

Romance and Violence

Aristocratic Sexuality in Late Medieval Iceland

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In the thirteenth century, Icelandic society underwent a series of profound changes. The political elite became more integrated into the Norwegian aristocracy, which enabled the Norwegian king to increase his power over the Icelandic people. During the period 1262 to 1264, the Icelanders agreed to pay taxes to him, and consequently Iceland evolved into a more highly organized and hierarchical society, where royal service played a major role. New offices were instated to govern Iceland and maintain social order.¹

In the new political system, officials were appointed by the king, and Icelandic chieftains were thus no longer able to seize power from one another.² The latter part of the Commonwealth period had been marked by harsh and bloody conflicts between rival chieftains, and in their attempts to outmanoeuvre each another, they had been dependent on the support of influential farmers.³ This changed once Iceland was incorporated into the Norwegian realm. From then on, it was far more important to consolidate alliances with other officials and strengthen bonds with the Norwegian Crown: it had become imperative to be part of an aristocratic community and to be counted as one of the king's men.⁴

Throughout the fourteenth century, the Icelandic elite were reorganized. Powerful governing families emerged, and by mid-century, nearly all men who were active in the administration of Iceland had fathers who had been governors (*hirðstjórar*), sheriffs (*sýslumenn*), or lawmen (*lögmenn*). Icelandic officials, to a greater extent than previously, married daughters of other officials, thus increasing the gap between themselves and the lower levels of society.⁵ As representatives of the

¹ Sigríður Beck, *I kungens frånvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1281–1387*, University of Gothenburg: Gothenburg 2011, 53–99; Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm, c. 1195–1397*, Alan Crozier trans. (The Northern World, 53), Brill: Leiden 2011, 89–112, 143–158 and 176–203.

² Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'The Icelandic Aristocracy after the Fall of the Free State', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 20 (1995), 153–166, at 156–157.

³ Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland. An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1985, 120; Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, 1, [s. n.]: Egilstaðir 1986, 109–125; Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power*, University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles 1988, 124; William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1990, 22–26. On the power base of the chieftains, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in Icelandic Commonwealth* (The Viking Collection, Studies in Northern Civilization, 13), Odense University Press: Odense 1999, 84–150.

⁴ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 160–161.

⁵ Sigríður Beck, 'Frá goðum til yfirstéttar 1220–1387', in Benedikt Eyþórsson and Hrafnkell Lárusson eds., *Þriðja íslenska söguþingið 18.–21. Maí 2006. Ráðstefnurit*, Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands: Reykjavík 2007, 234–244, at 242; Sigríður Beck 2011, 156–163.

Norwegian king, their aristocratic identity was strengthened—their mutual understanding grew and intensified, as did their sense of belonging to a group of chivalrous knights.⁶

This article discusses the interaction of political and sexual strategies when the Icelandic aristocracy was reorganized during the Late Middle Ages. The social changes in Iceland introduced a new sexual mindset that gave the aristocratic group a stronger affinity and accentuated the polarity between aristocratic masculinity and femininity. I will argue that emphasizing certain sexual norms was a way for the elite to define its own group, and that sexuality functioned as an important component when forming an aristocratic self-image. This is particularly evident in late medieval prose fiction from Iceland. As society was transformed, a courtly literature developed that reveals the aspirations of the political elite to become an aristocracy with a distinctive set of values and behaviours. Icelandic romances from the late thirteenth century to the fifteenth century typically tell the story of a European knight who sets off in search of power and glory. On his adventures in far-away countries, he encounters other noble men and together they fight against heathens and berserks. Often, these adventures revolve around the knight's search for a suitable wife. In fact, the bridal quest is the main plot of many of these narratives.⁷

When discussing medieval romance in Iceland, modern scholarship usually distinguishes between two categories of *riddarasögur*. The first consists of translations or adaptations of French or Anglo-Norman narratives produced at the Norwegian court in the thirteenth century. The vast majority of these sagas are preserved in Icelandic manuscripts, however, and it is generally presumed that they reached Iceland soon after their composition. Some of them may even have been translated in Iceland.⁸ This article, though, focuses on the second category, which comprises some thirty or so sagas written in Iceland at a slightly later date.⁹ Unlike

⁶ Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Marvellous North and Authorial Presence in the Icelandic Fornaldarsaga', in Roy Eriksen ed., *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative* (Approaches to Semiotics, 114), de Gruyter: Berlin 1994, 101–134, at 122–123; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 166.

⁷ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1990. The bridal quest narrative was very popular in the Middle Ages and can be found in many literary genres. See, for example, Friedmar Geißler, *Brautwerbung in der Weltliteratur*, Niemeyer: Halle (Saale) 1955, and Claudia Bornholdt, *Engaging Moments. The Origins of Medieval Bridal-Quest Narrative* (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, 46), de Gruyter: Berlin 2005.

⁸ Jürg Glauser, 'Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)', in Rory McTurk ed., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture, 31), Blackwell: Oxford 2005, 372–386. See also Geraldine Barnes, 'The Riddarasögur and Mediaeval European Literature', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 8 (1975), 140–158; Marianne E. Kalinke, 'Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)', in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide* (Islandica, 45), Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1985, 316–363; Geraldine Barnes, 'Some Current Issues in Riddarasögur Research', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989), 73–88. Three recent doctoral dissertations on the translation, transmission, and transformation of these *riddarasögur* are Ingvil Brügger Budal, *Strengleikar og Lais. Høviske noveller i omsetjing frå gammalfransk till gammalnorsk*, 1–2, Universitetet i Bergen: Bergen 2009; Stefka Georgieva Eriksen, *Writing and Reading in Medieval Manuscript Culture. The Transmission of the Story of Elye in Old French and Old Norse Literary Contexts*, University of Oslo: Oslo 2010; Suzanne Marti, *Kingship, Chivalry and Religion in the Perceval Matter. An Analysis of the Old Norse and Middle English Translations of Le Conte du Graal*, University of Oslo: Oslo 2010.

⁹ In *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*, Marianne E. Kalinke and Phillip M. Mitchell identify thirty-three romances written in Iceland during the Middle Ages that survive in medieval manuscripts. Kurt Schier gives a figure of thirty sagas; Jürg Glauser, thirty-one; and Daniel Sävborg, thirty-five. Agnete Loth refers to seventeen sagas in addition to the fifteen that she has edited in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. In other words, her list comprises thirty-two sagas. See Marianne E. Kalinke and P. M. Mitchell, 'Preface,' in Marianne E. Kalinke and P. M. Mitchell eds., *Bibliography of*

the translated sagas, these accounts had no direct foreign source texts, although several motifs were borrowed from Continental romances.¹⁰ These indigenous or original *riddarasögur* are sometimes referred to as Icelandic romances, a term used henceforth in this article.¹¹

