MAIDEN WARRIORS AND OTHER SONS

Carol J. Clover, University of California, Berkeley

Et ne quis hunc bellis sexum insudasse miretur, quaedam de talium feminarum condicio et moribus compendio modicae digressionis expe-diam. Fuere quondam apud Danos feminae, quae formam suam in virilem habitum convertentes omnia paene temporum momenta ad ex-coledam militiam conferebant, ne virtutis nervos luxuriae contagione hebetari paterentur. Siquidem delicatum vivendi genus perosae corpus animumque patientia ac labore durare solebant tamquam femineae levi-tatis mollitiem abdicantes muliere ingenium virili uti saevitia cogebant. Sed et tanta cura rei militaris notiitiam captabant, ut feminas exquisse quivis putaret. Praecipue vero, quibus aut ingeni vigour aut decora corporum proceritas erat, id vitae genus incedere consueverant. Hae ergo, perinde ac nativae condicionis immemores rigoremque blanditis ante-ferentes, bella pro basiis intentabant sanguinemque, non oscula delibantes armorum potius quam amorum officia frequentabant manusque, quas in telas aptare debuerant, telorum obsequis exhibebant, ut iam non lecto, sed leto studentes spiculis appeterent, quos mulcere specie potuissent.

—Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum

1 *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. C. Knabe and Paul Herrmann, rev. Jørgen Olrik and H. Raeder (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1951), 7:6. Hereafter cited as Saxo. "In case anyone is marveling that this sex should have sweated in warfare, let me di-gress briefly to explain the character and behavior of such females. There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers' skills; they did not want the sinews of their valour to lose tautness and be infected by self-indulgence. Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness. They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves. Those especially who had forceful personalities or were tall and elegant embarked on this way of life. And if they were forgetful of their true selves they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm's embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances" (Translation from *Saxo Grammaticus: History of the Danes*, tr. Peter Fisher and ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson [Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979], p. 212). Hereafter cited as Fisher. On this passage, and on Saxos shield maidens in general, see H. N. Holmqvist-Larsen, *Mør, skjoldmør og krigere: En studie i og omkring 7. bog af Saxon Gesta Danorum* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 1983), esp. Ch. 4 ("Skjoldmådigevisionen"). Holmqvist-Larsen makes a strong case for Saxos familiarity with medieval traditions of *amazones* and *viragues* and his echoing of those traditions in the representation of his own shield maidens. There are, however, fundamental differences, from which we may conclude that Saxos shield maidens are not derivative but stand on their own traditional feet. As Holmqvist-Larsen puts it, Saxo "omtolker det nordiske i lyset af det antikke" (p. 45).
Legends of militant women crop up here and there in Germanic literature, above all Old Norse. Like their cousins the Greek amazons, the “shield maidens” of the North have been consigned, by literary historians, to the realm of literary fantasy. Creatures of the imagination they may be, at least in the form they have come down to us (mostly in the historically unreliable fornaldrarsögur and the equivalent stories of Saxo); but that should not mean, as for the most part it has meant in Old Norse literary criticism, that they are therefore beyond discussion. On the contrary, a collective fantasy has much to tell us about the underlying tensions of the society that produced it; and when the subject is one such as women, which the “legitimate” sources treat only scantily, the literary fantasy takes on a special importance. Medieval literature is, after all, rich in transvestite traditions in both the religious and the secular spheres (e.g., female monks, amazons, viragines, Joan of Arc), and one need not look very far or deep to see that the shield maiden stories of the North share with other “women-on-top” traditions (as Natalie Davis has termed them) an underlying concern with the basic issue of where one sex stops and the other begins—not only psychosexually, but also socially. In the case of a certain set of shield-maiden stories we can go even further, for an analysis of their causal logic first in a cross-cultural and then in a legal context leads us beyond a general insight into the Norse sense of sexual borders to a specific insight into the particular role of certain women in the early Scandinavian world of bloodfeud.

