



## Conflict as Performative Masculinity in Icelandic Sagas

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Masculinity is a subject within Icelandic sagas that exists in a state of fluidity. The performance of it shifts according to both the needs of the narrative and the ways different types of conflict impact masculinity. Characters adopt more culturally male or female coded characteristics as the narrative develops, with both physical and non-physical conflict impacting this change, and therefore changing the character's performance of masculinity. The physical conflict in *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* is far removed from the verbal, non-physical conflicts from Skalds, mainly occurring between Gunnlaug and Hrafn in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*. *Eirik the Red's Saga* we see the impact that this performance can have on the narrative. Characters utilise the established standards of the physically masculine against the non-physically feminine as a way of insulting warriors, and potentially critiquing the idea of such a rigid gendered divide itself.

Judith Butler argues that 'gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual. [...] the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives'.<sup>1</sup> Within the context of Icelandic sagas, this means that characters perform to existing cultural standards of gender rather than performing alone – they are only known in relation to existing standards of gender. It could be argued that these pre-existing directives do not exist in Icelandic sagas, being that most are highly fictionalised with supernatural elements and thus bear little relevance to concepts of gender. This is not the case, as the names of characters gives an important insight into what attributes as a society and culture were viewed as masculine and what were viewed as feminine.

Men are almost always described by their physical attributes. Within *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* appears 'Einarr the tiny', 'Gormr the mighty', 'Hávarðr the hewer', and 'Þhórðr the left-handed' and this is far from an exhaustive list.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> Despite the fact that not all of these descriptions are heroic, ('tiny' and 'left-handed' carrying connotations of otherness in contrast with other more heroic descriptions) all of them rely on a physical description of characters. There are even contrasting positive and negative physical descriptions for the same person with little mention of their mental abilities, 'Sigvaldi the son of Earl Haraldr, had sallow features and an ugly nose. But he was very tall and very nimble and had excellent eyesight'.<sup>6</sup> Opposing this are the descriptions of the women in the saga, 'a very intelligent daughter called Þyri', and 'a wise and popular daughter called Álof'.<sup>7 8</sup> Importantly, both of these women are won as brides by male characters in the narrative, presenting the attributes of intelligence, wisdom, and popularity as feminine ideals to aspire to and be won by male suitors. Admittedly, some characters fall outside of this physical masculine/mental feminine dichotomy, either through being men described with a more mental description ('[Fjóllir] was wise, cunning, and malevolent') or through their descriptions being too vague to assign as either mental or

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), 519-531 (p. 526).

<sup>2</sup> N. F. Blake, trans., *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

physical descriptions.<sup>9</sup> This is the case with ‘Geirmundr the white’, whose name could possibly be a physical description of white hair or pale skin, or a comment on his character, with white carrying connotations of innocence and purity.<sup>10</sup> Many women are described as being fair or beautiful, but usually these descriptions are less frequent than descriptions of internal attributes. These titles and descriptions should be considered outliers however, as the vast majority of names across multiple sagas follow this gendered split.

*The Saga of the Jomsvikings* is not the only text to have these gendered titles. *Eirik the Red’s Saga* also features this, with the reader being reminded of the men’s associations with combat with ‘Hrafn the Dueller’.<sup>11</sup> The clearest division between the physical masculine and the mental feminine appear in the opening passage describing Oleif’s family, ‘As his wife he took Aud the Deep-minded, the daughter of Ketil Flat-nose’.<sup>12</sup> These titles juxtapose one another, a positive, mental description in ‘deep-minded’ and the negative physical ‘flat-nose’. In doing so, the writer has furthered the gendered difference between the descriptions, making clear the traits associated with each gender.

These names are more than just simple descriptions and are more so the lasting reputation of these characters. For many of these characters, whether historical or not, these short descriptions give all we know about them. The gnomic poem *Hávamál* makes clear this importance of reputation as a way of securing a legacy, ‘I know one thing which never dies: / the reputation of each dead man’.<sup>13</sup> The cultural importance of these titles and descriptions in maintaining the legacy of each described individual and the clearly gendered associations of different descriptions helps define the existing directives that characters perform gender in relation to. Feminine directives are generally internal, like wisdom and intelligence, whereas male directives are grounded in physicality and strength. How these directives are interpreted varies with the different types of conflict within the texts.

Physical conflict as performance of masculinity is integral to the Jomsvikings. Their laws dictated that all the men must be of fighting age, ‘no man should become a member who was older than fifty or younger than eighteen’.<sup>14</sup> This age difference is contested with the arrival of the twelve year-old Vagn, who must prove his worthiness to join this group as a boy through physical conflict, thus proving his masculinity. Similarly, the city of Jómaborg was off limits to women, ‘No one must have a woman in the city’.<sup>15</sup> This meant that the city was a place of masculinity, only inhabited by men and only those men capable of fighting as a means of asserting this. This shows the importance of the performance of masculinity within *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, being integral to their customs.