The Icelandic romances were probably composed by clerics, but there is much to suggest that it was at the behest of an aspiring aristocracy, consisting of royal officials, great landholders, and wealthy entrepreneurs grown rich from the fishing industry.¹² The intended audience was most likely, in other words, the Icelandic social elite, and the prevailing ideology of the sagas is, as Geraldine Barnes puts it, ‘fundamentally secular’, with a focus on matrimonial aspirations and patrimonial rights.¹³ It would seem that the majority of Icelandic romances were written in the fourteenth century; however, it is difficult to arrive at a more precise dating, since we know so little about their provenance. They survive in manuscripts that are often much more recent, and there is sometimes considerable disagreement about when a particular saga was written. As I see it, the Icelandic romances should be taken together. The older sagas of the genre, written at the turn of the fourteenth century, hit upon literary patterns and motifs that were then reused and further developed over the course of the century, and regardless of whether the sagas were written at the century’s beginning or end—or even in the fifteenth century—they contributed to the development of a stronger aristocratic identity among the Icelandic elite. The

Old Norse-Icelandic Romances (Islandica, 44), Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1985, vii–ix; Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (Sammlung Metzler, 78), Metzler: Stuttgart 1970, 112–115; Jürg Glauser, ‘Nachwort: Isländische Märchensagas’, in Jürg Glauser and Gert Kreutzer eds., *Isländische Märchensagas*, 1 (Saga: Bibliothek der altnordischen Literatur: Helden, Ritter, Abenteuer), Diedrichs: Munich 1998, 398–409, at 402; Daniel Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken. Erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Historia litterarum, 27), Uppsala universitet: Uppsala 2007, 561; Agnete Loth, ‘Preface’, in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 (Editiones Arnarnæ, Series B, 24), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1965, vi–xii, at x–xi. For this article, the following thirty indigenous *riddarasögur* have been studied: *Adonias saga*, *Ála flekks saga*, *Blómstrvallasaga*, *Bærings saga*, *Dámusta saga*, *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Ectors saga*, *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, *Gibbons saga*, *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Jóns saga leikara*, *Kíralax saga*, *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, *Mágus saga jarls*, *Mírmanns saga*, *Nitida saga*, *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, *Samsons saga fagra*, *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, *Sírgarðs saga frækna*, *Sírgarðs saga ok Valbrands*, *Síguðar saga fóts*, *Síguðar saga turnara*, *Síguðar saga þogla*, *Tristrams saga ok Ísoddar*, *Valdimars saga*, *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, and *Þjalar-Jóns saga*.

¹⁰ Geraldine Barnes, ‘Romance in Iceland’, in Margaret Clunies Ross ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 42), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2000, 268–286; Matthew Driscoll, ‘Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*)’, in McTurk ed., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, 190–204.

¹¹ Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘Riddarasögur, Indigenous’, in Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf eds., *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia* (Garland Reference Library of Humanities, 934; Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, 1), Garland: New York 1993, 528–531, at 528; Driscoll 2005, 191.

¹² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Viktors saga ok Blávus. Sources and Characteristics’, in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, Jónas Kristjánsson ed. (Riddarasögur, 2), Handritastofnun Íslands: Reykjavík 1964, cix–ccviii, at ccviii; Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Studia Islandica, 30), Heimskedeild Háskóla Íslands og Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs: Reykjavík 1971, 24–25; Jürg Glauser, ‘Erzähler – Ritter – Zuhörer. Das Beispiel der Riddarasögur. Erzählkommunikation und Hörergemeinschaft im mittelalterlichen Island’, in Régis Boyer ed., *Les sagas de chevaliers (Riddarasögur). Actes de la Ve conférence internationale sur les sagas, Toulon juillet 1982* (Civilisations, 10), Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne: Paris 1982, 93–119, at 101; Peter Hallberg, ‘A Group of Icelandic “Riddarasögur” from the Middle of the Fourteenth Century’, in Boyer ed., *Les sagas de chevaliers*, 7–53, at 20; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Stórkirkjur, sagnaritun og valdamiðstöðvar 1100–1400’, in Benedikt Eyþórsson and Hrafnkell Lárússon eds., *Þriðja íslenska söguþingið*, 225–233.

¹³ Barnes 2000, 276.

reorganization of the aristocracy was a prolonged process, and the romances witness to a long-term effort—one that spanned centuries—to define the aristocratic group.¹⁴

Icelandic romances express a strong fascination for a courtly society: a political system where the king grants favours to those who faithfully serve him, an aristocracy that stands united in the face of danger, and a chivalrousness that turns the knight into a nobler man. In this respect, they reflected changes in Icelandic society.¹⁵ But these sagas also changed society. Literature was dialogical.¹⁶ It described the manners of courageous knights and chaste maidens, and thus what was expected of aristocratic men and women. From the sagas, it is also evident that sexuality was frequently used to make distinctions of various kinds. Sexual norms served as markers to distinguish the chivalrous from the common, the human from the monstrous, and the masculine from the feminine.¹⁷

The article falls into four parts. First, I will discuss the long-term social changes in Iceland in the Late Middle Ages that affected sexual beliefs and practices among the Icelandic aristocracy, and which contributed to the gender norms of aristocratic men and women becoming more clearly separated. As the political structures were transformed, the power of the Church increased, and the aristocracy's interest in courtly culture grew, so a new sexual mindset developed. How these novel ideas about sexuality were represented and explored in the Icelandic romances is dealt with in the second and third sections, with particular attention paid to the sexual interaction between knights and maidens. In several of the Icelandic romances, the knight's courtship of the maiden is accompanied by violence on one or the other part, and it is not uncommon for the main characters to humiliate each other in different ways. What is the function of torture and abuse in these stories? Using *Gibbons saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, both from the fourteenth century, the mingling of violence and sexuality in the romances will be discussed. The violent

¹⁴ Bjarne Fidjestøl holds that the translated romances served a similar function at the thirteenth-century Norwegian court, and sees them 'as a mirror which the king held up to the nobility, presenting them with an ideal which they should live up to if they were to play their intended part in society.' Bjarne Fidjestøl, 'Romantic Reading at the Court of Hákon Hákonsson', in Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers*, Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal eds., Peter Foote trans. (The Viking Collection, 9), Odense University Press: Odense 1997, 351–365, at 365. The function of the translated *riddarasögur* has been widely discussed in what Geraldine Barnes (1989, 80) has called 'the "didacticism" versus "entertainment" debate'. Barnes is one of those who stress the sagas' didactic significance; see, for example, Barnes 1975, while others have underlined that the romances were translated primarily for entertainment; see, for example, Marianne E. Kalinke, *King Arthur, North-by-Northwest. The matière de Bretagne in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances* (Bibliotheca Arnarnagana, 37), C. A. Reitzel: Copenhagen 1981, 21–22. This dichotomizing tendency—didacticism or entertainment—was palpable in research of the 1970s and 1980s, but has, according to Jürg Glauser (2005, 380), 'receded into the background in the most recent discussions of the *riddarasögur*.'

¹⁵ Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas. Studien zur Prosalitteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie, 12), Helbing & Lichtenhahn: Basel 1983, 233.

¹⁶ Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island*, University of Gothenburg: Gothenburg 2009, 87–89. See also Carl Phelpstead, 'The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (2003), 1–24, at 17–18 and 22. Laurie Finke stresses the potential of a dialogical perspective on sexuality in medieval romances: 'In the dialogical view of representation I have articulated, literature perpetuates even as it investigates the problem of sexuality, of the relations between the sexes. It does not simply reflect human sexuality; instead it participates in social processes that produce multiple and contradictory forms of sexuality, which include not only prescriptions and proscriptions but resistance to such restrictions as well.' Laurie A. Finke, 'Sexuality in Medieval French Literature. "Séparés, on est ensemble"', in Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1696), Garland: New York 1996, 345–368, at 362.

