Jackson Crawford in his translation of the text.¹¹

⁹ Jackson Crawford, *The Wanderer's Hávamál* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2019), 75; Larrington "Sayings of the High One," 45.

¹⁰ Crawford, *The Wanderer's Hávamál*, 77, 83.

¹¹ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, edited by Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), viii.

Egils saga

Egils saga, similarly to *Volsunga saga*, follows the family and legacy of Egil Skallagrimsson. The story includes real people with real traces of historical events. This comes as no surprise because Icelanders were known for their historical accuracy of Scandinavian royals. Egil, as the main focus, is contrast against his family for his rebellious and poet nature. He comes into many conflicts, including with the king and queen of Norway, and often uses magic to solve them. Two scenes I will be focusing on in this project are scenes that include runes. The first is when part of the royal family of Norway, try to poison Egil with mead, but he instead uses runes break the curse, erecting a *níðstöng* in revenge in a much later chapter. The second is when his niece falls ill, only to find that she had been cursed with runes from another jealous woman. He rectifies the situation by carving new runes to place under her bed, remedying her overnight.

The purpose of including *Egils saga* into this project is to demonstrate the oddity of Egil practicing magic in the first place. His character is filled with contradictions, like homophobia against the use of practicing magic. I often draw comparisons between him and Odin since they are both highly literate compared to their counterparts. These comparisons reveal why mortal men are shunned from using magic while Odin, the god of wisdom, is not. Pieces from *Egils saga* are mostly used in chapter one, but some inclusions and callbacks are used in chapter two.

Analysis Procedure

First and foremost, this project will be analyzing the English translations of Icelandic stories, sagas, and poems. Additionally, this project aims to compare the original Old Norse text with the translations to English from a multitude of scholars. By understanding the etymology of the Old Norse text in comparison with their English counterparts, further connotations can be

extrapolated with greater precision. Etymologies of the original Old Norse words will be determined using many dictionaries.¹²

The first chapter focuses on runic mentions in Icelandic sagas. As stated before, runes are known to come from Odin and can contain magical properties. Runic magic is specific enough to where I have placed it in its own category, separating it from the other forms of magic seen. While it may overlap into other types, like shapeshifting, nonetheless it deserves a separate category on two bases. First, it is one of the few tangible magics out there. Seiðr and berserkers are tangible in a way that involves performance, while runic magic involves physical items in order to succeed. Second, they have a unique origin story. Not only do runes have a mythical origin, but because they were the writing system that Germanic-speaking peoples used for nearly a century, runes have linguistic origin and significance. By noting the relationship with runes that certain characters have within the sagas, along with the collocative adjectives and verbs associated with using them, my goal is to identify how often runes were used in a magical and practical sense during the time the sagas were written.

This project seeks to take a mix between a romantic approach and skeptical approach when it comes to runes. According to Evans, a romantic view implies that Germanic-speaking peoples thought runes to hold magical properties, while a skeptical view implies they never did.¹³ The literary record implies that many Icelanders believed in the efficacy of runic magic, there were, doubtless, skeptics. While this project acknowledges the validity to both sides of the argument, this project seeks to adhere to the romantic argument, since the evidence against Germanic peoples believing in the magical power of runes is slim. The addition of these

¹² Some of the main dictionaries used will be Zöega's *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* and Gordon's *An Introduction to Old Norse*.

¹³ Elliott S. Evans "Runes: Past and Present" (MA thesis, University of West Virginia, 2011) 1.

theoretical concepts allows for a fuller discussion on the role of runes in medieval Icelandic society.

The second chapter focuses on who practices magic and how they are perceived within the literature and ultimately medieval Icelandic society. The first half will focus on Odin, the main god in the religion. He is known by many names, but his most popular kenning, or a literary nickname given to a character to help a poet adhere to certain rules of poetry, in this case skaldic poetry, is Allfather, since he is considered the father to all people on earth. He is also father to the runes, sharing them with the Germanic peoples. In *Hávamál*, he sacrifices himself for himself and for the runes. He is also the only male who openly practices magic (seiðr at any rate) and is often chastised for it by other gods and men. By conducting a meta-analysis on Odin's character, we can understand the view of men who did practice magic and why Odin was a crucial exception.

In the second half of chapter two, I will be applying feminist theory to some Icelandic sagas, namely *Volsunga saga*. As mentioned previously, it is notably older women who practiced magic in the sagas, and their imagery is often not pleasant. The depiction of these older women often aligns with imagery of crones in other magical circles and myths. While the intention is not to compare the types of imagery, there will be some meta-analysis on the crone character itself followed by specific examples found within the sagas.

While the majority of scholars would agree that magic was only acceptable for women to practice during this time (with Odin as the exception), they typically exclude berserkers. Zoega's dictionary defines *beserkir* as "a wild warrior of the heathen age;"¹⁴ in Gordon's *An Introduction to Old Norse*, *berserkir* is a compound noun meaning "bare shirt."¹⁵ Not much is known about

¹⁴ Geir T. Zoega. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1910), 81.

¹⁵ E.V. Gordon. *An Introduction to Old Norse*. edited by A.R. Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press) 335, 379.

berserkers, but they were known for being the best warriors because of their “otherworldly” transformations. These warriors were always men, and they were not known for being in this mode at all times. They would often “go berserk” before a battle, changing attitudes towards others and their enemies into a more violent and animalistic way. In literary terms, this can be considered a form of shapeshifting, especially since one of the most famous examples comes from *Volsungs saga* and includes two of the main characters donning wolf’s skin and taking on a separate form, “Sigmund and Sinfjotli put the wolfskins on and could not remove them. Like princes before them, their voices were also changed into wolves’ howls.”¹⁶ However, the lack of “magic” and other related forms of the word collocating with berserkers in sagas creates ambiguity to the nature of changes in *berserkirs*, whether they were physical or strictly mental. Nonetheless, the second chapter aims to address ideas about masculinity and femininity in the magical realm.

Overall, the goal in researching this topic comes from an interest in the Norse neo-pagan community. As previously mentioned, Norse neo-pagans take these texts as direct pieces of Scandinavian pagan culture. There are two problems result from this kind of thinking: celebration of the inaccurate and the xenophobic. Since these texts were written under a Christianized lens 200-300 years after Iceland’s conversion into Christianity, we cannot trust that the examples of paganism and magic displayed in these sagas and poems are accurate. Even if the texts do derive from oral traditions told during the height of paganism, multiple versions of these stories existed, and it was the authors’ jobs to consolidate what they thought their audience would most identify with. This resulted in the exacerbation of how runes and magic were used, even utilizing them as simple plot devices to help move the story along.

¹⁶ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 11.

CHAPTER ONE: RUNIC REFERENCES IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGAS AND POEMS

The majority of medieval Icelandic sagas were written between the 13th and 15th centuries CE. Sagas are considered classical medieval Icelandic sagas, most of them set at the peak of the Viking Age, 200-300 years prior to their authorship.¹⁷ As such, the presence of magical and runic powers is noteworthy. The inclusion of runes and pagan gods are used as essential plot devices and main characters. This chapter will be discussing the realities of including runic references within the sagas as not only plot devices, but as evidence that the references do not reflect the old pagan practices that existed prior to the recording of these texts. In fact, they often reflect how Christians felt about runes instead of how runes were actually used. Christian attitudes were negative towards these antiquated practices. The use of runes in conjunction with characterizations of Egil and Odin in their respective texts illuminate these attitudes rather than give a historical account of runic magic. This chapter primarily examines *Egils saga* and *Hávamál* paralleled with other medieval Icelandic texts and runic inscriptions found throughout Scandinavia. Additionally, the use of irony in *Egils saga* and *Hávamál* will be analyzed to address the differences between Christians' relationship with runes and how they were genuinely used during their prime. The result is the further removal of pagan ideologies and practices in Iceland. This chapter poses the argument that the authors of the sagas, while attempting to preserve their cultural heritage, instead exacerbated how runes and magic were used in certain context, ultimately altering how medieval Icelanders viewed paganism and magic.