The main conflict occurring in the saga is during the battle of Hjörungavagr. Almost all of the combatants are men, with the only female presence in the battle being the witches Þorgerðr and Irpa. Unlike the physical conflict between the Jomsvikings and the Norwegians, the inclusion of this feminine presence shifts this into a supernatural conflict. The Jomsvikings remark on this during the battle, making a point of distinguishing their female presence, “I don’t think that we are fighting against men alone”.<sup>16</sup> The depiction of the witches here is a negative one through the use of the word ‘ófreskir’ as a description of the warriors who can see the witches first.<sup>17</sup> Blake translates this in relation to the Norwegian dialectal ‘ufriskje’, meaning ‘ghost, what causes fear (especially evil spirits)’.<sup>18</sup> Many sagas feature supernatural

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Keneva Kunz, trans., ‘Eirik the Red’s Saga’, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. by Örnófur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 654.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 653

<sup>13</sup> Carlyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Blake, *Jomsvikings*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

elements but here they are scorned, possibly due to their female associations and the fact that witches do not partake in the physical conflict in the same manner as the Jomsvikings, instead fighting at range when ‘they saw that an arrow flew from every finger of the witch and each one found its mark’.<sup>19</sup>

The witches are not the only combatants to not take part in the physical conflict. There are numerous skalds that take part, many of whom have no part in the physical combat and instead compose verse during the battle. Skjald-meyjar-Einarr even refuses to take part in the combat as his lord is not generous enough, declaring ‘I’m off to join Sigvaldi; this earl gives grudgingly’.<sup>20</sup> Einarr here prompts conflict with the Earl as a means of attaining more wealth – the Earl being forced in the face of the skald insulting him in front of his men to offer him a set of engraved scales to stop him from fleeing. There is no physical conflict between the two: Einarr’s insults are solely verbal, lacking the masculine impact of the Jomsviking’s physical violence. It’s interesting to note that the Earl does not give a weapon to Einarr as payment as would be typical for a gift, as noted in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, “Other kings give fine treasures – good swords or splendid gold bracelets – as rewards for poems”.<sup>21</sup> This could be a deliberate action by the Earl to point at the fact Einarr is unwillingly to fight and meant as a slight against his masculinity. However, Einarr is still at the battle and boasts in his verse of his physical prowess, ‘The bender of the wound-snake will not repulse me / when I meet the warrior’, the ‘wound-snake’ here being a kenning for a spear or sword.<sup>22</sup> Einarr does not appear in the saga after this point so it is unknown if he fulfils his boast. While this may be as a result of the scale of the conflict meaning the writer focused on more central characters, it’s possible he didn’t join the battle at all, instead performing masculinity quite literally – boasting of his physical exploits without actually having to achieve them.

When exploring the masculinity of Skjald-meyjar-Einarr it’s important to examine his name. The word ‘meyjar’ is the genitive form of ‘mær’, but more importantly it is a feminine word with two definitions. Either a poet, or ‘maid, girl, virgin’.<sup>23</sup> Being Einarr’s title, this is his description given by those around him, showing that he exists outside of the physical masculine world of the Jomsvikings, in part to his lack of engagement in physical conflict as a skald.

The titular character of *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent Tongue* also exists outside of this entirely physical masculine world. After insulting Thorir, one of Earl Eirik Hakonarson’s followers, Gunnlaug prompts him to violence which forces the Earl to order him to ‘Leave it be’, and that ‘Real men don’t pay attention to things like that’.<sup>24</sup> This portrays skaldic insults as not masculine. Despite prompting physical violence (as Einarr does in *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*), Gunnlaug’s attempt at conflict has not been sufficient enough to warrant a physical confrontation, and is therefore not true performance of masculinity in the Earl’s eyes. Kit R. Christensen argues that even in these simple verbal disputes there is still an underlying element of physical violence that is ever present, arguing that ‘even these nonviolent conflict resolution strategies presupposed the agonistic personalities of the dominant males involved’.<sup>25</sup> This might be the reason that Gunnlaug is never fully feminised for his lack of physical conflict – it underlies what he says and therefore helps him retain this performance of masculinity.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Katrina C. Attwood, trans., ‘The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue’, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. by Örnófur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 575.

<sup>22</sup> Blake, *Jomsvikings*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 306.

<sup>24</sup> Attwood, *Gunnlaug*, p. 571.

<sup>25</sup> Kit R. Christensen, *Revenge and Social Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 75.