¹⁷ Bagerius 2009, 193–196.

eroticism of the sagas raises questions about intercourse between knight and maiden as an act of dominance and submission. The fourth and final section summarizes the key ideas in the article, and relates the changes in gender norms and sexual practices among the Icelandic aristocracy to European developments.

Sexuality and Society

Several historians have noticed how sexual practices slowly changed when Icelandic society was transformed between the late thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Auður Magnúsdóttir has pointed out that the practice of concubinage lost its political significance in Iceland during the Late Middle Ages and that aristocratic marriage became the most important form of alliance. In the Commonwealth period, concubines had been a political resource for the Icelandic chieftains. These women made a chieftain's network wider and stronger by creating bonds to powerful farmers. Furthermore, concubines were assets to their families. Having a female relative who lived with a chieftain and bore him children brought status to a farmer. However, when political power was institutionalized, the need for this sort of vertical alliance decreased. The aristocracy of the Late Middle Ages did not see the political advantage of building on ties to farmers by taking their daughters or sisters as concubines. In time, the Icelandic word for concubine, *frilla*, took on a strongly negative connotation, and in the fourteenth century, concubinage was condemned in increasingly sharper terms by the bishops.¹⁸

In the Late Middle Ages, it was no longer necessary for aristocrats to father a multitude of offspring. In earlier times, a large number of children had been a political resource. The more sons a chieftain had, the stronger his group of followers. Now, however, a good income and a certain degree of wealth were required of those who would enter the king's service. Therefore, it became important to limit the number of children, in order to keep estates intact. It was still essential that heirs be born, but not so many that rivalry and conflict arose.¹⁹ Influenced by Norwegian law, Icelandic rules of inheritance took on a stronger patrilineal character.²⁰ Sons would inherit their father's manors, and if there was only one manor, it would go to the eldest son. Daughters would receive outlying lands to the manor or other less important landed property, as would younger sons, if the father owned but one manor.²¹

The Late Middle Ages also saw changes in marital norms. Agnes Arnórsdóttir argues that monogamy became a decisive principle in Icelandic society and virginity equally important when marriage contracts were drawn up. Under the influence of the Church, marriage was transformed into a more personal bond between man and woman, even if it still fulfilled a political and economic function for the elite. The

¹⁸ Auður Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120–1400* (Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg, 29), University of Gothenburg: Gothenburg 2001, 95–96 and 152–153.

¹⁹ Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001, 213.

²⁰ Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn. Staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld* (Sagnfræðirannsóknir, 12), Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan: Reykjavík 1995, 85–90.

²¹ *Jónsbók. Kong Magnus Hakonssons lovbog for Island vedtaget paa Altinget 1281 og Réttarboetr. De for Island givne retterbøder af 1294, 1305 og 1314*, Ólafur Halldórsson ed., S. L. Möller: Copenhagen 1904, 78; Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity. The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600*, Aarhus University Press: Aarhus 2010, 406–424.

inexperienced and innocent woman became an ideal, and in wedding speeches virginity was celebrated as a sign of a wife's fidelity to her husband.²²

Moreover, Bjørn Bandlien's research into late medieval sagas shows how the interest in virginity was growing in Iceland at the turn of the fourteenth century. In several sagas, a sharp distinction is made between innocent maidens and depraved temptresses, and this literary evidence suggests that it was essential for young women to preserve their reputation as pure and unspoiled. According to Bandlien, new marital norms in Icelandic society were instrumental in bringing about this emphasis on female chastity and fidelity.²³ Saga accounts of men's sexual behaviour changed too. Bandlien speaks of 'a sublimation of male sexuality' as men's lusts and desires no longer cause serious social conflicts. In the fourteenth-century sagas—unlike the earlier ones—men seldom act in a way that might dishonour other men. They try to avoid insulting the woman's father or brothers when approaching her. Their goal is to enter into a marriage, and consequently it is imperative for them to be perceived as courteous and honest.²⁴

Bandlien argues that both the Church and the Crown supported these new ideals of love in Icelandic society. For the Church, it was important to distinguish between ennobling love and sinful sexuality. This distinction made it easier to promote marriage as the only accepted mode of cohabitation and to define it as a personal relationship between husband and wife. For the Crown, a different kind of love was crucial in the disciplining of its subjects. Blood feuds caused by abductions of women and illicit sexual relations had to be stopped. In addition to this, new ideals of love had advantages for the aristocracy. Bandlien suggests that Icelandic chieftains, who were weary of bloodshed, found the notion of a lasting love between aristocratic men and women appealing:

Late medieval aristocrats in royal service could profit by idealizing love between a couple of equal social status. The notion of 'true love' linked sexual relations to the desire for marriage and showed in an unfavourable light young men who exploited women as a means of power.²⁵

In different ways, Auður Magnúsdóttir, Agnes Arnórsdóttir, and Bjørn Bandlien

²² Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir 2010, 427–441. See also Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Property and Virginity. Change in the Contract of Marriage in the Middle Ages', in Richard Holt, Hilde Lange and Ulrike Spring eds., *Internationalisation in the History of Northern Europe. Report of the Nordsaga '99 Conference, University of Tromsø, 17–21 Nov 1999*, Department of History, University of Tromsø: Tromsø 2000, 79–89, at 87.

²³ Bjørn Bandlien describes how the sociosexual relations between men and women changed in Norway and Iceland during the late medieval period. Women's 'social identity was more connected to their sexuality and bodies than in the early Middle Ages. They should no longer raise their voices and utter their emotions and views of men, but be humble servants of men—be they God, their fathers, their brothers, or their husbands.' Bjørn Bandlien, 'The Church's Teaching on Women's Consent. A Threat to Parents and Society in Medieval Norway and Iceland?', in Lars Ivar Hansen ed., *Family, Marriage and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, Department of History, University of Tromsø: Tromsø 2000, 55–79, at 73.

²⁴ Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion. Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway* (Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, 6), Brepols: Turnhout 2005, 282–284 and 293–294 (hereafter Bandlien 2005a). In Icelandic sagas from the thirteenth century, men's sexual desires often lead to violent conflicts and long-running feuds, see Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love. The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, John Tucker trans., Museum Tusulanum: Copenhagen 2001.

²⁵ Bandlien 2005a, 294.

have highlighted changes in sexual practices among the Icelandic aristocracy during the Late Middle Ages. Concubinage lost its political significance, monogamy was reinforced as norm, and marriage was held as a more important form of alliance. Aristocratic women were expected to be virgins when they entered marriage, and aristocratic men learned to love in a more sublime way. These changes have been explained by two great shifts in Icelandic society: a new political system where power emanated from a king, and a well-organized Church which more effectively controlled marriage formation and sexual behaviour among people. Yet the changes in sexual norms and practices can also be viewed from another perspective. As social conditions altered in Iceland, it became important for the aristocracy to define itself as a distinct group, and sexuality proved to be very useful as a social marker.