However, before diving into concrete examples of this project's argument, a discussion about the history of runes and literacy in Scandinavia, with a particular focus on Iceland, must

¹⁷ Joseph Harris, "Romancing the Rune: Aspects of Literacy in Early Scandinavian Orality," in *Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing: Old Norse Studies*, ed. Susan B. Deskins and Thomas D. Hill (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 323.

ensue. The definition of literacy this project will use is the employment of a writing system to convey meaning, proposed by Harry Roe.¹⁸ Other scholars would place literacy in the more general sense as being able to read/understand a specific situation, but since this project is aimed solely at literary works and runic inscriptions, Roe's definition of literacy fits appropriately. Without a clear outline of the history of runic inscriptions and Icelandic storytelling, one cannot understand their interrelatedness because together they portray the earliest forms of literacy in Scandinavia. Since Nordic cultures were defined by their oral traditions, runic inscriptions and oral storytelling grew together to form the understanding of literacy that shaped medieval Iceland.

The first known written form of a Germanic language is the translated portions of the New Testament from Greek to Gothic, written by Bishop Wulfilas in a (modified) Roman alphabet in the fourth century CE.¹⁹ However, Wulfilas's Gothic evidence is linguistically suspect because he translated very literally, often word for word from Greek, and in ways that violate expected Germanic syntax. Thus, most linguists look to runes as the first evidence of natural Germanic writing and literacy.²⁰ Runes are a script used for carving inscriptions by Scandinavian (i.e., North Germanic) and West Germanic tribes in any Germanic language for primarily religious purposes.²¹ The Elder Futhark, or the first runic alphabet, takes its name from the traditional order of its first six letters: (f) (u) (th) (a) (r) (k). Because this alphabet was used across many Germanic dialects and languages, often with local modifications, it sometimes

¹⁸ Harry Roe, "The Origins and Spread of Literacy in Early Scandinavia." *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 1 (1983): 53.

¹⁹ Michael Schulte, "Runology and Historical Sociolinguistics: On Runic Writing and Its Social History in the First Millennium," *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* 1, no. 1 (May 2015), 91.

²⁰ R.V.W. Elliot, *Runes: An Introduction*, (Manchester University Press, 1959, 1980), 5, 32; Schulte, "Runology," 91; Roe, "The Origins and Spread of Literacy in Early Scandinavia," 53.

²¹ Elliot, *Runes*, 1, 62.

obscured the meaning of some inscriptions, resulting in some difficulty in applying linguistic knowledge of early Germanic languages to their early data.

Once the Germanic tribes developed their own clans and were dispersed further, the runic alphabet was modified in these new environments to accommodate the needs of emerging Germanic dialects. This led to a family of runes known as the Younger Futhark, an umbrella term used to encompass a wider range of later Futhark-based alphabets that described the variations created by different regions.²² They were used as the main writing system, primarily for short, non-literary texts or memorialization, until the late Viking Age (ca. 800-1200CE). After the turn of the millennium, Christianity was introduced in Scandinavia, strongly encouraging the use of the Roman alphabet. However, conversion was a slow process for most Scandinavian countries and runes continued to be used on a local scale, mostly phasing out on the mainland by the 12th century.²³ Runic inscriptions can be found all throughout continental northern Europe and Viking settlements in the British Isles, Iceland, and Greenland, adorning monumental stones as well as jewelry, swords, and other valued objects.²⁴

Runic inscriptions in Iceland seem to be far fewer than elsewhere and do not begin to show up in the archaeological record until after the Viking Age, with a mere 53 known examples in total.²⁵ Many scholars believe that these writings are purely for preserving the antiquarian ways of mainland Nordic peoples, in Norway and Sweden in particular. Evidence for this is clear in the content of the inscriptions themselves. Einar Haugen notes that poetic inscriptions mainly come from Iceland, while others for magical, ornamental, and commemoration of the dead come

²² Elliot, *Runes*, 22.

²³ Einar Ingvald Haugen, *The History of Scandinavian Languages: An Introduction to Their History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 92; Schulte, "Runology," 103; Elliot, *Runes*, 23.

²⁴ Schulte, "Runology," 92-4; Elliot, *Runes*, 64.

²⁵ Haugen, *The History of Scandinavian Languages*, 141. While Haugen gives an exact number of 53, there are a number of other sources that list numbers as low as 50 and as high as 100, a small amount compared to their mainland counterparts, like Norway and Sweden, who have a runic record well in the thousands.

from elsewhere.²⁶ Non-inscription uses of runes for manuscript purposes, adopted by local churches, were again for language and cultural preservation.²⁷ Many excerpts or near-identical wording to runic inscriptions found all over Scandinavia can be found in Icelandic sagas and poems.²⁸ Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees note a few examples of ties between sagas' poetry and their much older, physical counterparts found in other parts of Scandinavia, such as the Vimose bucklet, Pforzen silver belt buckle, and the famed Setre comb.²⁹ One of the most famous examples is the eighth century English Franks Casket, which is covered in a modified Old English runic script. On the right side of the casket, R.W.V. Elliot concludes that it details a story that is incredibly similar to *Volsungs saga*, a story orally carried over from Scandinavians to the English Isles.³⁰

Egils saga

However, this chapter's emphasis is on the manners in which runes were used within the stories themselves. Unfortunately, these stories should not be read as historically accurate records for how runes were actually used. None of the Icelandic sagas give a 100% accurate account of the ways in which pagans utilized runes before the introduction of Christianity, even if some sagas, like *Egils saga*, get eerily close. It must be remembered that large portions are fabricated to romanticize the time of the Vikings.³¹ The most notable contingencies with the sagas' accuracy are the time difference and authorship. Even so, as mentioned previously, all runic inscriptions in Iceland are dated after the Viking Age, making none of the inscriptions

²⁶ Haugen, *The History of Scandinavian Languages*, 140.

²⁷ Haugen, *The History of Scandinavian Languages*, 141-2.

²⁸ Elliot, *Runes*, 29; Harris, "Romancing the Rune," 325.

²⁹ Mindy MacLeod and Barnard Mees. *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 2005), 15-23.

³⁰ Elliot, *Runes*, 103-5.

³¹ Hermann Pálsson. "Introduction," in *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Stories* (Harmondworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), 8.

pagan in content. Icelandic rune carvers, let alone writers of the sagas, would not have an accurate representation of practices that are considered antique even in their time.