MAIDEN WARRIORS

The story-type I have in mind is that of the maiden warrior: “maiden” because she is usually young and either repudiates or defers or enters reluctantly into marriage, and “warrior” because at least for a time she dresses and arms herself as a man and enrolls in the martial life. The


3 Natalie Zemon Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975), Ch. 5.

4 I understand the maiden-warrior theme to be a subtype of the shield-maiden theme. The latter term is used loosely in the literature to refer to any and all women who take up the sword or associate themselves with warfare or merely behave in un-feminine ways, however briefly and for whatever reason. Other subtypes of the shield maiden include the valkyrie, the avenging mother, and the maiden king (see n. 12 below).
most dramatic of the maiden-warrior stories is that of Hervör, told in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.

Hervör is the only child of Angantýr, who falls in battle before she is born. She is brought up in her maternal grandfather’s household and quickly shows herself able with bow, shield, and sword than with needlework. After a stint as a mugger (dressed and armed as a man, she kills people for their money), she learns who her father was and determines to seek out his grave on Samsey. “Bú þú á öllu,” she says (in verse) to her mother, “sem þú son mundir”; and under the name “Hervarör” she joins up with, and eventually becomes head of, a band of vikings. They come one day to Samsey, and at sunset Hervör makes her way on to the island, past a guardian, through the circle of flames, to her father’s barrow. She enters and initiates the famous daughter-father verse dialogue known as the “Waking of Angantýr.” The bone of contention is the sword Tyrfingr, which has gone to the grave with Angantýr. Hervör steadfastly insists, in the face of her father’s wrath, prevarications, and prophecies of doom, that the sword is by rights hers, but Angantýr refuses to hand it over, claiming, among other things, that “no woman in the world would dare to hold it in her hand.” In the end Hervör prevails, and armed with Tyrfingr re-enters the world of the living. She continues with her masculine adventures until, one day, she settles down, subsequently marries, and has two sons, of whom one, Heiðrek, is the saga’s main character.

The interpretation of this plot likely to spring first to the modern mind is a psychosexual one. Hervör is one of those women who wishes she weren’t, and she repudiates her femaleness by taking on the appearance, behavior, and name of the male—she gives over, in the language of the tale, the needle for the sword. Symbolically seen, the

---


5 I have used the dual-language edition *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra / The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, tr. and ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1960). Tolkien bases his text on the *R* redaction, filling in the lacuna from *U* and supplying the end from *U*203. References to other *fornaldarsögur* are to the edition of Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagafélag, 1954–1959), hereafter cited as *FSN*. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
struggle with her dead father over the sword is a struggle for phallic authority. Only when she comes to the point where she can have sons of her own (in psychoanalytic terms the proper resolution of the phallic conflict) does she resign herself to femaleness. So neat an example is Hervör's story of what Freud termed the masculinity complex that many readers will be tempted to let it stand there, as a crystalline realization of a human universal.

But is it so clear-cut? If we keep in mind that Hervör's story is not a case history but a fictional projection, and that it stands not alone but in a context of equivalent and linked plots, we may perceive her situation in a somewhat different light—a light more medieval than modern, and more anthropological than psychoanalytic.

_Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks_ is above all a narrative of genealogy and inheritance. It tells, in the main, the story of five generations: Arngrímur, who gets the sword Tyrfingr (depending on the version) either through marriage to Sigrlami's daughter or by slaying Sigrlami and seizing sword and daughter; his son Angantyr, who inherits it from Arngrímur; Hervör, who "inherits" it from her father Angantyr; her son Heiðrekr, who inherits from Hervör; and finally his son Angantyr, who avenges his father's death and retrieves the sword from his slayers.6 Tyrfingr is thus more than a sword, more than a phallic symbol, and more than a literary binding device. It is the emblematic representation of the larger patrimony—not only treasures and lands, but family name and ancestral spirit—that each generation must secure for itself and pass on to the next. By generation, of course, is meant son or sons (or perhaps son- or sons-in-law), at least in the normal and preferable case. So it works in _Heiðreks saga_ for four of the five generations. It is in the third generation that the line breaks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arngrímur</th>
<th>male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angantyr</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hervör</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heiðrekr</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angantyr</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The circumstances leading to this third-generation anomaly are clear enough. Hervör's father Angantyr was killed shortly after his