Manhood and Maidenhood

The aristocratic interest in sexuality is apparent in many of the romances written in Iceland from the late thirteenth century through to the fifteenth century. These narratives provided a framework of sexual interpretation for the aristocratic audience and delineated certain sexual boundaries that noble men and women never should cross. In Icelandic romances, the friendship between equal knights is central. Chivalrous men seek one another's company, and the strong bonds between them often affect the way they act sexually. A true knight does not keep a concubine. He wishes to contract a marriage that will make him more admirable and give him more power. According to his world-view, marriage will enhance his reputation and widen his political network. Consequently, the most beautiful and richest maiden becomes the most desirable one. Nevertheless, there is a homosocial order to be followed—if she is already promised to another noble man he has to accept this fact.²⁶

A chivalrous knight is able to control his sexual desires and he also considers the consequences of his actions. These characteristics distinguish him from other men in the romances. The heathen, for example, acts without respecting the code of chivalry. He lacks the ability to reason and his urges cannot be subdued.²⁷ These traits apply to the berserk as well. He promises the maiden not to rape her, but the

²⁶ In *Sigurðar saga fóts* King Ásmundr proposes to the beautiful Princess Signý. But her father has promised her to King Sigurðr, and when Ásmundr learns of his rival he abducts Signý. In the end, however, Ásmundr realizes that friendship with Sigurðr would be more valuable to him than a marriage to Signý. Therefore he brings her to Sigurðr guaranteeing that they never have lived as husband and wife and that 'Signý still is unspoiled'. 'Sigurðar saga fóts' in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 3 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Series B, 22), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1963, 233–250, at 243. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

²⁷ Duke Matheus in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* threatens to kill Nikanor, usurp his duchy and take his sister Potentiana by force if he refuses to accept him as brother-in-law. Nikanor explains that Potentiana is already betrothed to another man, Prince Saulus, but Matheus is determined to have her. After her wedding the heathen duke plans to abduct her and sleep with her even though, as he puts it, 'she is now a little more flexible and slippery between her legs'. 'Saulus saga ok Nikanors' in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 2 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Series B, 21), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1963, 3–91, at 62. Other examples of heathen knights with unbridled desires can be found in *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* and *Ála flekks saga*. 'Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns' in Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 3, 3–66, at 27; 'Vilhjálms saga sjóðs' in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 4 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Series B, 23), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1964, 3–136, at 30; 'Ála flekks saga' in Åke Lagerholm ed., *Drei Lygisögur. Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana, Ála flekks saga, Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* (Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, 17), Niemeyer: Halle (Saale) 1927, 84–120, at 97.

monstrous part of him makes this promise hard to keep.²⁸ Neither of these two—the heathen and the berserk—can be trusted. They constitute a threat to the homosocial order of courtly society and must therefore be eliminated. The significance of monstrosity in the Icelandic romances is not to be underestimated. Monsters exist to demarcate the homosocial bonds of knights and to call attention to borders that cannot be crossed.²⁹ However, it takes more than dissociation from heathens and berserks for the knight to show that he is different. He needs to interact with these monsters, to defeat and finally kill them, in order to display his chivalrous masculinity. This undertaking is a way of demonstrating to others that he has learned to control the urges of his body.

Sexuality was also important in distinguishing aristocratic ladies from other women. As already noted, the interest in virginity among Icelandic aristocrats increased in the Late Middle Ages, partially as a result of a stronger patrilineal way of thinking. The maiden was now given a greater economic value. An aristocrat who wanted to be sure of the paternity of his oldest son—who would inherit his manor if he only happened to own one—chose a wife who was a virgin. In other words, there had to be a maidenhead to be taken on the wedding night. This fact is also pointed out in a late medieval Icelandic wedding speech, probably related to an actual wedding between an aristocratic man and woman. The speech describes so-called ‘playing under the blanket’ and how the bride ought to behave on her wedding night. Since the groom has presented her with several gifts, she is expected to give him something in return: she has to acknowledge his right to ‘spoil’ (*spilla*) her virginity.³⁰

However, the aristocratic approach to virginity was tinged with ambivalence.³¹ There was something both enticing and frightening about the sexuality of young women. The maiden was adored because of her chastity and pure thoughts. Since she was not yet sexually active, she possessed an innocence that other women had lost. In other words, the maiden was desirable as she was still intact. On the other hand, she was not considered to have any real knowledge of being a woman. The maiden had

²⁸ Duke Valbrandr in *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands* is described as a dark-skinned man, strong as a giant and full of sorcery. He kills Prince Sigrarðr and threatens to rape Florida, the prince’s wife, if she refuses to marry him. She sees no other option than to give her consent and is then told that Valbrandr will ‘inflict the greatest shame on her and force her to be his concubine’ if she breaks her promise to him. Only hours before Valbrandr has come to rape her, she manages to escape. ‘Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands’ in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Series B, 24), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1965, 111–194, at 165. Similar episodes are to be found in *Adonias saga* and *Bærings saga*. ‘Adonias saga’ in Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 3, 69–230, at 82–87; ‘Bærings saga’ in Gustaf Cederschiöld ed., *Fornsögur Suðurlanda. Magus saga jarls, Konraðs saga, Bærings saga, Flovents saga, Bevers saga*, [s. n.]: Lund 1884, 85–123, at 85. Berserks or monsters with unrestrained desires also appear in *Blómstrvalla saga*, *Dámusta saga*, *Ectors saga* and *Þjálár-Jóns saga*. *Blómstrvalla saga*, Theodorus Möbius ed., Breitkopfius et Haertelius: Lipsiæ 1855, 21; ‘Dámusta saga’ in Louisa Fredrika Tan-Haverhorst ed., *Þjálár Jóns saga, Dámusta saga*, 1: *Teksten*, H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon: Haarlem 1939, 48–108, at 93–97; ‘Ectors saga’ in Agnete Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 1 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Series B, 20), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1962, 81–186, at 99 and 164; ‘Þjálár Jóns saga’ in Tan-Haverhorst ed., *Þjálár Jóns saga*, 1–47, at 15.

²⁹ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants. Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Medieval Cultures, 17), University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1999, 102. On masculinity and monstrosity in medieval Iceland, see Bjørn Bandlien, *Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society* (*Acta humaniora*, 236), Unipub: Oslo 2005 (hereafter Bandlien 2005b).

³⁰ ‘Islandske bryllupstaler fra senmiddelalderen’, in Jón Helgason ed., *Opuscula*, 1 (Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana, 20), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1960, 163–175, at 174.

³¹ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens. Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester Medieval Studies), Manchester University Press: New York 2003, 146.

not yet experienced sexual intercourse and hence did not know what it meant to be a wife and a mother. This made it difficult for her to curb her sexual desires and to resist men who wanted to deprive her of her virginity. In this regard, she was a source of deep worry.³²

Icelandic romances accentuate the polarity between men and women. The ‘otherness’ of the maiden is frequently used to define the knight as masculine, and this never becomes more obvious than in the sexual encounters between the two of them. For example, in some romances, lascivious maidens figure in order to emphasize the self-restraint and decency of the knight. The primary literary function of these women is to tempt the knight and wrongly accuse him of assault. In this way, he gets the chance to prove himself virtuous: he—unlike these women—is able to bridle his desires.³³ Even chaste maidens can serve as foils for the male hero. This fact applies particularly to the ‘maiden-kings’ who stubbornly refuse to marry and be subordinated to a man. A maiden-king is a beautiful maiden who reigns by virtue of her virginity and wants to keep it that way. In some cases she claims masculinity—uses a man’s name, wears men’s clothes, and leads her own army into battle—but even if she dresses like a woman and stays in her palace, she demands to be addressed as king. The maiden-king wants everybody to know that she rules the kingdom as (other) men have done before her.³⁴

One of these female rulers is Florentia in *Gibbons saga*.³⁵ From the very moment the Frankish Prince Gibbon sees her in a vision, he is determined to conquer her. If she cannot be forced into marrying him, at least he wants to ‘deflower

³² Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, ‘Introduction. Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity’, in Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (The New Middle Ages), Macmillan: Basingstoke 1999, 1–21, at 3. See also R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1991, 107–108.