Another point of contingency with the accuracy of pagan practices is the language itself. We can turn to *Egils saga* as an example of how runes play a significant role in the plot of the story. A scene in chapter 44 details the king and queen of Norway poisoning Egil's ale cup. Egil carves runes on the drinking horn to rid it of the poison, cuts his hand to smear blood on the runes, then sings an incantation:

<i>Rístum rún á horni.</i>	'Write we runes around the horn
<i>Rjóðum spjöll í dreyra.</i>	Redden all the spell with blood;
<i>Þau velk orð til eyrna</i>	Wise words choose I for the cup
<i>óðs dýrs viðar róta.</i>	Wrought from branching horn of beast.
<i>Drekkum veig, sem viljum,</i>	Drink we then, as drink we will,
<i>vel glýjaðra þýja</i>	Draught that cheerful bearer brings,
<i>Vitum, hvé oss of eiri</i>	Learn that health abides in ale,
<i>öl, þats Báröðr signdi</i>	Holy ale that Bard hath bless'd. ³²

The spell works, and the king and queen die. For reasons later discussed in Chapter 2, it is odd that Egil would choose to participate in such a magical practice such as rune carving, especially one that includes a blood sacrifice. MacLeod and Mees note that there is no evidence that blood was used in runic magic “outside the minds of the writers of the sagas.”³³ They indicate that multiple writers extrapolated and exploited the practices of runic magic in the sagas. The act of sacrificing one's blood was not uncommon for any ritualistic practice no matter what religious background. Joseph Harris utilizes Saussure's theory of signs to indicate that the act was not literal, and that the connotations Old Norse do not correspond with physical actions.³⁴ He notes that the first two lines of that stanza, specifically “rjóðum spjöll” calls for a physical

³² Green has taken a few liberties in the translation, but for the most part, it is a one-to-one of the word order and denotations of the incantation; some words are added, like “with blood,” some words are redacted, like *oss*, “god.” *Egils Saga*, trans. W.C. Green (Icelandic Saga Database), 1893; *Egils Saga (Old Norse)* (JiaHu Books, 2013), 74.

³³ MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 23.

³⁴ Harris, “Romancing the Rune,” 342.

act, and in an oral culture its akin to “painting a song red.”³⁵ Furthermore, on the Einang stone, Elliot translates the runic inscription to “Dagr painted the runes,” even though there seems to be no indication of sacrifice or blood associated with the inscription.³⁶ In fact, he notes that this inscription was a *bauta*-stone, a gravestone, used in secular practices.³⁷ Even before Iceland was known as a country of high literary status, people literate in runes would utilize poetic/metaphorical language in their everyday lives. This is due to the oral nature their culture was built on. Because Scandinavians prided themselves in being good with words, people who were literate, especially in runes and poetry, were received well. It is no wonder authors used creative turns of phrase to mean “written in runes.”

What is the purpose of this metaphorical connection with blood and heathenry?

Connecting the use of runes to blood makes the audience associate runic magic with sacrifice, a more primitive act than what it really was. By blurring the line between poetics and reality, as Scandinavians were already accustomed to, writers constructed a view of runes that was far removed from the realities. Again, using Saussure’s framework of signs, runes then become a sign synonymous with blood sacrifice, regardless of the metaphorical language. MacLeod and Mees mention that the phrase reddening the runes also appears in the poem *Second Lay of Gudrun* that has a magical effect on the main character, further driving the conjoining of runes with sacrifice in the popular literature of the time.³⁸ By favoring the pagan connection and removing the secular one, the reader is thus encouraged to forget that runes were ever used in a secular way, but view runes solely in a “magico-religious sense.”³⁹ The gap in time from the

³⁵ Harris, “Romancing the Rune,” 342.

³⁶ Elliot, *Runes*, 70.

³⁷ Elliot, *Runes*, 70.

³⁸ MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 235.

³⁹ Elliot, *Runes*, 72.

height of runic usage to the sagas' conception and publications point to the fact that Icelanders never truly wrote in runes during the Viking Age, further solidifying this theory. Oral culture gradually transitioned to an oral-derived literate culture. The only way for Icelanders to understand their history was through the sagas. That is often why medieval Icelanders pointed to the sagas as evidence for historical events.⁴⁰ While the sagas are based on real events, I want to further stress that the sagas are historical fiction, not accurate documentations of family lineage. Pálsson further explains this by saying the saga writers were "more concerned with moral and aesthetic truths than with historical facts."⁴¹ Certain saga writers displayed this gap in memory by writing runes only in their pagan context, ignorantly replacing some of the pieces with their own interpretations based on Christian practices.

Hávamál

Another piece of writing that has heavy usage of runes is *Hávamál*. There are many places where runes are mentioned, including an entire section scholars name *Rúnatal*, or "Account/Words of the Runes." Scholars agree that the whole poem is written through the voice of Odin, the patriarch of the Norse pantheon. While it is obvious that it is not actually written by him, much the same as the Bible is not actually written by God, the stories and themes are consistent with other representations of Odin throughout other literary examples. *Hávamál* is still a poem, and with every poem comes irony. It becomes clear that the ways in which Odin conveys the importance of the knowledge of runes is actually about the enlightenment of boys becoming men under the church's guide.

⁴⁰ Mats Malm, "Skalds, Runes, and Voice." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010): 135.

⁴¹ Pálsson, "Introduction," 7.

In Loren Gruber’s essay “The Rites of Passage: “Hávamál,” Stanzas 1-5” she argues that *Hávamál* portrays an initiation into Odin’s cultic knowledge.⁴² By focusing on the first five stanzas in conjunction with a few others from the poem, she is able to fully interpret the poem in its literal and metaphorical forms. Her analysis also works when applied to stanza 80, where Odin recounts his knowledge of the runes:

<p><i>Þat er þá reynt er þú at rúnum spyrr, inum reginkunnum þeim er górrðu ginnregin ok fáði Fimbulþulr. Þá hefir hann bazt ef hann þegir.</i></p>	<p>What you ask of the runes will prove true; they are of divine origin made by the mighty gods and painted by Odin. You’ll learn best with your mouth shut.⁴³</p>
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It is worth noting that *spyrr* is translated to “ask” by Crawford but can also mean “to investigate or be informed of.”⁴⁴ Connotatively, this form of ask is much less related to request as it is to interrogate. The word choice places a sense of personal responsibility is placed on the person to learn. Knowledge is not given to anyone; you have to be ready and willing to work towards getting to that place of enlightenment. Thus, we can deduce that it is not really getting closer to Odin, but becoming like Odin, transforming to a god-like figure, that allows people to unlock knowledge. If the goal of the ironist is to “become higher than human,” they can certainly do so by becoming men in the context of Norse society by using *Hávamál* as their guide.⁴⁵ Gruber best illustrates this concept by explaining that “Men who understand the *Hávamál*, in short, become initiated into the physical and *metaphysical* [sic] mysteries of life. Such men can pass successfully from the human to the divine world.”⁴⁶ This poem was meant to guide young men on their journeys – not just the physical ones, but their spiritual ones.

⁴² Loren C. Gruber, “The Rites of Passage: “Hávamál”, Stanzas 1-5.” *Scandinavian Studies* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 336.

⁴³ *Hávamál*. trans. Jackson Crawford. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2019), 39.

⁴⁴ A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic, s.v. “spyrja.”

⁴⁵ Paul A. Bové. “Cleanth Brooks and Modern Irony: A Kirkegaardian Critique,” *Boundary 2* 4, no. 3 (1976): 743.

⁴⁶ Gruber, “The Rites of Passage,” 334.