6 This genealogy has been scrutinized by generations of scholars in an effort to pin down its historical background and relation to Continental and British sources. This line of inquiry does not concern us here (for a selective bibliography see Tolkien's introduction, pp. xxxvi–xxxviii) though we may note that more than one critic has concluded that Hervör Heiðreksdóttir is the original figure and that our Hervör (Angantyr's daughter) is a fictional back formation. See especially Kemp Malone, "Widsith and the Hervorarsaga," *PMLA*, 40 (1925), 709–813, esp. 776–79.
marriage, and his pregnant wife gave birth to their one and only child. In the absence of brothers (and in the absence of paternal uncles, who were also slain, with Angantýr, on Samsey), Hervör thus stands as the sole survivor of her father's illustrious line. Hervör's own son Heiðrekr will also be illustrious, of course, as will his son Angantýr. For better or worse, then, the generation of Angantýr Arngrímsson and the generation of Heiðrekr must, if they are to be linked at all, be linked through Hervör, the sole representative of the intermediate generation. Herein lies the root explanation of Hervör's masculinity. So powerful is the principle of male inheritance that when it necessarily passes through the female, she must become, in legend if not in life, a functional son. The saga itself says as much. "Equip me as you would a son," she says to her mother as she readies herself to leave home in the quest for her father's grave. And the first thing she does when she confronts her dead father on Samsey is to state her relationship and her claim: "Vaki þú, Angantýr, / vekr þík Hervör, / eingadóttir / ykkr Sváfu; / seldu ór haugi / hvassan mæki, / þann er Sigrlama / slógu dvergar." Chanting the names of her dead uncles and ancestors, she threatens to curse the entire line if she is not acknowledged as proper heir. To Angantýr's protestation that what she wants, the sword Tyr-fingr, was taken by his slayers, she responds: "Segir þú eigi satt / . . . / trauðr ertu / arf at veita / eingabarni," at which point the barrow opens and the flames blaze up. For his part, Angantýr repeatedly calls her daughter, even as he relinquishes the sword and grants her the strength (afl) and bold spirit (eljun) that are the legacy of Arngrím's sons: "Far vel, dóttir, / fljótt gæfa ek þér / tólf manna fjór / ef þú trúu mættir, / afl ok eljun, allt it góða, / þat er synir Arngrims / at sik leiðu."

Just what genetic notions underlie this and other genealogical stories in early Scandinavian literature is not clear, but I have the impression that the idea of latent or recessive features, physical or characterological, was undeveloped; inherited qualities seem to manifest themselves in some degree in every generation. The qualities that Angantýr now bestows as the "legacy of Arngrím's sons," afl and eljun, are emphatically "male" qualities. They may ultimately be "intended" for Hervör's future sons and their sons on down the line (as Angantýr himself points out) but in the meantime they must assert themselves in Hervör herself (as indeed they already have). As Hervör turns to leave the barrow, she utters a final stanza in which she blesses her father and refers to herself as "between worlds" ("helzt þöttumst nú / heima í millum, / er mik umhverfís / eldar brunnu"). Indeed she is between worlds: as the genetic conduit between the dead father and the un-
born son, she bridges the worlds of male and female, living and dead, past and future. Only when she becomes fully nubile and hence ready to bear a male heir on whom the ancestral legacy will be unloaded, as it were, can Hervör withdraw from the male sphere and return to the female one. But until she is ready to produce another “son of Arngrímr,” she must function, in the genealogical breach, as a “son of Arngrímr” herself.7 It is a performance on which the heroic stature of her future son Heiðrekr, and of his sons and their sons, quite literally depends.8

Hervör may be the most elaborately drawn functional son in Norse literature, but she is by no means the only one. A similar story is played out on the mythological level by Skaði, who (as Snorri tells it) upon the death of her father Þjazi, “took helmet, byrnie, and a complete set of weapons and went to Ásgárðr to avenge her father” (“Skaði, dóttir Þjazas jotuns, tók hjálm ok brynjú ok òll herváp ok ferr til Ásgárðs at hefa fóður sins”).9 She settles for a husband, Njörðr, but the marriage founders on the question of where to live. Njörðr wants to be near the sea, while Skaði “wanted to have the homestead her father had owned, in the mountains at the place called Prymheimr” (“Skaði vill hafa bústað þann er átt hafði faðir hennar. Pat er á fjöllum nökkurum, þar sem heitir Prymheimr”).10 Snorri does not say in so many words that Skaði is a sole heir, but such is clearly implied by the fact that the task of vengeance and the paternal inheritance both devolve on her.