³³ See, for example, Lucinia in *Bærings saga* and Rósamunda in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*. ‘Bærings saga’, 109–110; *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, Sven Grén Broberg ed. (Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 38), Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur: Copenhagen 1909–1912, 80–99. Both these princesses feel a burning desire for the protagonists, and, rejected, falsely accuse them of sexual assault. Another lecherous woman is Queen Dowager Katrín in *Mírmanns saga*, who, by magical means, tricks Mírmann into marrying her and forgetting the woman he is already married to. *Mírmanns saga*, Desmond Slay ed. (Editiones Arnarnæ, Series A, 17), C. A. Reitzels: Copenhagen 1997, 109.

³⁴ Erik Wahlgren, *The Maiden King in Iceland*, The University of Chicago Libraries: Chicago 1938; Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘The Misogamous Maiden Kings of Icelandic Romances’, *Scripta Islandica. Isländska sällskapets årsbok* 37 (1986), 47–71; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Queens of Terror. Perilous Women in *Hálfs saga* and *Hrólf’s saga kraka*’, in Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney eds., *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi. Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9.2001* (Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 28), Uppsala universitet: Uppsala 2003, 173–189; Bagerius 2009, 127–130 and 155–186; Sif Ríkhardsdóttir, ‘Meykóngahæfðin í riddarasögum. Hugmyndafræðileg átök um kynhlutverk og þjóðfélagsstöðu’, *Skírnir. Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags* 184 (2010), 410–433; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘From Heroic Legend to “Medieval Screwball Comedy”? The Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Maiden-King Narrative’, in Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson eds., *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, University of Iceland Press: Reykjavík 2012, 229–249; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature. Bodies, Words, and Power* (The New Middle Ages), Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2013, 107–133.

³⁵ *Gibbons saga* was probably composed in Iceland in mid fourteenth century and is preserved in more than thirty manuscripts and fragments. M. J. Driscoll, ‘Gibbons saga’, in Pulsiano and Wolf eds., *Medieval Scandinavia*, 226–227, at 226. R. I. Page’s edition from 1960 is based on *AM 335 4°* (ca 1400), *Holm perg 7 fol* (late fifteenth century), and *AM 529 4°* (early sixteenth century). The learned vocabulary and religious elements of *Gibbons saga* suggest that the author was a cleric, or at least a person familiar with learned and religious literature. Kalinke 1990, 135.

her maidenhead'.³⁶ But Florentia, queen over a third of India, rejects his courtship and orders her warriors to attack him. When Gibbon finally avenges himself on the maiden-king, he does so disfigured by magical means and disguised as a monk. He approaches her bed, and when Florentia wakes up, one of his followers—a dwarf—throws a magical blanket over her:

Then the Queen's strength fails her, so that she can neither move nor make any sign. But she sees these enemies and is fully conscious. The dwarf says: 'Now, Prince, it is time to fulfil your promise.'

The Prince undresses quickly, climbs onto the bed, and takes Queen Florentia's pale body in his arms. There she loses her pure virginity with little enjoyment. Not with pleasure or delight, but rather with bitterness and hatred. More with gall and shame, than with any joy in this world.³⁷

A knight who is humiliated and attacked by a woman must take action, which explains why Gibbon in this case attacks the maiden-king, and shows none of the tact and courteousness that might otherwise be expected of him. In *Gibbons saga*, sexual intercourse becomes a gendering act. When Gibbon 'takes revenge on the lady's maidenhead', he demonstrates his masculinity and at the same time makes a woman out of the maiden-king.³⁸ Once it becomes known that a maiden-king has lost her virginity, she cannot maintain her masculine identity and political power. In other words, Gibbon's actions re-establish a hierarchical order between man and woman.³⁹

In the Middle Ages, sexual intercourse was interpreted as reflecting and reinforcing a divine and natural order in society. When penetrating, a man demonstrated his masculine ability to act decisively and forcefully, and by allowing herself to be penetrated, a woman accepted subordination to a man. This view of active men and passive women was ubiquitous in medieval society, as was the notion that sexual transgressions of any kind caused social disorder.⁴⁰ Male same-sex acts, for example, were considered an abomination. They violated God's created order, not least because the man who played the passive role showed his preference for being a woman.⁴¹ Certain heterosexual acts were also condemned as dangerous. Thus, a

³⁶ *Gibbons saga*, R. I. Page ed. (Editiones Arnemagnæanæ, Series B, 2), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1960, 26.

³⁷ *Gibbons saga*, 75.

³⁸ *Gibbons saga*, 75.

³⁹ It should be noted that sexuality is portrayed as a gender determinant in other saga genres too. In several *Íslendingasögur*—sagas of Iceland's oldest history—intercourse becomes a trial of strength. By defeating the woman sexually, the man lays claim to his masculinity. See Henric Bagerius, 'I genusstrukturens spänningsfält. Om kön, genus och sexualitet i saga och samhälle', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 116 (2001), 21–63, at 43–55, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, 'Heder och sexuellt våld. En undersökning av medeltida isländska källor', in Kenneth Johansson ed., *Hedersmord. Tusen år av hederskultur* (Lagerbringbiblioteket), Historiska media: Lund 2005, 47–75, at 58–70. Similarly, in a number of *fornaldarsögur*—sagas set in a mythical past—sexual encounters between men and women are described as a power struggle. See Henric Bagerius, 'Vidunderliga kvinnor vid vatten. Konfliktskapande intimitet i myt och verklighet', in Agneta Ney, Armann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen eds., *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Museum Tusulanum: Copenhagen 2009, 223–243.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Murray, 'Historicizing Sex, Sexualizing History', in Nancy Partner ed., *Writing Medieval History* (Writing History), Arnold: London 2005, 133–152, at 144–146.

