

"Cold Are the Counsels of Women"
The Tradition Behind the Tradition

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Let me begin with two clichés. One is that funeral lamentation is a cultural universal and that its expressions are remarkably similar throughout the world and throughout human history. The other is that funeral lamentation is a typically female form--not infrequently a female profession. By the term "funeral lamentation" is meant two things: behavior and verbal expression. Typical lamenting behaviors include weeping, wailing, tearing at one's hair or letting it fall into dishevelment, self-mutilation, tearing one's clothes or other cloth, and wearing tattered garments. The verbal lament can range from a "formless outcry," as Brakeley puts it, to a "high order of poetic and musical expression approaching the lyric elegy and the epic lay." It typically combines praise for the dead person with expressions of fear or self-pity at being left alone and perhaps unprotected. In Mustanoja's words, lamenting one's own fate in another's seems to be a more or less inherent feature of funeral songs wherever they are heard. To the extent that verbal lamentation of this sort constitutes a literary genre, it is a literary genre repeatedly associated with women.

With these generalities in mind, let us turn to verbal lamentation in the Norse world. The memorial poem or erfíkvæði is a well-developed genre there--but it appears to be an exclusively male genre, not a female one. For example, Þorkell Elfaraskáld on the death of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi:

Spurðu vér, hvé varðisk
vígmóðr kjalar slóða
glaðstýrandi geiri,
Gunnarr, fyrir Kjǫlr sunnan.
Sóknrýrir vann sára
sextán víðar mána
hríðar herðimeíða
hauðrmens, en tvá dauða.

[We heard how the battle-sturdy
*seafarer, Gunnarr, defended
himself with his sword south of
Kjǫlr. On sixteen *warriors
the decimator scored wounds;
two he killed.]

*seafarer: rider of the horse of
the keel-path

*warriors: hard-trees of the storm
of the wood of the earth-girdler
(earth-girdler=sea; wood of the
see=sip; moons of the ship=shields;
storm of the shields=battle; hard
trees of battle=warriors)

Or Þorsteinn drómundr Ásmundarson on the death of his brother
Grettir:

Eigi mættu átta
eggþings boðar, hringa
Grund, Or Grettis hendi
geðrakks koma saxi,
áðr hvarðyggvir hjuggu
herðendr fetils gerðar
axlarfót af ýti
unnþlakks hugar røkum.

Not even eight *warriors could
pull the short sword from brave
Grettir's grip--until, *woman,
these vigorous *warriors hewed
off the bold *sailor's hand.

*warriors: givers of blade-play
*woman: field (goddess) of rings
*warriors: wielders of the
sword-strap staff
*sailor: man of the wave-horse
*hand: foot of the shoulder

Or Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld on the death of his foster-brother
Þorgeir Hávarðarson:

Stirðr réð stafn at varða
strenghreins tógum drengja,
ítr þvít ár vas heitinn
auðstjóri þrek, fjórum,
áðr sigreynir sínum
--sér hlutu meðr at hvóru--
út við eigi líttla
erring fell á knerri.

The hard wealth-dealer mounted
his bold defense on the *ship's
stem against forty fighting men,
for he was early named to glory--
until, with great valor (truly
men were wounded), out on the
ship, the victory-tester fell.

*ship: cable-reindeer

The typical skaldic erfíkvæði, then, is a laconic obituary,
a backward-locking description of the fortitude of the hero
and the circumstances of his fall, all in more or less
unemotional terms. Not so the masterpiece of the genre,
however, which is Egill Skallagrímsson's long poem Sonatorrek,
of which three strophes may be quoted here (Turville-Petre):

4) Þvíat att mín
á enda stendr,
sem 'hrabarnar
hlínnar marka';
era karskr maðr,
sá er koggla þerr
franda hrórs
af fletjum niðr.

For my line is at its end like
the withered stump of the forest
maple (?); a man is not happy
who bears the limbs of his
kinsman's corpse down from his
house.

7) Mjök hefr Rán
 ryskt um mik,
 em ek ofsnaður
 at ástvinum;
 sleit marr bönd
 minnar ættar,
 snaran þátt
 af sjölfum mér.