More explicit is the case of Þornbjörg in Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar.11 The only child of King Eirekr of Sweden and his wife (“þau hóðu átt eina dóttur barna, sú er Þornbjörg hét”), she spends her girlhood pursuing the martial arts. When her father objects to her masculine

7 I have confined myself here to those examples in which the genealogical breach is either explicit or unambiguously implied.
8 Melissa Berman (Senior Thesis, Harvard University, 1977) makes the point that Hervör’s narrative stint is very much like those of her male ancestors and progeny. “In every generation of the story, the problem of the hero’s relationship to society is brought out through the repeating folk pattern of the fatherless hero’s maturation, which seems always to involve an inability to deal with normal society, manifested by violence, unnatural acts, pride, and often, supernatural wisdom. These elements play a part in each of the four [main generational] units in HSH” (p. 42). It might also be pointed out in this connection that in medieval medical thought, children were commonly believed, as Vern L. Bullough put it, “to resemble their fathers if the paternal seeds were stronger, the mother if the maternal ones were.” (“Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” Marriage in the Middle Ages, Viator, 4 (1973), 497.8
10 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, p. 30.
11 FSN IV, esp. Chs. 4–5.
interests, she replies: “Nú með því at þú hefi eigi meir en eins manns líf til ríkisstjórnar ok ek er nú þitt einberini ok á allan arf efir þíð, má vera, at ek þurfi þetta ríki at verja fyrir konungum eða konungs-num, ef ek missi þín við” (Ch. 4). Her father provides her with men and lands; and she adopts male dress and name (Þórbergr) and is known as king. At this point in the story (as in several of the other cases), the warrior-maiden or functional-son theme merges with the maiden-king (meikongr) theme—the haughty woman who swears not to marry and defeats or kills her suitors.12 The next several chapters are given over to the efforts, finally successful, of the hero Hrólfr Gautreksson to bend Þornbjörg to his will.

One of Saxo's several shield maidens is Ladgerda, whom Ragnar Shaggy-Breeks encounters on his visit to Norway shortly after the death of King Sivard.13 Like other well-born Norwegian women, Ladgerda has assumed male dress for self-protection. Ragnar does not hesitate to make use of the military services of these female warriors in his quest for vengeance, and Ladgerda in particular proves “a skilled female fighter, who bore a man's temper in a girl's body; with locks flowing loose over her shoulders she would do battle in the forefront of the most valiant warriors” (“perita bellandi femina, quae virilem in virgine animum gerens, immisso humeris capillitio, prima inter promptissimos dimicabat”). Smitten with her (not least because she singlehandedly wins his war), Ragnar makes inquiries and learns that she is of high birth—indeed, is the daughter and sole survivor of the dead king. The rest of the story has to do with her resistance to his wooing (again the maiden-king motif) and their eventual marriage and divorce. Their son Fridleif becomes Earl of Norway and Orkney.

The Saxonian digression on amazons that heads this essay is prompted by the figure of Alfhild, who turns to male dress and the military life to avoid marrying an unwanted suitor. There is no question of a surrogate son here, for Alfhild's father is alive and she has two brothers. Her daughter Gyrid, however (for like other women of the maiden-king type, Alfhild does marry), finds herself at the end of a family line. “All these wars and critical events had so much depleted the Danish royal family,” Saxo writes, “that eventually men realised it had been reduced to one woman, Gyrid, daughter of Alf and grandchild of Sigar” (“Talia rerum bellorumque discrimina adeo regiam

12 Examples are collected and discussed in Erik Wahlgren, The Maiden King in Iceland (Diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1938). See also Boberg, Motif-Index, T311.4: “Maiden queen prefers to fight instead of marrying. She usually scorns or even kills her suitors or sets them difficult tasks.”

13 Saxo, Book 9, pp. 251–54; Fisher, pp. 279–83.
apud Danos gentem exhauserant, ut hanc ad solam Guritham, Alfi filiam, Sigari vero neptem, redactam esse constaret."