⁴¹ William E. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature. France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature), Cambridge University Press: New York 2004,

woman on top was regarded as a sexual inversion that might deprive the man of his masculinity. This position was seen as a metaphor for an inverted social order where women dominated men.⁴²

Ruth Mazo Karras argues that sexual intercourse in medieval society ‘was understood as something that one person did to another’.⁴³ Sexual acts had clear-cut roles: men did the penetrating, and women—or other men—were penetrated. Being an active or a passive partner did not necessarily have anything to do with who initiated the sexual contact or who enjoyed sex more. Women were thought to be more lecherous than men, but nevertheless they were understood to be passive partners in sexual intercourse. Consequently, men’s and women’s experiences of sexual acts were often seen as quite different. Even if both sexual partners were satisfied, a feeling of reciprocal pleasure was of less significance to them. ‘Mutuality’, as Karras puts it, ‘was not important in the medieval conceptualization of sex.’⁴⁴

In the Icelandic romances, sexual mutuality is often absent. The deflowering of Florentia in *Gibbons saga* may be a pleasure to Gibbon, but for the maiden-king the experience is both horrifying and agonizing. Being swaddled in a magic blanket leaves Florentia paralysed but fully conscious, and she is forced to endure every second of Gibbon’s violation of her body. This causes feelings of hate and shame in Florentia and, as the saga tells us, she is neither happy nor satisfied. Not at that point. But when Gibbon casts off his disguise, Florentia’s feelings suddenly change. She is pleased to find that her ravisher is a handsome knight, and from this moment the two of them ‘are such true loves that they cannot take their eyes off each other’.⁴⁵ Thus, an act of sexual abuse is transformed into a romantic episode.⁴⁶ Male domination and female submission are ‘coded as emotionally satisfying and aesthetically pleasing’ to use Kathryn Gravdal’s words.⁴⁷

Unlike most Icelandic sagas where the maiden-king motif occurs, *Gibbons saga* does not end in a marriage between the brave knight and the headstrong maiden-king. Once Gibbon has lived with Florentia for a year, he is persuaded to travel to the Greek Empire, and the waiting Princess Greka, his first love, whose maidenhead he once attempted to take ‘in his male nature and desire’.⁴⁸ That time he

53–73; Karma Lochrie, ‘Presumptive Sodomy and Its Exclusions’, *Textual Practice* 13 (1999), 295–310.

⁴² Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages. Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge Monographs on the History of Medicine), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1993, 245–246; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations. The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (The Middle Ages), University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 1999, 185. See also Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Women on Top’, in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France. Eight Essays by Natalie Zemon Davis*, Stanford University Press: Stanford 1975, 124–151.

⁴³ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe. Doing unto Others*, Routledge: New York 2005, 4.

⁴⁴ Karras 2005, 4.

⁴⁵ *Gibbons saga*, 78.

⁴⁶ The sexual encounter between the married King Marsilius and the young Remedja in *Adonias saga* has the same dramaturgy. The king ignores her tears and prayers, and the forced intercourse arouses strong feelings of pleasure in her (‘Adonias saga’, 86). In *Sigurðar saga turnara* the king’s daughter is resigned when Sigurðr, heir to the Frankish throne, having forced her to have sex with him, asks if he should return later. What would be the point of protesting, she asks. The whole winter long, Sigurðr shares her bed, and he does not hesitate to announce that he has ‘spoilt no other than the king’s daughter’. ‘Sigurðar saga turnara’, in Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 3, 197–232, at 221. In time, however, the king’s daughter falls in love with Sigurðr, and what begins in sexual assault ends in a happy marriage.

⁴⁷ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens. Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (New Cultural Studies Series), University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 1991, 15.

⁴⁸ *Gibbons saga*, 8.

failed, but now Greka wants him back. And, even more remarkably, it transpires that she was the one who got Gibbon interested in Florentia and helped him to defeat her. The reasons for Greka's actions are not clear from the saga, but her plan has obviously always been to finally be reunited with Gibbon. Their wedding is celebrated immediately, and the couple later have a son.

Florentia, too, has a son, named Eskopart. In this way, Gibbon's time at the Indian court can be seen as an investment for the future. He now has two sons to carry on his line. At first, Eskopart finds it hard to accept that Gibbon treated his mother so badly, and he wants to avenge his mother's dishonour; but later, having fought a duel, father and son reconcile, and in recognition of Eskopart's birthright, he is given the Frankish kingdom, Gibbon's ancestral lands, to rule. For Florentia a life of sorrow and loss beckons, however. Since Gibbon abandoned her, she has sought refuge in a nunnery, where she has taken vows to live in chastity and never again to speak to men.

Pain and Pleasure

Sexual violence is not uncommon in medieval literature. Kathryn Gravdal has studied Old French romances from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and her conclusion is that romantic episodes in these narratives often contain men's declarations of love as well as expressions of their aggression. The use of language in particular indicates that rape is seen as an intrinsic part of the feudal system in the world of medieval romance, 'built into the military culture in which force is applauded in most of its forms.'⁴⁹ In the works of Chrétien de Troyes, sexual violence does indeed fill a didactic function—it is wrong to rape women, and a true knight never forces a maiden into having sex with him—but at the same time, the literary audience is invited to share an erotic experience where men from lower levels of society appear crude and brutal. According to Gravdal, the poet titillates male fantasies about forced intercourse. In the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, rape scenes are turned into romantic adventures. Maidens must be attacked in order for knights to save them. Rape thus glorifies masculine courage, and the result is that the audience's attention is drawn away from the victims, 'away from a reflection on the physical suffering of women.'⁵⁰

The sexual violence in Icelandic romances is different. Marginal men as heathens and berserks may attempt to ravish princesses, but they are almost always unsuccessful in their pursuit. Instead, the typical offender is an ambitious prince trying to conquer a maiden-king who has rejected him in one way or other. He may force himself upon her, disgrace her, compare her to a harlot, and leave her crying on the bed, but his actions are usually not described as contemptible and despicable in the romances. On the contrary, in these narratives the defloration of the maiden-king—however violent this act may be—is a necessary measure that wins the admiration of other men. All women have to be subdued, socially and sexually, especially those who call themselves kings and act like men.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gravdal 1991, 4.

⁵⁰ Gravdal 1991, 67.

⁵¹ Frederic Amory, 'Things Greek and the *Riddarasögur*', *Speculum* 59 (1984), 509–523, at 517, argues that the overall tendency of the characterization of the maiden-king is to exploit sadomasochism and 'degrade her and her lovers to retaliatory acts of sexual bondage'.

As Daniel Sävborg has pointed out, there are many romances in which the knight does not behave violently towards the maiden or humiliate her. True, the brand of courtly love where the man worships the woman is certainly not a prominent feature, but as a rule the knight is respectful when approaching a lady of birth and wealth.⁵² However, there is a risk that he will abuse and humiliate her if she refuses to marry him—that is, if she is unwilling to conform to the patriarchal order. Sedentiana, the maiden-king of *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, is publicly disgraced, and this after being forced to have sexual intercourse with three different creatures three nights in a row.⁵³ This Frankish queen is so proud that she can think of ‘no one born in the northern hemisphere to whom she could be joined in love without thereby incurring absolute disgrace.’⁵⁴ All kings, dukes, and princes that are bold enough to woo her are humiliated and thrown out of her kingdom. There are two princes, Hálfðan and Vilhjálmr, who are particularly badly treated. First Sedentiana cuts off all their hair and has their heads smeared with tar. Then she calls for eight thralls to flog the brothers with whips and swords until their skin is in shreds. She also has the shape of an owl cut into their backs and their stomachs burnt with a red-hot basin before she releases them.⁵⁵ Hálfðan and Vilhjálmr are eager to seek revenge, but in the end it is Sigurðr the Silent, their younger brother, who defends their honour by attacking the maiden-king. With a magic stone he lures Sedentiana out of her palace, and when night falls he leaves her alone on a heath. Suddenly she sees a swineherd approaching with a great herd of swine. Sedentiana begs him to help her, and when he finds out who she is, he promises to do so—if she spends the night with him. The queen is appalled and says that she would rather die than endure such shame. But the swineherd is persistent, and eventually she has no other option than to accept his demand.