Rán has handled me roughly,
 I am deprived of loving friends;
 the sea has cut the bonds of
 my race, a strong strand of
 me myself.

25) Nú er mér torvelt,
 Tveggja bága
 'njörfa' nipt
 á nesi stendr;
 skal ek þó glaður
 með góðan vilja
 ok óhryggr
 Heljar biða.

Now it goes hard with me:
 the sister...of Tveggi's
 enemy stands on the headland;
 but yet happy, in good heart
 and fearless, I shall await
 the goddess Hel.

Egill's immediate subject is the loss of his son Þóðvarr, drowned at sea. But it is also about the loss of his other son in illness; the earlier loss of his brother Þórólfr in battle; the loss of his father; and the loss of his mother--the loss, in short, of his entire family. His line, he says, is at its end, like the withered stump of the forest maple (?); the sea has severed the strand (þátt) of his lineage. Note for future reference the tree conceit and the word þátt, both used in connection with the end-of-the-family-line theme.

What distinguishes Sonatorrek from the other skaldic erfíkvæði is its personal tone and its interest not so much in the deceased as in the survivor. Egill's poem is finally about himself--about his own history, his own poetic talent, his own grief and self-pity, his anger at the powers that robbed him of his son, his thwarted desire for revenge, and finally his own mortality and his resolve to face his own death not only defiantly but happily. According to the saga, Egill never planned to compose this poem; he planned to perish from grief in his bed chamber and was on the point of succeeding when his daughter talked him into eating, drinking, and composing an erfíkvæði. So cathartic was the act of composition, the saga says; that he got up from bed, declaimed the poem to his household, resumed his place in the high seat, and lived to enjoy a crusty old

age (cf. Beowulf, vv. 2444-71).

The poems mentioned so far--the obituary poems, of which there are many, and Sonatorrek, which stands alone in the skaldic corpus--pretty much account for the genre of death lament as it is conventionally defined in Norse literary history. And by the lights of the contentional definition, it would indeed seem to be a male genre: by, for, and about men. Women may sing the dead in other cultures, but not, it would seem, in this one.

But if Norse women do not sing death, they do sing revenge. Saga readers know well the typescene in which a woman goads a man into taking action over a kin slaying and so drives to even bloodier extremes a feud that might otherwise have been legally composed or died of its own accord. In the typical case the woman bides her time: days, months, even years (fifteen years in the case of Guðrún in Laxdøla saga, who must wait for her unborn son to attain majority). But then, at a chosen and often carefully staged moment, she lets loose a speech in which she reminds the designated kinsmen of their relationship and hence their obligation to the dead man. If need be she adds some remarks about cowardice and produces a bloody token: the bloodstained clothes in which the dead man was killed, or his severed head, or the corpse itself with wounds displayed. The effect of her efforts is what in vendetta language is called "hot blood"--the wish for immediate revenge. If the kinsmen planned to take no action before, or to seek judicial redress, they now want a life for a life and go off and take it. Not without first objecting to the woman's blood-thirstiness, however. As Flosi said to Hildigunnr in Njáls saga, and Þorkr of Þórðis in Gísla saga, and Þorgils to Guðrún in Laxdøla saga, and King Niðuðr to his queen in Völundarkviða: "Köld eru kvenna ráð" (a proverb with some Germanic currency, to judge from its appearance in a fifteenth-century Swiss source (Das weisse Buch) and Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale).

Such a scene is called a hvöt, literally 'whet.' Two recurring verbs relating to the women's actions are hvetja

'to what, sharpen (a blade)' and eggja 'egg (on),' related to English 'edge' and hence meaning 'put an edge on' or again 'sharpen (a blade)'. The underlying idea seems to be that the leading man of the family is its weapon, its instrument of revenge, while the leading woman is the whetter of the weapon. As Bjargey in Hávarðar saga put it, "Þat er karlmannligt mál, at hann, er til engra harðræðanna er fóerr, at spara þá ekki tunguna at tala þat, er honum mætti verða gagn at." It is in any case as avengers that men play their most dramatic role in Norse literature, and as whetters of the avengers that women play theirs. Not only their most dramatic role, but also their most frequent one: Rolf Heller counts 51 such female whets in the sagas alone (though not all of them occur in connection with kin slayings).