The Danes appoint regents drawn from the populace, but when Gyrid saw that the “royal stock had dwindled to none but herself and there was no man of equal rank for her to marry, she declared a self-imposed oath of chastity, considering it preferable to forego a husband rather than select one from the rabble” (“Interea Alfi filia Guritha, cum regiam stirpem ad se solam redactam animadverteret neminemque, cui nubere, nobilitate parem haberet, nuncupatis votis voluntarium sibi castimoniam indixit concubitique carere quam ex plebe maritum asciscere satius duxit”). Of Gyrid’s military propensities Saxo says nothing until, years later, she dons male clothing and enters a battle next to her son. This after-the-fact behavior might on first glance seem to qualify Gyrid as loyal mother rather than surrogate son; but if we recall that Gyrid’s mother too was a formidable warrior and that the martial nature in general tends to be passed down in the female line (witness Hervör’s granddaughter Hervör and Brynhildr’s daughter Áslaugr, both shield maidens in their own right), we can safely assume that Gyrid was traditionally constituted as a maiden warrior from the outset, Saxo’s order of events notwithstanding.

Finally there is Brynhildr herself, whose story is too well known to require summary here. Her case is, of course, greatly complicated by her literary popularity, which has left us with differing versions of her life and adventures. The picture that we get from the sources in general, and the Völsunga saga harmonization in particular, is a contradictory one. She is on the one hand depicted as an independent woman who lives in isolation, unencumbered by family of any kind; such a conception would indeed seem fundamental to her story. She is on the other hand depicted as a woman with a number of relatives, including a brother or brothers. According to Theodore M. Andersson, the former Brynhildr is the original one; her family, he argues, is ersonat, created in a late “speculative attempt to domesticate her in the style of other heroic stories”:

Germanic heroes and heroines regularly appear in the context of their families and are characteristically trapped in a situation that compels them to act against family obligations or interests. Hildebrand must kill his son. Angantýr must kill his brother. Rosimund and Signý must contrive the deaths of their husbands and Kriemhilt the death of her broth-

---

16 See Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks, Ch. 9 (“Hún [Hervör, daughter of Heiðrekr] var skjaldmær ok fæddist upp i Englandi med Fröðmari jarli”) and Pátr of Ragnar’s sonum, Ch. 2.
ers. Gudrun must dispatch her sons Hamðir and Sǫrli to their deaths. Gunnarr must abandon his family to the bears and the wolves. Everywhere the immediate social context of the family focuses the tragedy. But Brynhild appears originally to have had no family. In Pidreks saga she resides alone in a castle with her retainers. In the Nibelungentied she is an independent princess on a remote island; the only signs of family are vague references to relatives in stanzas 476 and 526 and an adventitious uncle to whom she entrusts her realm in stanza 523. In Icelandic literature she does acquire a family: a father Buðli, a brother Atlí, a sister Bekkhið, and a foster father Heimir. But here too she resides apart, in a tower or behind her magic flame wall, and the family looks like a late speculative attempt to domesticate her in the style of other heroic stories.17

If this is so, then we may posit that Brynhildr too was at some early layer in her development construed as a warrior maiden like Skaði or Hervör or Þornbjörg or Gyrid: the sole survivor who must function, in the genealogical breach, as a son.

“SWORN VIRGINS” IN ALBANIA

The system of self- or clan government that existed in Iceland (and in early Germanic Europe in general) is a standard form of government in stateless societies.18 Remarkably like the Icelandic case is that of Albania, where until quite recent times, feud was the chief or only mechanism for maintaining order.19 Observers tell of retaliatory killings that go on for generations; of wergild successful and unsuccessful; of a hypersensitivity to matters of honor and slights to personal and family prestige; of whetting/lamenting women and their flaunting of bloody tokens of the dead man before his living relatives; of male children raised from infancy with the imperative of revenge; of burnings-in; and of “sworn virgins”—women who for various reasons abandon the female role and assume the role of the male.