This stanza is a clear indication of the themes found in Gruber’s work. The irony is found in voice. The immediate contradiction here is “asking” about runes but learning by keeping “your mouth shut.” How is one to learn without asking questions? How is one to ask questions in silence? The surface language here indicates that Odin must bestow the runes upon you. Gruber notes that if we were to “read ‘literally,’ then we should find in the *Hávamál* a living correspondence between the worlds of men and northern gods.”⁴⁷ *Hávamál*, instead of being read literally, but for its metaphorical attributes. By getting closer to God, or Odin in this case, one can gain knowledge through intrinsic thought, keeping ones “mouth shut” through mediation. This is further exemplified in stanza 6 through the personification of wisdom in connection to Odin:

*At hyggjandi sinni
skyli-t maðr hrósinn vera,
heldr gætinn at geði,
þá er horskr ok þøgull
kømr heimisgarða til.
Sjaldan verðr víti vörum,
því at óbrigðra vin
fær maðr aldregi
en mannvit mikit.*

A wise man
is not showy about his wisdom;
he guards it carefully.
He is silent when he comes
to a stranger’s home.
Harm seldom befalls the watchful man,
for you can never have
a more faithful friend
than a good supply of wisdom.⁴⁸

By naming wisdom as a friend, one can conclude that the writer is personifying wisdom in the person of Odin, the god of wisdom. Then, if men should not show their wisdom, then they should not show their affiliation with Odin. This aligns with the sentiment that people could worship their pagan gods in secret, as long as they did not conflict with Christianity. In the *Codex Regius*, where the original of *Hávamál* is found, the word *maðr* in the transcript is still written with the M rune. This is not evidence for the lingering runic literacy of the peoples of

⁴⁷ Gruber, “The Rites of Passage,” 330.

⁴⁸ *Hávamál*, 5.

Iceland, but rather their attempt to appeal to the people who are reading by implementing something familiar.⁴⁹

The concept of man transcending human forms through paradox of identification is further confirmed in stanza 143:

*Óðinn með ásum,
en fyr álfum Dáinn,
ok Dvalinn dvergum fyrir,
Ásviðr jötnum fyrir,
ek reist sjálfr sumar.*

Odin carved [the runes] for the gods,
and Dáin for the elves,
Dvalin for the dwarves,
and Ásvid for the giants
I carved some for myself.⁵⁰

In this stanza, the ambiguity does not come from the language, but the signifiers associated with the language. Again, we see here this paradox of both Odin being the narrator and the referent. John McKinnell quotes Ottar Grønvik, who writes that stanzas in “111-64 of *Hávamál* [it] is not Odin at all, but a human priest of Odin, who...undergoes an initiation ordeal with the aim of achieving mystic union with the god.”⁵¹ However, many well-known sagas adhere to similar themes and writing styles found in the New Testament because literacy was strictly linked to the spread of Christianity in Germanic-speaking societies, especially in Iceland.⁵² The connection between the Christianity, specifically St. Paul, and Odin is made by McKinnell as evidence of the metaphorical nature of initiations in Norse society.⁵³ The author of *Hávamál* wrote Odin ambiguously so that its audience can easily supplement whatever god they may choose, again focusing on moral and aesthetic truths as previously mentioned from Pálsson. The most obvious replacement during this time would be the Christian God. While the first section of the poem is meant to indicate the rules of hospitality, it is also meant to be a

⁴⁹ Jackson Crawford, “Introduction,” in *The Wanderer’s Hávamál* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2019), xxix-xxx.

⁵⁰ *Hávamál*, 74-5.

⁵¹ John McKinnell. “Wisdom from the Dead: The ‘Ljóðatal’ Section of ‘Hávamál,’” *Medium Aevum* 76, no. 1 (June 2007): 94.

⁵² Roe, “The Origins and Spread of Literacy in Early Scandinavia,” 49.

⁵³ McKinnell, “Wisdom from the Dead,” 94.

framework for hosting life on earth.⁵⁴ The metaphors of *Hávamál* seem to be transmitted throughout regular parts of Scandinavian culture. Given that this poem originated orally, the poem is a memorial to the cultural ideology that passed on through generations of Viking and pre-Viking warriors. Here, we can see these Christian authors using older ideologies and attitudes already present and reframing them in their preferred context. Per Holmberg, when talking about the Rök stone, stated, “written text is like an eternity machine...it keeps us reading. It keeps us commemorating.”⁵⁵

But Why Include the Runes at All?

I have established that Christians view runes in an exaggerated and overall negative light. This calls into question the need to include runes at all in these texts. There are two key reasons why these authors would include them, and they have much to do with Icelandic culture itself. Medieval Icelanders were known for being incredible historians and masters of literary techniques. Norwegians would contract Icelandic writers to record the lineage of their families – medieval Scandinavians were deeply interested in genealogy. This resulted in sagas like *Volsunga saga* and *Egils saga* in the first place, family histories that stretched back for generations. Because of Icelanders reputation for being flowery writers, they seemed better fit for the job.

If we put this into context with runic inclusions in these stories and poems, we begin to demonstrate that medieval Icelandic writers were not attempting to preserve the authentic or historically accurate pagan runic usage. They were attempting to write a family history in an interesting way, including runes as a means of preserving unique artifacts of their material culture or else moving the plot of a saga along via convenient magical practices (whose

⁵⁴ Gruber, “The Rites of Passage,” 333.

⁵⁵ Kaplan, “The key to these ancient riddles.”

authenticity may well be dubious). This is also shown in *Hávamál* with the inclusion of Odin and the originator of runes. Rather than tell a linguistic or historical origin story, the poet who recorded *Hávamál* thought it would be more appropriate to record the metaphysical origin of runes. This insulates the audience from runes in their secular contexts and puts them in a pagan one. Without the inclusion of runes in these sagas and poems, it would not only be an injustice towards preserving the culture of Scandinavians, but it would halt some plots from progressing. Take my example from *Egils saga*, when Egil paints the runes in blood on the poisoned cup. If he was not written as a pagan who knew how to write and use runes, how was he going to get out of that situation, by fighting the king of Norway, or refusing to drink from the cup? Both would have been seen as improbable to the audience, so the author chose to include Egil's use of runes as a way to move the story forward. In the cases of *Hávamál* and *Egils saga*, it is integral to incorporate runes into the literature, but because the purpose was not accuracy, the ways in which the authors wrote about runes were exaggerated to the point of removal from reality.

CHAPTER TWO: A DISCUSSION ON ODINIC MAGIC AND SEXUALITY

Seiðr is among the most famous and controversial forms of Old Norse magic. While *seiðr* can be used as the general term for magic during this time period, it is actually one of many forms of magic that was practiced.⁵⁶ There is another form that is also often discussed, *galdr*. *Galdr* is more akin to chanting, singing, etymologically deriving from the Old Norse word *gala*, “to make the sound of a crow or raven.”⁵⁷ These two forms are compared to one another, juxtaposing each other as the “feminine” and “masculine” types of magic.⁵⁸ While there is no piece of text that explicitly states this dichotomy, there are allusions to it both inside and outside of texts.⁵⁹ For example, in *Lokasenna*, Loki, the trickster god in the Norse pantheon, accuses Odin of being a pervert/unmanly⁶⁰ for practicing *seiðr*.⁶¹ However, it has never explicitly been stated in the corpus that men cannot practice or learn about magic. In fact, there are several instances where men are practitioners, but there are often reputational or deadly consequences that follow. In this thesis, I will be able to indicate that the exceptions to the “rules” to allow for a clear definition of gendered practices of magic during the Medieval Era. The main method to prove this argument will be through literary and queer analysis of characters that are practitioners of magic within medieval Icelandic sagas, with specific highlights on *Hávamál* and *Volsunga saga*.

The first character I will first dissect is Odin. Odin is elusive in the sagas, often wearing a disguise and only helping people when they benefit him. He is also seen as the most

⁵⁶ Daniel McCoy, *The Viking Spirit: An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion* (2016), 45.

⁵⁷ Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. 1st ed., s.v. “Magic.” New York: Garland Publishing, 1993.

⁵⁸ Pulsiano, and Wolf., s.v. “Magic.”