On the face of it, then, we are looking at a literature in which women are nowhere seen doing what in some sense they ought to be doing, which is lamenting the dead, but are everywhere seen doing just the opposite, which is whetting or causing death. Now the question arises whether the absolute absence of one expected female function and the ubiquitous presence of another can really be coincidental. Is it possible that the categories are linked--specifically, that the whet function implies and somehow satisfies the lament function?

The thesis of this paper is that the missing female lament in Norse literature is not missing at all, but is abundantly represented, under our very noses, in the form of the hvöt. We may open the case with two Eddic poems: Hamðismál and Guðrúnar-hvöt. Both poems open with the same event: the legendary Guðrún's dispatching of her sons to avenge the death of their half-sister Svanhildr. Guðrún's speech in Hamðismál consists of only three stanzas, the middle of which is defective (Dronke):

3) "Syster var ykkor
Svanhildr um heitin,
sú er Iqrmunrekkr
ióm um traddi
hvítom ok svörtom
á hervegi,
grám, gangtómum
Gotna hrossom.

"Your sister
was called Svanhildr,
whom Iqrmunrekkr
trampled with his chargers
white and black
on the common highway,
with the gray, smooth-paced
horses of the Goths.

- 4) "Eptir er ykr þrúngit,
þjóðkonunga--
lífið einir ér
þátta ættar minnar
- "You have been crushed back,
you kings of nations--
only you remain
of the strands of my race
- 5) "Einstöð em ek orðin
sem osp í holti,
fallin at fróðndóm
sem fura at kvísti,
vaðin at vilja
sem viðr at laufi,
þá er in kvistskóða
kémr um dag varman."
- "I am left standing alone
like the aspen in woodland,
shorn of kinsmen
as pine-tree of branch,
stripped of joy
as wood of leaf
when the girl, branch-robbing,
comes on a hot day."

In the first (number 3) she reminds her sons how Jörmunrekkr had their sister trampled to death by horses. In the (defective) second, she seems to suggest that the family line has dwindled to a sad end. And in the third, she mourns her own solitude, comparing herself to a tree, isolated and stripped. The similarities with Sonatorrek hardly need pointing out. Both speakers concentrate on themselves and their bereft state. Both of them use the same rare word, þáttr, and both of them use it in exactly the same unprecedented connection: with the end of the family line. And both of them employ the equally rare elegiac conceit of the tree as an image of family growth and ruin. Joseph Harris concludes from these correspondences that the Eddic laments should not be so readily dismissed as medieval fiction, and I agree: the similarities between the Guðrún poems and Sonatorrek must point to a preexisting tradition of elegiac lament. Then there is the matter of gender: if lament of the Sonatorrek type were really an exclusively male genre in early Scandinavia, we would hardly expect to find it relocated, as it is here, in the mouth of a woman, legendary or not. Finally, consider the relation of Guðrún's speech to the narrative that precedes and follows it. The speech itself is putnly elegiac--but it is introduced as a whet (...hvatti Guðrún, /.../ sona sína unga / at hefna Svanhildr--stanza 2) and it has the effect of a whet, for after the requisite grumbling about her harsh nature, her sons rush off in hot blood. Thus Guðrún speaks a lament--but a lament that is meant, and functions, as a whet.

The second poem, Guðrúnarhvöt, gives another version of the same event:

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| <p>1) Þá frá ek senno
slíðr fengligsta,
trauð mál talið
af trega stórum,
er harðhuguð
hvatti at vígi
grimmom orðom
Guðrún sono.</p> | <p>Then I heard invective
most virulent,
words forced to utterance
by great grief,
when, stern-hearted,
to the slaying
by her savage speech
Guðrún goaded her sons.</p> |
| <p>2) "Hví sitið,
hví sofið lífi?
hví tregat ykr
teiti at mæla?--
er Iðrmunrekkur
ykra systor,
unga at aldri,
iðm of traddi,
hvítom ok svörtom,
á hervegi,
grám, gangtöfum
Gotna hrossom.</p> | <p>"Why do you sit,
why sleep your life away?
Why does it not grieve you
to talk of glad things?--
when Iðrmunrekkur
trod down your sister,
young in years,
with his chargers
white and black,
on the common highway,
with the grey, smooth-paced
horses of the Goths.</p> |
| <p>3) "Urðua it glíkir
þeim Gunnari,
né in heldr hugðir,
sem var Hogni--
hennar mundað it
hefna leita,
ef it móð ættið
minna bróðra
eða harðan hug
Húnkonunga."</p> | <p>"You have not grown like
Gunnarr and his brother--
still less shown yourselves brave
as Hogni was.
Her death you would have
sought to avenge,
if you had had the spirit
of my brothers
or the stern heart
of the Hunnish kings."</p> |