The existence, if not the exact social significance, of sworn virgins in Albania is well attested. Dressed as men and often armed with rifles, and eating and smoking with men in public places, they have caught the curious eye of various travelers in various periods. Three related reasons are given for their renunciation of femaleness. One has to do with the rejection of an arranged marriage the young woman finds unacceptable; only by renouncing the female role altogether can she reject the marriage without bringing the respective families into feud. The second reason has to do with inheritance and is attested in the northern region of Malésia e Madje. Here a sonless man could prevail on his daughter (or, if he had two or more, the one of his choice) to assume the male role for inheritance purposes. He could then "bequeath to her his house and land for her lifetime, after which it reverted to the nearest male heir." The third reason has to do with the obligations of bloodfeud. The role of women in Albanian feud was normally passive: they could be insulted, seduced, abducted, even murdered—but the business of revenge or seeking settlement always fell, at least in principle, to the male; women were, at least in theory though not always in practice, exempt from violence. In fact, numerous instances are recorded of women's seeking and taking revenge, often in quite gruesome forms. But such actions on the part of women were regarded not only as "illegal," but also, in some degree, as abnormal, embarrassing, and insulting. There was, however, one set of circumstances in which a woman might play an active role in bloodfeud. As Ian Whitaker puts it, "When all of her brothers had been killed, she might herself assume the masculine role, abjure marriage, and take on the duty of exacting revenge for her siblings." The sworn virgin then assumed male dress, and "having taken such an oath she might not revert to her earlier female role, but would thenceforth be treated solely as a man, killing and being killed in the bloodfeud and thereafter counting as a full life [as opposed to the usual half] in the calculation of blood money." Just why women's lives were calculated at half a wergild is unclear; it may reflect either their relative value in that society or, as Whitaker suggests, an understanding that blood money might be claimed by two clans. In either case, a woman's assumption of a full wergild would seem to be an assumption of maleness on a fundamental level.

20 This discussion of sworn virgins is based mainly on Whitaker, "A Sack for Carrying Things" (see also his bibliography), and Durham, Some Tribal Origins, pp. 194–95.
22 See especially Hasluck, The Unwritten Law of Albania, pp. 219–55.
Let us pass over the first type of sworn virgin, the woman who rejects marriage (although we cannot help noting her resemblance to the maiden king), and turn instead to the woman who becomes a surrogate man for inheritance or feud purposes. What interests us here is that the assumption of the male role is prompted, in both cases, by a breach in the male line. Just how important the rule of father-son inheritance was in Albania is suggested by the once-widespread practice of levirate marriage there, whereby a man's widow was married by her late husband's brother and also whereby the resulting children might be credited to the dead brother, even though they be conceived after his death.\textsuperscript{26} Better, evidently, to have a son who is not your own, or a son who is your daughter, than no son at all.

An interesting question for our purposes, but unfortunately one to which there appears to be no clear answer, is whether in reality these sworn virgins keep to their vows or whether (like their Icelandic literary sisters) they eventually marry and produce heirs of their own. In the case of the first category of male-women, the marriage-rejectors, the potential of feud would seem to constitute a powerful deterrent to eventual marriage (though even here at least one case of marriage has been recorded).\textsuperscript{27} One might suppose that there would actually be an incentive for the women to marry in the other two cases, for they could then produce sons of their own and so restore the interrupted line of inheritance, but on this point the sources are, alas, scanty.\textsuperscript{28} We must content ourselves with the observation that there exists a European society in which, traditionally, certain women under certain conditions renounce the female role, and dress, arm, and comport themselves as men; and further, that a certain proportion of them do so because they are brotherless and hence constrained to function as sons in the central matters of the patrilineage: feud and inheritance.

\textbf{ICELANDIC LAW: BAUGATAL}

The earliest Icelandic legal codex, \textit{Grágás}, contains two schedules of compensation for slayings: \textit{Baugatal} and \textit{Vigslóði}. \textit{Baugatal}, probably the older of the two, divides the kindred into four tiers depending on their relationship to the slain person. The first tier is composed of the near kinsmen of the slain person (father, son, brother, etc.) who are

\textsuperscript{26}Durham, \textit{Some Tribal Origins}, p. 74; Whitaker, "'A Sack for Carrying Things,'" p. 151.

\textsuperscript{27}Durham, \textit{Some Tribal Origins}, p. 195.