⁵⁹ McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 47.

⁶⁰ In Old Norse, the ideas of “unmanly,” “cowardly,” “receptive homosexual,” and “pervert” were lumped into one word: *ergi*. This term and how it affects men in Scandinavian society will be discussed in-depth later in this chapter. McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 47.

⁶¹ Ármann Jakobsson, “Two Wise Women and Their Young Apprentice: A Miscarried Magic Class” in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 88.

knowledgeable of the gods, being the god of wisdom. He is incredibly powerful, but not in the same ways people associate with Vikings: manly, honorable, and aggressive.⁶² He is magically powerful, being the only god to know multiple types of magic.⁶³ This conflicts with the idea that women are the sole practitioners of magic in Norse society; men can know and study magic, but to partake in it is considered feminine.⁶⁴ While Odin embodies many of the values involved in the medieval Icelandic constructions of masculinity, his practice of magic does not. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Odin is characterized in *Hávamál* and *Volsunga saga*, compare that with other male characters that know or practice magic in various other sagas, and demonstrate why Odin was able to practice *seiðr* magic without scrutiny and homophobic labeling (outside Loki) and was, instead, revered within medieval Icelandic society.

The concepts of *níð* and *ergi* are important in understanding the characterization and reception of Odin during medieval Iceland. *Níð* is an adjective used for insulting someone, namely a male, and commonly associated with the practice of carving an enemy's likeness or cursing them through runes into a pole, a *níðstöng* (*níð* pole), for the public to see.⁶⁵ According to MacLeod and Mees, *níð* can be classified into categories based on how you insult someone, whether it be verbally or otherwise.⁶⁶ *Ergi* (or the noun form, *argr*) can take a multitude of meanings, but the definition I will be using for this project is an adjective describing someone who engages in passive homosexuality by allowing their counterpart take advantage of them in

⁶² Daniel McCoy, "Viking Gender Roles," Norse Mythology for Smart People, last modified 2019. <https://norse-mythology.org/viking-gender-roles/>.

⁶³ Pulsiano, and Wolf., s.v. "Óðinn."

⁶⁴ Jakobsson, "Two Wise Women," 86; Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 175.

⁶⁵ Geir T. Zöega. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1910), 544.

⁶⁶ Mindy MacLeod and Barnard Mees. *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 2005), 236.

some capacity.⁶⁷ Scandinavian peoples depicted their gods and goddesses as personifications of human traits, positive and negative actions included. However, *níð* and *ergi* have such highly negative connotations that it is only when Loki teases the other gods like Thor and Odin that these terms are directed at the Norse gods. One of the most notable examples of these ideas are found in *Egils saga*, when Egil erects a *níðstöng* for the king of Norway after the king and queen attempted to poison him.⁶⁸ There seems to be no consequence for Egil – partly because they begin to go to war in the next chapter – but that does not detract from the negative connotation of a man cursing another through the physical manifestation of slander. *Níðstöng* poles symbolically label their victim as *ergi* as they are taking a passive role in their reputation by having someone else display their thoughts on the person in question.⁶⁹ Parallels between Odin and Egil will be drawn as comparisons of mortals and the divine’s reactions when their sexuality is being called into question. In addition to outlining rules of magic within the sagas, I will be discussing why these homophobic concepts are not associated with Odin and the significance of this avoidance, even though he possesses traits that would qualify him in Scandinavian society to be called *ergi*.

Secondly, I would like to discuss the *seiðr* and *berserkirs* of *Volsunga saga* and how they perform their assigned gender roles. *Berserkirs* were elite warriors who “underwent training and initiation...[and were] impervious to danger.”⁷⁰ How these men got into this state and whether this is a form of magic itself are matters of debate among scholars. These warriors were not just pieces of fiction, but a real class of men that existed within Norse society. There are several

⁶⁷ Paul Halsall. “Gunnora Hallakarva: The Vikings and Homosexuality,” Fordham University, last modified January 2, 2020, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/gayvik.asp>; Zöega, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 190; Jakobsson, “Two Wise Women,” 86.

⁶⁸ *Egils Saga (Old Norse)*. (JiaHu Books, 2013), 115.

⁶⁹ Ármann Jakobsson. “Introduction: Saga Criticism” in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Saga*. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 32.

⁷⁰ McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 48.

historians that describe *berserkir*, one even citing their transformation as a form of magic itself.⁷¹ In the saga, it is not stated that Sigmund and Sinfjotli are such warriors, but they do partake in the type of animalistic shape-shifting that often takes place when someone “goes berserk” by putting on wolf’s skin.⁷² They are not shunned by their community for this. Instead, they are revered as main characters of the saga, as *berserkir* are in most sagas and medieval Scandinavian society in general as “models of manliness”⁷³ in opposition to *ergi*.⁷⁴ The women of the saga, on the other hand, are often the receivers of brutal punishments, despite warning their male counterparts of certain doom. By investigating the relationships each practitioner of magic has with one another and their surroundings, I will be able to categorize the roles of men and women in medieval Icelandic society, and the consequences of breaking them.

The cornerstone for these gender roles in the practice of magic is internalize homophobia within the post-Viking world. Gregory Herek has completed sociological work on the reasons why homophobia arises. He specifically focuses on the modern United States, but I believe many of his findings can be applied to medieval Icelandic society. In his discussion of cultural contexts and attitudes, he traces the origin of homophobia to the hetero/homosexual dichotomy of Europe and the Christian revolution.⁷⁵ However, he adds that sexual attitudes should be viewed in their cultural contexts – that the ways in which cultures address sexuality are not universal.⁷⁶ He notes

⁷¹ McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 49; Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 105.

⁷² Another term for berserkir was *ulfhedhar*, or “wolf-skins.” Wolves were so heavily associated with these men that it was common to see warriors named “wolf,” like Egil Skalla-Grimr’s grandfather, Kveld-Ulfr. Sometimes men who wear wolf-skins are considered a subcategory of *berserkirs*, but for now, I will keep them in the same category. McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 48; *The Saga of the Volsungs*. trans. by Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 11; Carol Parrish Jamison, “Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges.” *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 21; Ármann Jakobsson, “Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in *Egils saga*” in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 145; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007): 281.

⁷³ McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 49.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 36; Jakobsson, “Beast and Man” 145.

⁷⁵ Gregory M. Herek. ““Beyond “Homophobia”: A Social Psychological Perspective on Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 10, no. 1-2 (1984): 3, 5.

⁷⁶ Herek. “Beyond “Homophobia,”” 4.

that homophobia stems from three different types of attitudes: experiential, defensive, and symbolic. The latter two are present within the sagas. Herek defines defensive attitudes towards gay people as perceptions of personal threat and feelings of inadequacy from association with homosexual characteristics.⁷⁷ This results in negative and often violent attitudes towards gay people themselves, releasing the unconscious inner conflict and anxiety they face. He defines symbolic homophobia as the feeling that people's cherished values are being illegitimately changed.⁷⁸ Defense mechanisms are expressed in Icelandic sagas through the ideas and actions of characters; symbolic disagreements are present through the cultural contexts the sagas were written under.