This poet too states plainly in the prefatory stanza that Guðrún is whetting her sons with "grim words" and "virulent invective." But whereas the Hamðismál poet promised a whet and delivered a lament, this poet promises a whet and delivers just that. Strophe 2 accuses the sons of laziness and cowardice, and strophe 3 accuses them of falling short of ancestral expectation. Notice the stated reason for her vicious words, however: she is forced to such utterance by great grief (af tregum stórum). Notice too that the last eight lines of stanza 2 duplicate almost verbatim the eight lines of stanza 3 of Hamðismál; the fact that the lines work as well in a whetting context as in a lamenting context would seem to suggest that the contexts are closely related.

After Guðrún finishes speaking in Hamðismál, the narrative follows the sons as they complain and ride off. In Guðrúnarhvöt, the narrative focus remains on Guðrún, who sits at her threshold and tearfully recounts "grieving laments":

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| <p>9) Guðrún grátandi,
 Glúka dóttir,
 gekk hon tregliga
 á tái síta,
 ok at telia,
 táröghlýra,
 möðug spiðli
 á margan veg.</p> | <p>Weeping, Guðrún,
 Gjúki's daughter,
 went with sad steps
 to sit by the threshold
 and to relate,
 with tears on her cheeks,
 tales of fierce grief
 many times.</p> |
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The remaining thirteen stanzas tally the personal tragedies of her life. This long tregróf 'chain of woes' (as it is called in the final stanza) is pure lament of the backward-looking or elegiac variety--which is to say the Sonatorrek variety. And like Sonatorrek, Guðrúnarhvöt ends on a suicidal note as Guðrún contemplates her own death:

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| <p>21) "Hlaðit ér, íarlar,
 eikikgötinn,
 látið þann und himni
 hæstan verða!
 Megi brenna brióst
 þolvafult eldr,
 [þungar] um hiarta
 þiðni sorgir."</p> | <p>"Build high, my lords,
 the pyre of oakwood,
 make it under heaven
 rise highest of all.
 May fire burn
 the breast full of griefs;
 may sorrows melt,
 that weigh down the heart."</p> |
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And again like Sonatorrek, this poem results in poetic catharsis:

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| <p>22) Içrlom öllum
 óðal batni,
 snótom gillum
 sorg at minni,
 at þetta tregróf
 um talit varí.</p> | <p>For all men
 may their lot grow lighter,
 for all women
 their sorrow be less,
 because this chain of woe
 has been uttered.</p> |
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The correspondences with Sonatorrek are raised here for the same reason they were raised before: as validation of the traditional nature of Guðrún's lament, and as evidence of the transferability of that tradition to a female speaker. Finally, returning to the question of fusion, it may be noted that this poem consists of two speeches, one purely whetting and the other purely lamenting, and that the two of them are not only harnessed together, but harnessed together under the title Guðrúnarhvöt.

I began this paper with some remarks about lament practices in general, and I would now like to return to the larger picture--but this time with an eye to women's role in funeral ceremonies in bloodfeud societies. It's worth remembering that feud is a normal form of government in stateless societies, and that when "states" emerge, they commonly find themselves at odds with and try to curtail the preexisting system of self-government via the mechanism of feud. Especially in those parts of Europe where the emergence of the state coincides with the emergence of the Church, as in Scandinavia, what was an essentially political process got colored religious, and feud with time got a bad name--a worse name than it deserves, according to modern anthropologists and such historians as Wallace-Hadrill. It is in any case with this conflict between state and clan in mind that I would like to consider a few historical references and their death rituals.