Gunnlaug does have moments of physical conflict in the saga, particularly in his duel in Iceland with Hrafn late in the saga. Here most of the conflict is verbal, with the two poets taunting each other in verse before combat. The writer makes a point of establishing that this does not compare to the physical conflict he takes part in when raiding the Hebrides, where he 'proved himself to be a very brave and valiant fellow, and very manly'.<sup>26</sup> This description of skalds taking part in combat is rare in the saga in that every other time there is a battle it is won through trickery. This is the case earlier with Gunnlaug duelling the berserker Thororm where he tricks him into believing he is fighting with a blunted sword. Later, the mortally wounded Hrafn only kills Gunnlaug through trickery, making him take off his helmet to fetch him water. Gunnlaug even remarks upon this himself, saying "Now you have cruelly deceived me" and that Hrafn had "behaved in an unmanly way, since I trusted you".<sup>27</sup> Much like the honour-driven Jomsvikings, trickery here is looked down upon. Hrafn's trickery is something that emasculates him, though as this is said in dialogue from Gunnlaug it is likely just Gunnlaug's opinion and meant as an insult. Gunnlaug's trickery of Thororm is viewed very differently, where instead Gunnlaug wins 'great fame for [defeating him] in England and beyond'.<sup>28</sup> This difference might be as a result of Thororm being a bandit and Hrafn being a respected skald, but it shows that trickery (and therefore, non- masculine behaviour) is acceptable through some forms of conflict, depending on the victim. Conflict for Hrafn and Gunnlaug is not always a performance of masculinity as it is with the Jomsvikings. For them, conflict is mostly verbal and when it eventually escalates to physical conflict, they have to use trickery to succeed which is remarked upon for being unmanly.

Conflict as a means of performing masculinity is also present in *Eirik the Red's Saga* during the confrontation with the natives. Despite the expedition containing both men and women, only men initially actually partake in the battle, 'The men took up their red shields and went towards them'.<sup>29</sup> When the men retreat from the battle Freydis insults their masculinity as they flee, 'Why do you flee such miserable opponents, men like you who look to me to be capable of killing them off like sheep'.<sup>30</sup> Freydis' actions during the battle operate in a strange area when viewing conflict as a performance of masculinity. Despite the overwhelmingly masculine connotations of physical combat, she engages with it as a pregnant woman. However, her performance during combat is still feminine as she uses her breasts to win victory, 'Free one of her breasts from her shift, she smacked the sword with it. This frightened the natives who turned and ran'.<sup>31</sup> Here Freydis engages in physical conflict but it is not a performance of masculinity, instead being an expression of her femininity. It's rare for a woman to partake in combat within sagas, and even less so to not adopt masculine actions as she does so. This might be a way of subverting this existing narrative convention as a means of showing Freydis' strength and willingness to fight to protect her unborn child. Alternatively, Freydis' actions might just be a narrative tool to highlight the cowardice of Karlsefni and his men. Freydis herself remarks that 'Had I a weapon I'm sure I would fight better than any of you', in reference to the men.<sup>32</sup> By proving Freydis' claim to be correct (herself routing the natives, something the men were incapable of doing) the saga emphasises the cowardice of the men by showing a woman to be superior to them. An argument could be made that as Freydis is partaking in physical conflict she is performing masculinity, but this is not the case as her femininity is highlighted as a means to comment on the men's own masculinity.

The use of conflict as a means to perform masculinity in these three sagas is something with varied effects due to the range of conflict within them. Masculinity is performed in relation to directives established through the naming conventions of characters. Men are described with predominantly physical names detailing their appearance or their skill in battle, whereas

<sup>26</sup> Attwood, *Gunnlaug*, p. 589.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 591.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>29</sup> Kunz, *Eirik*, p. 670.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 671.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 670.

women's names focus more on internal skills like wisdom and intelligence. The Jomsvikings lend themselves well to this world of masculinity with their battles, skill at arms, and male-exclusive city. Their treatment of the few female (albeit, supernatural) characters in the saga shows their disdain for unmanly, non-physical conflict. When men perform non-physical conflict, as is the case with the skalds present in both *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* and *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, this performance of masculinity becomes more nuanced. While Gunnlaug, Hrafn, and Einarr are all men, they attempt to distance themselves from masculine physical conflict and instead adopt the more feminine aspects of wisdom and intelligence. As a consequence they are treated as somewhat effeminate by those around them. When they do engage in physical conflict they are praised as manly by their peers, but when they use trickery within this concept it is seen as unmanly and therefore shameful. In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, physical conflict is partaken in by men, with the exception of Freydis. Though performing a masculine action, she performs it using feminine means. This could be a way of insulting the masculinity of the men by proving that a woman is their equal in combat, or might be a critique of the idea of a male-exclusive physical conflict in itself.

Overall, the use of conflict as a performance of masculinity is not as clear-cut as might be assumed within these sagas. While physical conflict remains a pinnacle of masculinity, those engaging in non-physical conflict have a more negotiated position within this scale of masculinity, not quite fully masculine but not quite fully feminine either. This gives an insight into on Norse attitudes on the interplay between conflict and gender.

**Bibliography**

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