Hávamál

Hávamál is often cited as being the direct word of Odin. It is here that we can gain a personal glimpse into his character. Since he is known as the god of wisdom, it is no surprise that he spends the vast majority of the poem relaying advice to the audience. The entire section of *Loddfáfnismál* ("Words to Loddfáfnir") has each stanza beginning with "*Ráðum 'k þér Loddfáfnir,*" or "I counsel you, Loddfáfnir," and stretches from stanzas 111-137.⁷⁹ The advice that Odin gives is very male-oriented, with more focus on male friendship and travel than anything else. He imparts knowledge on how to be the ideal man, detailing how to be a good guest, host, and avenger of wrongdoings. Odin sometimes contradicts himself, notably and ironically, about knowledge. He puts an emphasis on being wise and witty, but states in stanza 54:

⁷⁷ Herek, "Beyond "Homophobia," 10.

⁷⁸ Herek, "Beyond Homophobia," 12.

⁷⁹ *Hávamál*. trans. Jackson Crawford. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2019), 55-71.

*Meðalsnotr
skyli manna hverr,
æva til snort sé.
Þeim er fryða
fegrst at lifa
er vel mart vitu.*

(You should be / only a little wise / never too wise. / The happiest people / throughout their lives / are those who know just enough.)⁸⁰

How does one go about measuring the amount of wisdom one should obtain? The most helpful answer can be found by looking at Odin's definition of wisdom. In *Hávamál*, he defines wisdom through literacy and wariness. Odin measures literacy through reading, understanding, and correctly using runes. As discussed in chapter one, in Nordic lore, runes were learned by Odin after he sacrificed himself to himself by hanging from a tree for nine nights.⁸¹ Among many other uses, runes were used for magic spells, connecting him with witchcraft in a way that other gods in the Norse pantheon are not. While runes were not the only way that magic existed in Norse culture, they are often represented in conjunction with magic in sagas and poems.

Hávamál's final section, *Rúnatal*, or "Word/Account of the Runes," details the eighteen spells that Odin knows and what they are used for. However, as stated previously, magic was normally reserved for females, goddesses or mortals alike. It seems suspicious in a culture so focused on masculinity that one of the chief gods would be associated with such a feminine practice. Ármann Jakobsson notes that Odin practices *seiðr* in *Ynglinga saga*.⁸² If any other man was known for practicing *seiðr*, they would be labelled as a *seiðmaðr*, a man who practices women's magic and *ergi*. But Odin is not labelled this way. He is seen as an initiator into

⁸⁰ *Hávamál*, trans. Jackson Crawford, 27.

⁸¹ *Hávamál*, trans. Jackson Crawford, 71-3.

⁸² Jakobsson, "Two Wise Women and Their Young Apprentice," 85.

manhood.⁸³ Does Odin have any other effeminate traits, or is the practice of magic the only “feminine” quality about him, disqualifying him from *níð* territory? In *Hávamál*, he does not take the passive role around Billing’s daughter, pursuing her only to be driven away by an army of men.⁸⁴ Soon after relaying the encounter, he gives advice to “Loddfáfnir” in stanzas 113-4:

*Ráðum ’k þér, Loddfáfnir,
at þu ráð nemir,
njóta mundu ef þú nemr,
þér munu góð ef þú getr:
Fjolkunnigri konu
skal-at-tu í faðmi sofa,
svá at hon lyki þik liðum*

*Hon svá gørir
at þú gáir eigi
þings né þjóðans máls
mat þú vill-at
né mannkis gaman,
ferr þú sorgafullr at sofa.*

(I counsel you, Loodfáfnir / if you’ll take my advice / you’ll profit if you learn it / it’ll do you good to remember it: / Do not sleep in the arms / of a sorceress / or else she will lock your limbs.

She will enchant you / so that you won’t care / for advice or a powerful man’s words; / you will neither want food / not the pleasure of a friends’ company / and you will sleep full of sorrow.)⁸⁵

It should be noted that Crawford translates *konu* here to sorceress, instead of the literal definition, woman. This isn’t uncommon; many sources translate *kona* to witch or sorceress because of the inherent connection between witchcraft and women.⁸⁶ It is only heightened in these two stanzas by its collocates “lock your limbs” and “enchant.” With that, there is still a lot of irony in Odin’s advice. As someone who is known for enchanting women often,⁸⁷ he talks

⁸³ Loren C. Gruber “The Rites of Passage: “Hávamál” Stanzas 1-5,” *Scandinavian Studies* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 337.

⁸⁴ *Hávamál*, trans. Jackson Crawford, 49.

⁸⁵ *Hávamál*, 57.

⁸⁶ Albert Morey Sturtevant, “A Note on the *Hárbarðsljóð*,” *Publications of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study* 1, no. 4 (November 1913): 160.

⁸⁷ Sturtevant, “A Note on the *Hárbarðsljóð*,” 161.

about them in a way that is misogynistic and self-serving. We see this repeatedly both in *Hávamál* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, where Odin describes the sexual exploitations he took with women in the past.⁸⁸ Conquering women was common among Viking men, as it was considered good for their political reputation, social reputation, and overall survival.⁸⁹ While partaking in these events aligns with Odin's message of "a good reputation never dies for the one who earns it well," boasting about it seems to contradict his repetitive message of "say something useful or stay quiet."⁹⁰ By not taking his own advice, he is setting not only a bad example, but exposing an ulterior motive in gloating: saving face.

Volsunga saga

Volsunga saga is one of the few sagas that showcases both kinds of magic through its characters. It allows for the showcase of the dichotomy between each of the practitioners, especially with the inclusion of Odin as a guide throughout the plot. This saga is a microcosm of the stereotypes of *seiðr* and *berserkirs* and how they perform their roles within Viking society.

In nearly every saga, there is a *seiðr* character. The vast majority of the time, they're women. In *Volsunga saga*, there are several women inside and outside the Volsungs' family that are magic practitioners, but the two I want to focus on in this story are Brynhild and Grímhild. Brynhild is younger, with a reputation for being beautiful and wise,⁹¹ while Grímhild, mother to Guðrún and mother-in-law to Sigurd, is immediately marked as a witch and "a cruel-minded woman."⁹² They both influence the plot in negative ways, regardless of intention. This dichotomy of an older witch, or a crone, and a younger witch being foils of one another, is a

⁸⁸ Carol J. Clover, "HÁRBARDSLJÓÐ AS GENERIC FARCE." *Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 131; Sturtevant, "A Note on the *Hárbarðsljóð*, 158.

⁸⁹ Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard. "Polygyny, Concubinage, and the Social Lives of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13, no. 1 (January 2017): 169.

⁹⁰ *Hávamál*, 37, 11.

⁹¹ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 35.

⁹² *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 45.

common trope in the Icelandic sagas. Jakobsson notes that this is present in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where two witches fight over a young male apprentice.⁹³ Regardless, women and/or practitioners of magic are seen as outcast, as was anyone who practiced magic during this time.⁹⁴ Even in *Volsunga saga*, when any woman gives advice, it is immediately discarded by the men in the room. Take for example, when Guðrún's brothers are planning a battle against King Atli, she suggests peaceful negotiations, which they "rejected...immediately,"⁹⁵ even though time and time again she had been proven right in her judgements. She follows along with them anyway, and they are unsuccessful in winning the battle. Most of the tragedies in this saga can be avoided by the wise words of the female characters, but they are shunned anyway. She remarks to King Atli, who mocks her about her brothers' deaths, in the next chapter that "women are often overpowered by men's violence, and now all my kin are dead, and now I have you to obey."⁹⁶ The women of the sagas are not ignorant, and they are well aware of their secondary status within society. Magic could be seen as a way for women to have agency against the chains that held them down. While not all the women in *Volsunga saga* are considered *seiðrs*, they're allowed to have a say, even if it is often ignored, through the use of dream prophecy and other actions that by their standards would be considered magic. None of the other men in the saga do dream readings or predict the future in the way that the women do, and they certainly don't concoct cursed meads like Grímhild.