\textsuperscript{28}Whitaker, "'A Sack for Carrying Things,'" p. 151–52) argues that the oath of virginity was understood to be permanently binding (it was performed in the church), though he mentions cases in which it was broken.
required to pay (if they are the defendants) or collect (if they are the plaintiffs) the main “ring” or lion’s share of the wergild. Then comes the next tier made up of less immediately related kinsmen with a lesser share of the wergild, and so on. The extensive list, which explores all possible permutations of payers and receivers, consists exclusively of men, with one exception:

Sú er ok kona ein er bæði skal baugi böta ok baug taka ef hon er einberni. En sú konu heitir baugrygr. En hon er dóttir ins dauta, enda sé eigi skapþígjandi til hofuðbaugs en bætendi lifi, þá skal hon taka þrýmerking sem sonr, ef hon tók eigi full setti at vigsbótum til þess er hon er ept; enda skulu frændr ðengr taka. Nó er hon dóttir veganda, en engi er skapþætendi til bætendi til hofuðbaugs, en viðtakendr sé til, þá skal hon böta þrýmerkingi sem sonr til þess er hon kömr í vers hvilu; en þá kastar hon gjöldum í kæ frændum.29

(There is also one woman who is both to pay and to take a wergild ring, given that she is an only child, and that woman is called “ring lady.” She who takes is the daughter of the dead man if no proper receiver of the main ring otherwise exists but atonement payers are alive, and she takes the three-mark ring like a son, given that she has not accepted full settlement in compensation for the killing, and this until she is married, but thereafter kinsmen take it. She who pays is the daughter of the killer if no proper payer of the main ring otherwise exists but receivers do, and then she is to pay the three-mark ring like a son, and this until she enters a husband’s bed and thereby tosses the outlay into her kinsman’s lap.) Translation from Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, tr. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1980), p. 181; my italics.

Not only is the daughter of a sonless, brotherless, and fatherless man expected to fill the genealogical breach, but also she is expressly said to do so as a son and even—since the clause specifically applies only to the unmarried—as a “maid.” That the practice is of some antiquity in Scandinavia is suggested by the presence of similar statutes in the early Norwegian laws.30

Nowhere in Grágás are the rules of bloodfeud spelled out. In Iceland, as elsewhere, these belong to the unwritten law. But insofar as a wergild list ranks an individual’s kinsmen according to their degree of


30 Gulaping Law: "Nú verð kona baugrygr, verðr hon bæði arfa óðals ok aura ok a engi maðr undan henni at leysa ... þar eru baugrygjar tvær dóttir ok systir, þar skulu baugum böta ok svá taka sem karímen, ok svá eigu þar boð á þýðum jafnt sem karílar. ..." Frostathing Law "Nú er man ein er baugrygr er kallaðr; hon skal bæði baugum böta ok svá taka, ef hon er einberni ok til arfís komin, þar til er hon setzk á brúðstöl, þá kastar hon gjöldum apt í kæ frændum, ok skal hon hvárki síðan baugum böta né taka. ..." Text from Norges gamle love indtil 1387, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (Oslo: C. Grøndahl, 1846), Vol. 1, pp. 92 and 184 respectively.
relatedness to the slain person, it may also be assumed to reflect, at
least roughly, not only the schedule of inheritance but also the sched-
ule of feud itself—the order, that is, in which the survivors are
obliged to take retaliatory action. If this is so, then the very law—or at
least one part of the law at one time—may be said to contemplate a
situation in which, in the absence of proper male heirs, a woman be-
comes a surrogate son not only in the transaction of wergild, but also
in the matter of inheritance and also in the prosecution of feud.