And after this, he lies down next to her and makes her body warm and comfortable. Then he takes her forcibly, and she finds it most curious how delightful his body is to touch and how strongly she is being handled. She now completely realizes what she will never regain: her virginity. The night passes and the lady gets warm, both from love games and from more clement weather. Then the Queen becomes drowsy and falls asleep.⁵⁶

⁵² Sävborg 2007, 578.

⁵³ *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* was probably composed in Iceland in the fourteenth century and is preserved in some sixty manuscripts and fragments. The saga survives in two redactions, a longer and a shorter one. M. J. Driscoll, ‘Sigurðar saga þǫgla’, in Pulsiano and Wolf eds., *Medieval Scandinavia*, 585. For this article, Agnete Loth’s 1963 edition of the longer redaction, which is based on *AM 152 fol* (early sixteenth century), has been studied.

⁵⁴ ‘Sigurðar saga þǫgla’, in Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 2, 95–259, at 100–101.

⁵⁵ It is not uncommon to find sexualized violence in the maiden-king sagas. Scenes of torture, where the knight is surprised in the maiden-king’s bed and is beaten, whipped, and branded, are found in *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, and *Víktor saga ok Blávus*. *Dínus saga drambláta* (I) in *Dínus saga drambláta*, Jónas Kristjánsson ed. (Riddarasögur, 1), Háskóli Íslands: Reykjavík 1960, 3–94, at 31–36; ‘Sigrarðs saga frækna’ in Loth ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5, 41–107, at 61–63; *Víktors saga ok Blávus*, Jónas Kristjánsson ed. (Riddarasögur, 2), Handritastofnun Íslands: Reykjavík 1964, 37–38. Also in *Hrólfss saga kraka ok kappá hans*—an Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* that, according to Ármann Jakobsson, ‘ideologically as well as stylistically and structurally’ resembles a romance—the maiden-king has her suitors tortured. *Hrólfss saga kraka*, D. Slay ed. (Editiones Arnarnænar, Series B, 1), Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1960, 18–19; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Le Roi Chevalier. The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfss saga kraka*’, *Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999), 139–166, at 163.

⁵⁶ ‘Sigurðar saga þǫgla’, 203.

By the next morning the swineherd is gone, and Sedentiana continues to wander through the wilderness. At dusk, a dwarf appears and forces her to have sex with him, and the night after that she has to spend with a hideous giant. When the maiden-king awakes on the third morning, she is lying under a fruit tree in her own palace garden, and she soon realizes that the events of the previous days have been orchestrated through enchantment and optical illusions. She has never actually left the palace garden. Shortly after, Sedentiana discovers that she is pregnant, and she is somewhat cheered when she finds out that it is Sigurðr the Silent in disguise who has slept with her each of the three nights. Later the maiden-king secretly gives birth to a son, Flores.

In *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, the aestheticization of sexual violence is such that the distinction between coercion and consent is blurred. The maiden-king protests loudly, but when the swineherd takes her forcefully she marvels at the attractiveness of his body and is fascinated by his strength. Sedentiana also finds that she is not repelled to be near the giant when he ‘handles her beautiful body as it pleases him’, and she observes that the dwarf feels like a full-grown man when he ‘takes her so firmly that she cannot offer any resistance’ and then ‘amuses himself with her’.⁵⁷ In *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, the maiden-king is more or less enjoying being taken against her will.⁵⁸

Evelyn Birge Vitz has discussed sexual violence and erotic pleasure in Old French romances, and she opposes Gravidal’s premise that medieval rape narratives titillated *male* fantasies and that only men took pleasure in the idea of forced sex. According to Vitz, it is highly likely that some medieval women dreamed of succumbing to an attractive man and fantasized about being overpowered and conquered by him. An aristocratic man was defined by his ability to use force; he was admired for his strength, boldness, and bravery. This applied to his sexual behaviour as well. When he took a woman by force, he proved his masculinity. Vitz argues that

whether we approve of this or not, medieval women and men alike may have considered that for a man to ‘force’ a woman—to refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer—could be construed as a natural expression of his manhood: that some use of force was appropriate in ‘conquering’ a woman, as in capturing a town. And while it is, undeniably, a terrible and frightening experience for a woman to be raped in actuality, it is altogether likely that some medieval women entertained fantasies of being, at least to some extent, ‘forced’ by men whom they found attractive.⁵⁹

Vitz has been criticized for projecting modern notions into the past and for ignoring female medieval poets such as Marie de France and Christine de Pizan who

⁵⁷ ‘Sigurðar saga þǫgla’, 206 and 209.

⁵⁸ In *Dínus saga drambláta*, the defloration of Princess Philotemia is described in similar terms. When Prince Dínus forces her into bed, she begs him to ‘spare her and her maidenhead’, but when she realizes that he has overpowered her, she surrenders, and finds the experience not entirely unpleasant (*Dínus saga drambláta* (I), 64). Daniel Sävborg (2007, 577) notes that the sexual abuse in *Dínus saga drambláta* is depicted in the idiom of courtly love, with the victim referred to as *unnusta*, ‘sweetheart’, and intercourse as *amor*.

⁵⁹ Evelyn Birge Vitz, ‘Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature. Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections’, *The Romanic Review* 88 (1997), 1–26, at 10.

denounced men's sexual violence against women.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Vitz makes an important point: intercourse was understood as an act where one person claimed sexual ownership of another person. By conquering a woman sexually—especially by 'spoiling' her virginity, to quote the Icelandic wedding speech mentioned above—a man gave himself ownership of her body. This is why the maiden-kings of Icelandic romances have to abdicate once their defloration has become publicly known. They can no longer claim political power, since they are now a man's possession.⁶¹

Some years later Sedentiana and Sigurðr meet again, and the maiden-king is now determined to disgrace him and his brothers once and for all. During a banquet in her palace, eight thralls enter the hall and in a dramatic form re-enact the torture of Hálfðan and Vilhjálmr. Both princes turn white with rage, but they have to endure this spectacle being performed for a further two evenings. The fourth night ends differently, however. To Sedentiana's great horror, a swineherd appears in the hall telling every one of his sexual adventures with the maiden-king on the heath, and this man does not mince matters:

You disgusting harlot, known as Queen of Trier! Now the time has come when I will no longer remain silent over the shame you are about to bring on me. Although Sigurðr the Silent—whom you cannot take your eyes off—appears to be lordlier than I am, I have a greater claim to you than he has. For when I lay by your naked body there on the heath, I thoroughly explored your virginity. I know that I was your first man, and even though you have lain with many others since, no one can make full claim to you but me.⁶²

Considering himself the rightful owner of Sedentiana and her body, the swineherd tries to grab her and drag her out of the hall. This causes great merriment, especially among Sigurðr's brothers who insult her loudly as she is fighting off the swineherd. The scene is repeated on two subsequent evenings, when the banquet is attended by a dwarf and a giant respectively. Watching the giant trying to capture the maiden-king, Sigurðr sarcastically remarks that Sedentiana could certainly no longer be called a virgin 'if *he* has lain between her legs'.⁶³ In the end, it is Flores who brings reconciliation to his parents. Facing the public shame of having been deflowered, Sedentiana has no other option than to renounce her kingdom in favour of her son.