On the other hand, and as previously mentioned, some historians considered *berserkirs* as practitioners of magic. While *berserkirs* are not explicitly named in this saga, there is one clear

⁹³ Jakobsson, "Two Wise Women," 80.

⁹⁴ When a *seið* died, their grave was set apart as a result of them being outcasted so much in society. McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 47; Jakobsson, "The Trollish Acts," 113.

⁹⁵ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 73.

⁹⁶ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 76.

example two characters performing the same actions as a *berserkir* would. Sigmund and Sinfjotli, who go to rob people in the forest (this was common practice and was not looked down upon as being immoral in medieval Scandinavian society), find two princes asleep in a house, who have wolfskins hung up near them. The two men took them, even though they could not be taken off for ten days. Suddenly, “their voices were also changed into wolves’ howls, although they both understood each other.”⁹⁷ On the tenth day, once they are able to take off the skins, they “curse them, saying they would never cause anyone harm again.”⁹⁸ The story doesn’t specify what they did to the skins to curse them, whether there was any type of magic involved, or just a passing statement. Regardless, cursing is normally associated with magic, and they are not criticized either for wearing the wolf-skins or cursing them afterwards. In contrast, the following sentence states how “during this time of bad fate, they did many brave things in Siggeir’s land.”⁹⁹ They are praised for their accomplishments while until the spell of the wolf-skins, as *berserkir* always are. In the context of the saga, they are not practicing magic at all, they are just doing what they can to survive such harsh conditions.

Odin’s character in *Volsunga saga* is much less involved in the plot than he is in *Hávamál*. However, this is pretty common of him, since typically he only helps others when it benefits him, often at the expense of those involved. He acts as an invisible hand, offering his services of magic, wisdom, and guidance from time to time, though largely in the beginning of the saga. For example, after Sigmund in his *berserkir* form accidentally bites Sinfjotli in the throat, a raven, a typical messenger of Odin (and is sometimes used to represent Odin himself), comes by with a leaf that cures his wound. Odin needed both of them to live because it would allow for

⁹⁷ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 11.

⁹⁸ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 12.

⁹⁹ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 12.

his bloodline to continue. Additionally, he could have had the raven come by at any time to give them this leaf, but that's the point of Sigmund taking his son out in the forest in the first place: to accustom them to the hardships of being a warrior.¹⁰⁰ This part of the process seems necessary, as a part of initiation into becoming a man.¹⁰¹ Odin cares more about them gaining wisdom than about the possibility of them dying, especially in a situation where gender roles are enforced, even if their lives are put at risk.

Discussion and Analysis

The rules are laid out pretty plainly in *Volsunga saga*: women are to practice their magic in a separate space, and men are not to pay attention to them. The practice of magic in acts such as cursing meads, prophesizing the future, and even casting spells using runes, is a woman's work.¹⁰² In Old Norse literature, when mortal men practice magic the way Odin does, it is seen as "so queer that men cannot do it without shame so that the goddesses had to learn this skill."¹⁰³ In fact, Jakobsson points out that men featured in the sagas often reject magic in favor of *karlmennska*, or manliness.¹⁰⁴ For example, in *Egils saga*, Egil works with the many definitions of *níð* in the *níðstöng* scene.¹⁰⁵ He exhibits overtly aggressive and defensive behavior under Herek's definitions since his wellbeing and character are under attack. Similarly to Odin, Egil also practices magic, and is seen doing so in multiple scenes. Egil took the act of being poisoned to take on multiple meanings – as meant to harm him physically and to call into question his masculinity. This interpretation is likely the case, as we see double entendres laden throughout

¹⁰⁰ Guðmundsdóttir, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," 284.

¹⁰¹ In certain parts of Scandinavia, *berserkirs* did take part in initiations in secret male societies, but by the time of the sagas' recordings, this was considered a purely literary occurrence. Pulsiano and Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia.*, s.v. "Berserkr."

¹⁰² In the chapter where Brynhild meets Sigurd, she tells

¹⁰³ Jakobsson, "Two Wise Women," 85.

¹⁰⁴ Jakobsson, "Two Wise Women," 86.

¹⁰⁵ MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects*, 236.

Egils saga.¹⁰⁶ In *The Saga of Harald the Fair-Hair*, when King Harald finds out his son practices magic, he has his other son burn the other alive along with 80 other “*seið-men*” in the hall where they gathered.¹⁰⁷ If the consequences of men practicing magic are so egregious, why is Odin exempt from this criticism? Why does he get to practice magic in a way that mortal men cannot? The two main reasons I would like to suggest are his relationship with the everyday medieval Icelanders and the cultural hierarchy of reputation.

To begin, Odin is not representative of the quintessential, masculine man. In reality, most of the gods were not the most sexually “moral” individuals. Jakobsson notes that “the gods may not have been restricted by the moral code which applies to humans.”¹⁰⁸ In his article, “The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi” he lists each of the Norse gods’ that have committed questionable sexual acts canonically, which include incest, homosexuality and pedophilia, singling out “Njǫrðr [who] has not only had children with his sister but also indulged in freakish sexual games with the otherwise unknown *Hymis meyjar* who seem to have urinated in his mouth.”¹⁰⁹ The only god that Jakobsson does not mention in the slew of amoral gods, is Thor, the people’s god, who was seen as a paragon of *karlsmennska*. The majority of people subscribed to Thor and asked him for strength and safety in battle.¹¹⁰ In contrast, laypeople rarely associated with or praised Odin; he represented the elite, the literate, the powerful. The origin of Odin’s status can be attributed to the Romans, who Anders Ardén notes receives his fatherly rank among the gods as influence from the Roman pantheon’s

¹⁰⁶ Carl Phepstead, “Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders.” *Exemplaria* 19, no. 3 (2007): 425.

¹⁰⁷ McCoy, *The Viking Spirit*, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Jakobsson, “The Trollish Acts,” 115.

¹⁰⁹ Jakobsson, “The Trollish Acts,” 115.

¹¹⁰ Daniel McCoy, “The Vikings’ Conversion to Christianity,” Norse Mythology for Smart People, last modified 2019. <https://norse-mythology.org/the-vikings-conversion-to-christianity/>.

model.¹¹¹ Albert Sturtevant contrasts Thor and Odin, pointing out that in the literature, Thor is associated with stupidity and clumsiness, while Odin is associated with higher intellectual ability and cultural superiority.¹¹² Distaste for homosexuality arose through Christianity, and there seems to be little mention of it in a negative context before Christianity's introduction.¹¹³ Writing sagas was still a project of the elite and scholarly under the Christian church and law.¹¹⁴ So again, we must ask why would Odin be associated with magic, something that would be considered feminine, old, and primitive? It makes little sense coming from the cultural influence of Christianity that has historically shunned homosexuality.

There are two parts to this answer. The first part is that the gods followed different rules. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of the gods had partaken in questionable sexual activity, things that might get a mere mortal executed. Jakobsson does indicate that the gods are not supposed to be exemplars for the morals that their society carries, but they are simply characters as well.¹¹⁵ With that, comes the second part of this answer: people have their own opinions and views about the gods. Quite frankly, it makes more sense that the general public of medieval Iceland did hold an unsavory view of Odin. In the medieval era, the divide between the rich and the poor was growing wider and more hostile.¹¹⁶ The elite were characterized as Odinic, living in luxuries and fighting more with words than swords, being more passive than active.¹¹⁷ In sagas and poems, it is more common that you see someone berating another for having Odinic

¹¹¹ Anders Andrén. "Behind "Heathendom": Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion." *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2005): 128.