We have some idea, from a variety of early references, the most famous being Book 24 of the Iliad, of just how demonstrative women's lamentations could be in traditional Greek society, and from the sixth century on there were periodic attempts to suppress or at least limit the practice. The first such legislation on record is that of Solon, who forbade "everything disorderly and excessive in women's festivals, processions, and funeral rites"--funeral rites including the singing of set dirges, the tearing of clothes, and the wailing of other dead. Plutarch spells out the reason for Solon's regulations against women. In Alexiou's summary:

Women, by wailing, lacerating themselves and holding ceremonies in public, were attracting attention which might amount to a social menace....In the inflammable atmosphere of the bloodfeud between the families of Megakles and Kylon,...what more effective way could there be to stir up feelings of revenge than the incessant lamentation at the tomb by large numbers of women for "those long dead"? Thanks to Solon's suppression of female mourning, the barbaric excesses for which women were chiefly responsible were brought to an end.

The Greeks were not alone in their efforts to restrict women's mourning habits. As Diane Owen Hughes points out, medieval Genoa

also from time to time banned women's participation in public funeral ceremonies on grounds that their singing had the real effect of fueling vendetta.

Turning to Germanic sources, we find in Tacitus the remark that "it is considered appropriate for women to mourn and for men to remember" (*Feminis lugere honestum est, viris meminisse*) and in Jordanes a reference to the warrior "who does not mourn by feminine lamentations and tears, but by masculine blood" (*Ut procliator eximius non femineis lamentationibus et lacrimis sed sanguine lugeretur virile*). What is intriguing about both comments is the implied equation between female lament and male revenge.

That women all over medieval Europe engaged in funeral lamentation, sometimes in excessive forms, is clear among other things from the pronouncements of the Church Councils. A variety of sources attests to the usual set of behaviors: handwringing and breast-beating, wearing ashes, tearing clothes, and pulling at loosened hair. (Note the emphasis on women's hair-pulling and clothes-tearing, in the attached medieval German illustration.)

A survey of recent or modern bloodfeud societies in Europe and beyond confirms the idea that female mourning and male revenge go hand in glove. As one scholar sums it up, "the dirge, whether purely memorial or bloodthirsty, is always strongest where the law of vendetta flourishes, as in Sicily or Mani today (my emphasis). It is lament of the bloodthirsty type that interests Black-Michaud. In his study of feud societies, he writes that

it is customary practice for the women to improvise funerary dirges the principal object of which is to incite the dependents and close kin of the victim to wash the stain of the blood from their house by spilling the blood of the killer or his near agnates. These dirges can express ferociously blood-thirsty sentiments and are frequently the work of women endowed with outstanding poetical gifts. They are remembered by the kin of the victim over whose bier they were sung and are repeated by their women folk for years after the event to instill into the male heirs of the deceased, who may have been infants at the time of the killing, the necessity to bring vengeance when they grow old enough to bear arms.

Consider the tradition of the vocero in Corsica. Composed initially as a memorial lament--laudatory, detailed, and individualized--it is memorized by the listeners at the funeral and later recited before the victim's near kinsmen. This after-the-fact recital of the death lament is known as a rimbecco and is understood by both parties to be a reproach of the most insulting and inciting kind.

A similar tradition is the so-called vendetta ballad of Mani. I quote Alexiou's summary of a traditional narrative detailing the circumstances of such a recital:

One Easter morning, the mother prepares for the revenge of her husband's murder eighteen years before. Returning from church, she lays an extra place at the Easter meal, telling her five children that it is for their father, and instructing them to avenge his death by seeking out the enemy clan and making sure to kill the leader that very Easter day, or else her black curse will pursue them everywhere. They ask her solemn blessing, which is given over the ritual tasting of the lamb, and then go out. Greeting their return at evening when the deed is done, she acclaims them as worthy at last, and gives thanks to Fortune.