⁶⁰ See the following three articles in Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose eds., *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (The New Middle Ages), Palgrave: New York 2001: Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose, 'Introduction. Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature', 1–17, at 6; Christine M. Rose, 'Reading Chaucer Reading Rape', 21–60, at 26–27; Christopher Cannon, 'Afterword', 411–416.

⁶¹ In *Sigrarðs saga frækna* there is a passage that accentuates the man's ownership of the deflowered woman. Ingigerðr, the maiden-king of the saga, rejects all her suitors, but when Prince Sigrarðr courts her, she pretends to be flattered into accepting his offer of marriage. That same night his standard will be carried into her bedchamber, as she says, to 'make it clear that you have power over me and over all that is mine' ('Sigrarðs saga frækna', 55).

⁶² 'Sigurðar saga þt̄gla', 239–240. Neither does Dínus in *Dínus saga drambláta* mince his words with Princess Philotemia. Having forced her to have sex with him, he decides to return to his homeland. Philotemia cries, and begs him to stay and marry her as he promised. But Dínus will have none of it. He leaves her with the words: 'It is not the custom in our country to visit a whore more than once, and so we shall part here, never to meet again if I have my way' (*Dínus saga drambláta* (I), 67–68). In time, however, he changes his mind, and the saga ends with a detailed description of their wedding celebrations, which last seven days.

⁶³ 'Sigurðar saga þt̄gla', 243.

Flores, however, is prepared to give the whole empire to Sigurðr the Silent, if he will acknowledge that he is Flores's father. Sigurðr then recognizes Flores as his son and asks Sedentiana to marry him, and at his request the disgraced maiden-king is willing to 'put on her robes of state and rejoice.'⁶⁴

Iceland and Europe

Both *Gibbons saga* and *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* were written at a time when aristocratic masculinity and femininity were redefined in Icelandic society. In the fourteenth century, virginity became more important to the political elite. It was thought that only by choosing a virgin bride could an aristocratic man ensure that he would be the father of their first-born. As a stronger patrilineal principle of inheritance was introduced in Iceland, aristocratic women—and women in general—were sexualized. From then on, female honour was highly dependent on a woman's ability to protect her sexual purity.

Femininity was fixed, while masculinity expanded. Political developments in Iceland opened new arenas to aristocratic men where they could explore modes of behaviour that would previously have been taken for weaknesses. These men were still supposed to use violence to defend themselves when attacked, but as the Norwegian king's men and representatives of his kingdom they would also be expected to behave courteously to one another. A chivalrous man used his weapons wisely. He should also show sexual self-control. If a woman tried to seduce him, he should reject her. Keeping concubines was not accepted, nor was he allowed to use prostitutes. All this is stated in *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Hirðskrá*, the former a Norwegian example of speculum literature dealing with politics and morality, the latter a Norwegian collection of laws regulating the king's retinue.⁶⁵ Both these texts seem to have been widely read in Iceland during the fourteenth century.⁶⁶

The changes in gender norms and sexual practices among the Icelandic aristocracy were similar to those that occurred in France and Germany in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁶⁷ James Schultz points to three historical developments that would have affected aristocratic masculinity in Continental Europe around the year 1200. First, the growth of territorial states served to curtail and mitigate violence in the aristocracy. Once political power was concentrated and held by greater princes, feuds and other violent conflicts could more easily be avoided. Second, as the Church consolidated its jurisdiction over marriage, men's relations with women were increasingly regulated. The ecclesiastical doctrine of consensual, monogamous, and indissoluble marriage made it more difficult for an aristocrat to repudiate his wife and live with a concubine. Third, the formation of

⁶⁴ 'Sigurðar saga þǫgla', 246.

⁶⁵ *Konungs skuggsjá*, Ludvig Holm-Olsen ed. (Norrøne tekster, 1), Kjeldeskriftfondet: Oslo 1945, 5:30, 56:23, 59:27–33 and 64:39; 'Hirðskráen' in Steinar Imsen ed., *Hirdloven til Norges konge og hans håndgagne menn. Etter Am 322 fol.*, Riksarkivet: Oslo 2000, 110.

⁶⁶ Ludvig Holm-Olsen, 'The Prologue to The King's Mirror. Did the Author of the Work write it?' in Ursula Droke et al. eds., *Specvlvm Norroenvm. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, Odense University Press: Odense 1981, 223–241, at 235–238; Steinar Imsen, 'Innledning', in Imsen ed., *Hirdloven*, 9–55, at 19.

⁶⁷ Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest. The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1993, 282–284; James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1987, 183–185.

courtly culture offered aristocratic men alternative ways of distinguishing themselves. Courtly propriety had a disciplinary effect and encouraged men to exercise restraint in their relations with women. Schultz argues that these historical developments 'represent a gradual shift from an older paradigm of noble masculinity to a newer one'. Male aristocrats were expected to abandon, or at least modify, behaviours that previously had defined them as men and to adopt a new, more class-specific gender ideal.⁶⁸

It is tempting to describe changing gender norms and sexual practices in late medieval Iceland as the result of some sort of disciplinary process too. This has been suggested by Bjørn Bandlien, who stresses that new political and ecclesiastical realities in Norse society contributed to the disciplining of male aristocrats: they learned to control their emotions and act in a chivalrous manner.⁶⁹ This is true, in part. Icelandic romances from the late thirteenth through to the fifteenth centuries show that chivalry was an essential element in the aristocratic self-image in Iceland. These narratives often tell of noble knights who bridle their desires and respect the main principles of aristocratic marriage formation. They avoid violent conflicts with other noble men over a princess.

However, it should also be emphasized that these knights do not always act in such a controlled manner. Judging from the Icelandic romances, it was a matter of disciplining *within* the aristocracy and *between* male aristocrats. Men outside the aristocratic group—heathens and berserks—constitute a threat to the homosocial order of knighthood, and must be killed or otherwise punished if they try to conquer a high-born lady. In these cases, aggression and violence are justified. This also goes for proud queens or princesses. Especially the maiden-king, who despises marriage and refuses to submit to a man, must be defeated and sexually subordinated. To modern eyes, the sexual encounter between the knight and the maiden-king does not appear the least bit courtly.

In several romances, sex is portrayed as an act by which the man confirms his power over the woman and her body. The same mode of thought is evident in other Icelandic sources. By way of conclusion, let us return to the wedding speech mentioned before. Written, it would seem, for an aristocratic wedding in Iceland in the Late Middle Ages, it describes among other things what the bride should expect on her wedding night. When her husband comes to her, she should make space for him in the bed, and if he wants to bare something that she has not previously seen she should not be afraid: it means that her husband wants to give her a further gift that will be a source of joy to her, bringing her both satisfaction and delight. The speech to the bride continues:

Now you have made a good bargain, received many good things without paying for them, and even if he spoils what you lay in his power, he himself is entitled to claim it.⁷⁰

On this her wedding night, the bride is to present the bridegroom with her virginity—to lay it in his power, as the speech puts it—and when he 'spoils' it, then she must

⁶⁸ James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2006, 173–175.

⁶⁹ Bandlien 2005a, 295–298.

⁷⁰ 'Íslandske bryllupstaler fra senmiddelalderen', 174.

know that it is his right to do so. A wife does not own her body. Once her husband has deflowered her, she belongs to him forever.

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