¹¹² Sturtevant, "A Note on the *Hárbarðsljóð*," 157.

¹¹³ Halsall, "The Vikings and Homosexuality."

¹¹⁴ Skaldic poetry can be found in peace treaties and charters. It was often used to prove historical events as well. Mats Malm, "Skalds, Runes, and Voice." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010): 135; Herek "Beyond "Homosexuality,"" 5.

¹¹⁵ Jakobsson, "The Trollish Acts," 115.

¹¹⁶ Derek McCoy, "Viking Political Institutions," Norse Mythology for Smart People, last modified 2019. <https://norse-mythology.org/viking-political-institutions/>.

¹¹⁷ Clover, "*HÁRBARDSLJÓÐ* AS GENERIC FARCE," 129.

qualities like poetic fluency and magic knowledge rather than favoring it.¹¹⁸ Parallels can be seen in Egil's reactions and characteristics in *Egils saga*. With the construction of the *níðstöng*, Egil not only defends himself, but takes part in a Freudian sense of “phallic aggression” towards the king.¹¹⁹ This is one further step of defensiveness from Egil. Not only must he reject the idea of passive homosexuality, but project it onto someone else to quell his inner anxieties of being associated with *ergi* behavior, like magic. Odin doesn't erect a *níðstöng* for accusers – his explicit descriptions of his sexual history with women can be viewed as a verbal phallic aggression, or *tungunið*.¹²⁰ While Odin is an example of a god standing up for his reputation, Egil is a concrete example of how men should treat those assumptions because he is a mortal. Both Odin and Egil perpetuate homophobia through their attitudes towards the possibility of being called *ergi* because of their magical practices. Egil is more reactionary, while Odin stops the rumors before they start.

However, what was more important to society was standing up for yourself, less so about sexual preferences.¹²¹ It would make more sense that the elite were depicting Odin as an all-wise being to save their reputation. Medieval Icelandic culture wanted people to express their own reputations favorably, as seen in *Hávamál* and *Volsunga saga*. By providing multiple examples of Odin standing up for his reputation and practicing common defense mechanisms through projection, it eliminates the possibility of passive homosexual behavior, and therefore creating a more favorable image of people who were considered “Odinic.” Why did the rulers of Iceland need to create a favorable image of themselves? In typical medieval societies, it was only the

¹¹⁸ Clover, “HÁRBARDSLJÓÐ AS GENERIC FARCE,” 129.

¹¹⁹ Phelpsstead, “Size Matters,” 426.

¹²⁰ MacLeod and Mees describe *tungunið* as “verbal scorn,” or a type of *níð* that is exclusively verbal. *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects*, 236.

¹²¹ Halsall, “The Vikings and Homosexuality.”

people associated with the king and the clergy that could read – the majority of laypeople were illiterate. However, Iceland had an unusually high rate of literacy, most likely due to the lack of a centralized monarchy.¹²² Not only were the king’s men reading the sagas, but parts of the general public were, too. Since Scandinavian societies relied heavily on oral tradition, these stories were passed down from generation to generation. Theoretically, if you had asked a medieval, illiterate, Icelandic farmer if they had read *Egils saga*, *Volsunga saga*, or *Hávamál*, they would say no, but they had heard it through nights of storytelling with friends. The authors of medieval Icelandic sagas and poems were solidifying a version of the story that suited them the best. Additionally, they were carving out what were acceptable actions to take, what roles were to be performed, in order to make Iceland run smoothly. Writers of the sagas, while taking heavy influence from the legends of pagan times, were more focused on the present, and merged the two together to encapsulate a sense of their culture. They were ahead of their time by documenting a complex mesh of Scandinavian culture that existed pre and post-Christianity’s introduction.

The next step in research would be to examine the change in Odin’s characterization over time, from the Viking Age to medieval sagas. Only then can we pinpoint the exact nature of Odin’s sexuality in regard to his magical practices and how the general public viewed his involvement with magic. This is admittedly difficult, since so few records exist from the Viking Age proper.¹²³ However, through the careful analysis of runic inscriptions, manuscripts written about the Vikings from other civilizations, and in-depth literary analyses of poems and sagas thought to have older origins, I believe that it isn’t out of the realm of possibility that research

¹²² Joseph Harris, “Romancing the Rune: Aspects of Literacy in Early Scandinavian Orality,” *Università degli Studi di Messina: Messanae Universitas Studiorum* (1994): 322; McCoy, “Viking Political Institutions.”

¹²³ Halsall, “The Vikings and Homosexuality.”

might produce the answer. This future research would expand our ideas of the roles and standards of men and women within medieval Icelandic society.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The goal of this project is to view the linguistic and literary scope of how magic was perceived in medieval Iceland through the literature produced during the time. The main texts I review are *Hávamál*, *Egils saga*, and *Volsunga saga*, with inclusions and comparisons to other texts produced during the same time. In my first chapter, I discuss how runes, the logographic predecessor of the Latin script in Scandinavia, are written and how that affects the audiences' view of runes. In my second chapter, I discuss how specific characters, like Sigmund, Odin, Brynhild, and Egil are depicted in the sagas for using magic, which leads to an overall exclusion of mortals using magic, reserving the practice for the gods. An overall implication is that Christian Icelandic writers seem to have portrayed runes in a distorted and somewhat fantastic manner, perhaps in an effort to steer their audiences away from genuine pagan magical practices, or else simply by misunderstanding the bits of folklore that preserved fractured memories of pagan magic. The authors of medieval Icelandic sagas and poems were Christian, as Iceland had started its conversion process 200-300 years prior to this Icelandic renaissance of sorts. By writing magic from an inherently Christian lens, audiences are insulated from the accuracies of runes and magical practices.

My interest in this project stems from an observation I have made about the Norse neo-pagan community. As mentioned in the introduction, the increased interest in medieval Icelandic literature by neo-pagans has caused a romanticization of the lifestyles portrayed in these texts. Norse neo-pagans often take the advice given in *Hávamál* and other popular texts like the *Prose Edda* literally instead of metaphorically as I have suggested these texts should be interpreted. Taking these exaggerated depictions as truths can result in the consequence of Norse neo-pagans glorifying a culture that is homophobic, misogynistic, and overall exclusionary. In my second chapter, I talk of how the characters in *Volsunga saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Hávamál* perpetuate ideas

of homophobia and misogyny in the context of magic by excluding men and women from the practice. Much of the advice Odin gives in *Hávamál* is derogatory towards women, saying a man cannot trust a woman's word, or that they are simply witches who are there to hurt men. In giving this advice, paired with characters in *Volsunga saga* and *Egils saga* actively utilizing this advice, we see how normalized this behavior becomes if it is romanticized and taken as factual today. Yet my research shows that this exclusionary act is a back-projection upon Norse paganism, distorted and magnified by Christian writers. With romanticization comes superiority, thinking that the culture portrayed by medieval Icelanders is the best culture, and that the heritage and practices should be continued and used over other, more inclusive practices. It is no coincidence that you often see Neo-Nazis wearing a Mjölnir (Thor's hammer) necklace or dawning tattoos of runes next to a swastika. I took on this project to educate myself and others about the inherent flaws in the logic surrounding Norse neo-pagans that can come from taking these texts as face value and uncritically. If we do not educate ourselves in understanding the nuances surrounding the creation and transmission of these pieces of Icelandic literature, it can result in incredibly damaging ideologies within and outside the neo-pagan community.

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