

Friðriksdóttir, Jóhanna Katrín. 2013. *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 192 pages. ISBN: 978-0-230-12042-6.

No doubt as a result of the development of feminist theory and its recent application to literary and historical criticism, the last several decades have witnessed an outpouring of works dedicated to the study of women in Old Norse literature. Scholars such as Carol Clover (1993), Jenny Jochens (1995 and 1996), and Helga Kress (1993) have re-examined Old Norse literature and history—scholarship on which was primarily male-dominated, both in focus and authorship—and in doing so have made significant contributions to our understanding of the status of and views towards women and gender in the saga world. In her monograph, based on her doctoral thesis, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir seeks to build upon these foundational works and add to their discourse, which, she argues, are in need of revision. She argues that Jochens’ model, although of “much critical value” (6), is not sufficiently nuanced, and Clover’s argument that women’s power is tied to masculine virtues is one-dimensional and neglects other important ways in which women wield influence. Moreover, the analyses of previous critics have focused almost exclusively on the *Íslendingasögur* and drawn conclusions about gender in Old Norse society based on examples from this genre. Friðriksdóttir’s scope is wider, and the corpus she examines extends to often-overlooked works of secular Old Norse prose—namely, the *fornaldarsögur*. The purpose of the work is therefore to “interrogate and complicate the previous images of women, aiming to bring more of them to the forefront of scholarly discussion” (8).

In Chapter 1, “Women Speaking,” Friðriksdóttir reviews and re-examines one of the best-known and most frequently-discussed roles for women in Old Norse literature: the whetter. Friðriksdóttir considers the historicity and function of the whetter and concludes that it is much more complex than scholars have acknowledged. Moreover, it is by no means the only role that allows for women’s speech; another important character type is the wise woman, who advocates for peace rather than violence. She explores the association of women with wisdom and good counsel, particularly within the realm of the *fornaldarsögur*, where royal women and queens act as wise counselors to their kings. Next, Friðriksdóttir details the manifestations of women’s wisdom as well as the essence of their advice. The function, she argues, is a didactic one since the consequences of ignoring women’s advice is almost always disastrous.

In Chapter 2, “Women and Magic,” Friðriksdóttir explores the way in which women use magic as a tool for power and discusses how it can function as a versatile literary motif to shed light and promote debate on questions of a sociopolitical nature. She defines magic as all supernatural events caused by a

saga character and characterizes attitudes towards magic as ambiguous and case-dependent—particularly when women practice it. The scholarly discourse on women and magic has tended to focus on women practicing magic as human counterparts to the *völva*, whose power was suppressed by Christianity. However, the contemporary sagas show very little magic, and there are few explicit references to *seiðr* and *völur*. Friðriksdóttir is skeptical over whether women who practice magic in the sagas really reflect the pagan *völur*, since this implies the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century authors were familiar with these pagan practices. She also considers this question to be irrelevant because of much more importance than historicity is what authors do with magic and how it functions in the text. She concludes that when there are no men available to act on a woman's behalf, magic is a critical tool that women in Old Norse literature are able to use for self-preservation without automatic social stigma.

In Chapter 3, “Monstrous Women,” Friðriksdóttir examines gendered bodies and alterity in the *fornaldarsögur*. She begins with a brief summary of monster theory and a definition of the hybrid figure, who “embodies and mirrors not only the fears and anxieties but also the desires of the culture that produces it” (60-61). The monster who mirrors humans uncovers feelings of vulnerability and defines what is constructed as “normal” and “natural” by embodying the “abnormal” and the “unnatural.” For the most part, the female monster in Old Norse literature is the giantess. She may be hostile, and her presentation in this way indicates cultural attitudes towards race (Sámi and Celts, especially), violence, and sexual deviance. She may be a sexual partner, mirroring the Irish Loathly Lady, or helpful, as a *fóstra*, expressing the desire of the “monstrous woman” embodied in the giantess to be part of human society. While reading the chapter, particularly in the monster/human dichotomy, I was reminded of the giant/god dichotomy in the mythological literature, which would have been a helpful comparison to draw.

Chapter 4, “Royal and Aristocratic Women,” concentrates on the influence of women in courtly culture who “have special status due to their elevated rank, enabling them to operate outside the traditional female spheres of reproduction, child-rearing, and domestic responsibilities” (80). The subgenre of focus is, understandably, the *konungasögur*, or kings' sagas. Friðriksdóttir notes that while there do not appear to be any stock female characters in the *konungasögur*, there are some identifiable role patterns among queens of legend, mothers of kings, heads of royal households, and women as politicians, all of whom she analyzes using Max Weber's model of power. She demonstrates the ways in which famous royal and aristocratic women of the *konungasögur* gained power and wielded influence and considers the legitimacy of this power based on their depictions and other characters' reactions to them.

The fifth and final chapter, “The Female Ruler,” focuses on the maiden-king [*meykongr*] narratives, and is in many ways a continuation of the previous chapter's discussion, as it similarly focuses on women in the royal court—but this time, as

rulers rather than rulers' wives or mothers. The chapter includes an analysis of this character type and demonstrates how in all but one narrative—namely, *Nitida saga*—the maiden-king, who was initially able to live independently of men and fulfill public roles otherwise reserved for men only, is in the end subjugated under a man and is made subservient. One small emendation needs to be made to a statement about the Old Norse virgin martyr legends as worthy rivals in brutality to the maiden-king narrative *Clári saga* (121); the pagan rulers who tortured these young women were, in fact, legitimate suitors who were mesmerized by the maidens. Indeed, the fact that the maidens rejected their pagan suitors due to their commitments to Christ is the initial reason for which they are brought to trial and subject to gruesome punishments.

Overall, I found this to be a very well-written, well-researched, and well-argued text. Friðriksdóttir succeeds in her purpose of nuancing previous studies and bringing to light a number of additional images of women from genres that are often absent from scholarship on women in secular Old Norse literature—most notably the *fornaldarsögur* but also the *konungasögur*. The conclusions drawn are exciting as are the possibilities the work opens for similar studies on vernacular secular poetry and vernacular religious prose and poetry.

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