"Revenge might be the motive," Alexiou concludes, but there is also a "more subjective aspect: grief, finding expression, is relieved and lightened, hence the ritual lament is just as necessary for the mourner as it is for the dead." The mother's meal-speech may be openly vengeful, and it may be delivered eighteen years after the fact, but it is still perceived and classified as part of the funeral protocol. Not quite bloodthirsty but no less vengeful is the eighteenth-century Irish lament or keen for Art O'Leary, murdered by some English soldiers. After a recital of her own life history and a tender recollection of her husband, O'Leary's widow turns her attention to the instigator, Morris, wishing him blindness and mutilation, daring someone to "fire the shot" and bring him down, and vowing, if all else fails, to "settle things alone with the blackblooded rogue." Morris was indeed shot not long after, allegedly by O'Leary's brother, and the widow herself engineered the deportation of his English companions.

The patterns of Icelandic bloodfeud described in the sagas are nowhere more strikingly paralleled than in Albania, where the *practice*

throve until recent times. Like the Icelanders, the Albanians regarded monetary compensation with suspicion and those who accepted it with contempt, and in Albania too retaliatory killings had the tendency to culminate in burnings-in. Although Albanian women (on whom feud was typically blamed) were theoretically exempt both as subjects and objects of feud violence, they were expected to play a flamboyantly active role in the business of remembering and reminding, not least in the form of funeral songs, and in this capacity they were regarded as "fierce upholders of the bloodfeud," as Durham puts it. Just how long women's memories could be, and what form their reminders might take, are indicated in Durham's summary, which but for the word "bottle" could stand as a verbatim description of Chapter 66 of Laxdóela saga:

A widow left with a young son brings up the boy with the sole idea of taking blood for his father. Even when other men of the family have made peace and accepted blood gelt, a feud has been reopened by a boy of fifteen, who so soon as he has reached manhood, according to the ideas of the land, has been sent out by his mother on the deadly errand. She knows she may lose her son; that the house may be burnt over her head, and she left alone and destitute... [But] blood alone can give her peace, and her son must go out to slay or be slain for his father's sake. For this the mother has kept in a bottle a blood-soaked piece of his garment, and again and again shown it to her son. It is a treasure hidden in her dower chest...

Among Catholics in northern Albania, simply burying the man publicly in his bloodstained clothes was enough--another good example of how, in a bloodfeud society, vengeance mnemonics and funeral ceremonies go hand in glove and are construed as one and the same formality.

With this larger picture in mind, let us go back to Scandinavia and look at three different whetting scenes from three different sagas. The first one comes from Harðar saga. The hvöt in Harðar saga follows on the slaying of Hvörðr. When his sister, Þorbjörg, hears the news, the saga says, she was so overcome she could not speak:

Þorbjörg mátti þá ekki mæla, svá fekk henni mikils
 ...Þenna aftan kom Indriði [her husband] ok margmanna
 með þeim. Ekki fann á Þorbjörgu, ok bar hon mat fyrir
 gesti. En er þeir sögðu henni tíðendin ok þat, at
 Þorsteinn gullknappr hafði vegit Hörð ok gengit aftan
 at honum, en hinn staðit kyrr fyrir, þá kvað Þorbjörg vísu:

Varð í hreggi hörðu
 Hörður felldr at jörðu,
 hann hefr átta unnit,
 Unns, ok fimm at gunni.
 Heldr nam grimma galdra
 galdr rammliga at halda.
 Mundi bitra branda
 brandr elligar standa.

En er þau kómu í sæng um kveldit, þá brá Þorbjörg saxi
 ok vildi leggja á Indriða, bónda sínum, en hann tók í
 móti ok varð sárr mjök á hendi. Hann mælti þá: "Bæði
 er nú, Þorbjörg, at ör hörðu er at ráða, enda villtu
 mikit at gera, eða hvat skal nú vinna til sátta með
 okkr?" "Ekki annat en þú færir mér höfuð Þorsteins
 gullknapps." Því játaði Indriði. Hann fór um morguninn...

Þorbjörg was so overcome that she could not speak...
 That evening Indriði [her husband] and a number of men
 came. Þorbjörg gave no sign, and she served dinner to
 the guests. And when they told her the news that Þorsteinn
 gullknapper had killed Hörður, and had attacked him from
 behind, when Hörður was standing still, Þorbjörg spoke a stanza:

Hörður was felled to earth in the hard storm
 of Óðinn. He vanquished eight and five in the
 battle. The spell of grim spells [the 'war fetter']
 gripped him powerfully; otherwise the stave of
 the blade would still be standing.