Let me propose a hypothetical situation on the basis of Baugatal and
other parts of Grágás, filling it out with familiars from the Icelandic
sagas. A man is killed in bloodfeud and leaves a daughter, whom we
will call Vigfús, as sole heir (as outlined in Baugatal). Let us say that
Vigfús accepts wergild for her slain father but later, because of some
further insult, ignores the settlement and seeks blood revenge.31 She
first tries to incite kinsmen to act on her behalf, but (as in Ærbyggja
saga) they refuse to accept responsibility. Disgusted, she arms herself
and rides off with the intention of taking her own revenge; but she is
foiled by a blizzard and returns home. She calms down, and there the
matter rests. In the meantime, as a woman of means—for she is now
the possessor of her father’s patrimony and also his wergild—Vigfús
has become an attractive marital candidate. In the absence of male
relatives who would ordinarily arrange her marriage, she makes her
opinion known to her remaining kinsmen—who, under the circum-
stances, are inclined to defer to her wishes. For her part, she is aware
that to marry would mean that her father’s wergild would become
forfeit to her kinsmen and his patrimony subject to a husband’s con-
trol. Her property, that which makes her sought after, also makes her
choosy and even reluctant. She does finally marry, however—at which
point her special status ceases and she becomes, in the eye of the law
and the eye of the public, a woman like other women.32

In this situation are found all the major themes of the maiden war-
rior (and maiden king) tales: brotherless daughter as heir; her pursuit

---

31 According to Ærbyggja saga (Ch. 38), women once had the right to serve as plain-
tiffs in court cases, but as the result of a botched performance ca. 992, they (and males
under sixteen) were thenceforth debarrad in that capacity.

32 The idea that the virgin is more male than female—the idea, that is, that inter-
course constructs the female—has a certain patrician authority. As Saint Jerome put it,
“Quamdiu mulier partu servit et liberis, hanc habet ad virum differentiam, quam cor-
pus ad animam. Sin autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam saeculo, mulier esse
cessabit, et dicetur vir” (“As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different
from man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world,
then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man”). As cited in Vern L. Buil-
ough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” Marriage in the Middle Ages, ed. John
of combat, especially in connection with revenge; her reluctance or refusal to marry (=maiden king); and her "disappearance" as a character once she does marry. Just when and where and how effectively Baugatal, with its "daughter clause," obtained in Iceland we do not know. Even when and where it did obtain, it cannot have affected very many women, and it may not have affected them in just the ways I have proposed here (it may be, for example, that I have underestimated the influence of the woman's remaining kinsmen over her property and her marriage). But if the Vigfús situation is even roughly valid as a collective description of women who did serve or might potentially serve as functional sons under the law, it provides an actual societal context for one conspicuous subtype of the shieldmaiden complex.

CONCLUSION

It is not without reason that the maiden warrior stories have been classified as fantasy. They are for the most part found in "fictional" sources; they bear, in their patterned representation of persons and events, the stigmata of folklore; and they are exaggerated to a greater or lesser degree. Baugatal, however, guarantees the "son" status of certain women under the law, and this piece of evidence, taken together with the analogous examples from Albania, leads us to the conclusion that while the tales may not be true as told, they are not purely fictional, either. They are best understood as imaginative adumbrations of a social reality in which certain women, under certain circumstances, became men for legal purposes. In other words: the maiden warrior tales spring from a feud society, like the Albanian one, in which a brotherless daughter was constrained to function, in the matters of the patrilineage, as a surrogate son.

Whether such daughters also became masculine in dress and behavior is another question. It seems on the one hand inevitable that the processes of legend would sooner or later conscript the woman who was, like Hervör, genealogically sandwiched between heroic forebears and heroic progeny: a female surrogate in the patrilineage would be remembered as acting out the role, whether she actually did or not. On the other hand, the lesson of the Albanian example is that the legal role can be acted out on the social level—or perhaps that the legal role implies the social role and is indistinguishable from it. Could this not also have been the case in Iceland? The woman contemplated in the Baugatal passage—the woman who transacts wergild and who, by
extension, stands as heir and prosecutes bloodfeud—is, after all, a woman operating firmly within the male sphere. She may not be the amazon of legend, but neither is she Helga the Fair. She is a woman, as Hervör put it so neatly, between worlds. It is finally not so much her masculinity as her “betweenness” that had such a grip on the popular imagination.

It should be noted that the surrogate son, the woman I have argued is the historical prototype of the maiden warrior, does not herself choose the male role, but is, by custom and circumstance, chosen for it. This essay began with a discussion of the fantastic quality of the maiden warrior tales, so it is fitting to close it by suggesting that the real fantasy here is the dream of female autonomy. In the end these tales tell us less about daughters than they do about sons, and less about female volition than about the power, in Norse society, of the patrilineal principle to bend legend and life to its intention.