And when they went to bed that evening, Þorbjörg drew a
 sword on her husband, Indriði, and he grabbed for it,
 cutting his hand in the process. He then said: "Not only
 are we in a hard spot, Þorbjörg, but you want extreme
 action. What would it take to reconcile us? "Nothing
 less than your bringing me the head of Þorsteinn gullknappr."
 Indriði agreed to this. In the morning he left...

Notice first that Þorbjörg is so stricken by the news of her
 brother's death that she cannot speak. Notice too that when she
 does speak, it is in verse. Her poem is in fact exactly like the
 male obituary poems mentioned at the beginning of this paper.
 And notice finally that although the text of Þorbjörg's little
 poem is purely memorial, its subtext is revenge; that is clear
 from what happens in bed later that evening. Her husband's words
 on grabbing away the sword acknowledge, belatedly, the request
 or demand implicit in her earlier poem: "you want extreme action,"

he says. Only when thus challenged does she admit the intention of her memorial poem: she wants revenge. Like the Eddic *Guðrún*, she speaks a lament which is meant as a whet and is taken as a whet.

The second passage comes from *Heiðarvígá saga*. The oldest of three brothers has been killed, and their mother is keeping his memory alive for the other two by setting a place at table for him every day. Then one morning:

..Þuríðr mælti, at þeim sonum hennar [Barði and Steingrímur] skyldi ekki deila dögurð, ok kvæðk hon deila mundu....Þuríðr gengr þá innar ok leggur sitt stykki fyrir hvern þeirra bróðra, ok var þar þá yxinsbógrinn ok brytjaðr í þrennt. Tekr hann Steingrímur til orða ok mælti: "Þó er nú brytjat stórmannliga, móðir, ok ekki áttu vanða til at gefa mönnum svá kappsamliga mat, ok er á þessu mikit vanstilli, ok ertu nær óvitandi vits." Hon svarar: "Ekki er þetta furða nein, ok máttu þetta ekki undrask, fyrir því at stóerra var Hallr, bróðir yðvarr, brytjaðr, ok heyrða ek yðr ekki þess geta, at þat væri nein furða." Hon léttr fylgja slátninu sinn stein fyrir hvern þeirra. Þeir spurðu, hvat þat skyldi merkja. Hon svarar: "Melt hafi þér þat, bróðir, er eigi er vðenna til en steina þessa, er þér hafið eigi þorat at hefna Hallis, bróður yðvars, þvílíks manns, sem hann var, ok eru þér orðnir langt frá yðrum áttmönnum, er mikils eru verðir, ok eigi mundu þeir þvílíka skömm eða neisu setit. hafa, sem þér hafið þolat um hríð ok margra á máli fyrir haft." Gekk hon útan ok innar eptir gölfínu eiskrandi ok kvæð vísu:

Brátt munu Barða frýja
beiðendr þrimu seiða;
Ullr, munu áttar spillir,
undlíns, taliðr þinnar,
nema lýbrautar látir
láðs valdandi falda,
lýðr nemi ljóð, sem kvæðum,
lauðrhysr boða rauðu.

Þuríðr gave orders that no breakfast should be served to her sons [Barði and Steingrímur], saying that she herself would serve them...Þuríðr goes in now and lays in front of each of the brothers a portion--and it was the shoulder of an ox, cut into three. Steingrímur speaks up, saying: "But these are huge pieces, mother. It's not your habit to give men such heroic portions. This is excessive--you must be losing your mind." She answers: "It's not so strange, and you shouldn't be surprised, for your brother Hallr was carved into even larger pieces, and I never heard you say that was odd." She then put a stone next to the meat in front of each of them. They asked what that might mean. She answers: "You brothers have swallowed something that is no easlier to digest than these stones, in that you have not dared to avenge Hallr, your brother, such a man as he

was; and you are a far cry from your ancestors, who were great and worthy men, for they would not have tolerated the kind of shame and disgrace that you have been putting up with for some time now and that has prompted so much blame." Then she strode back and forth across the floor, screaming with rage and frustration, and then she spoke a stanza:

Soon will Barði's courage be challenged by the
cravers of the fish of battle. Ullr of the
wound-serpent, you will be reckoned the spoiler
of your kin unless you cause the offerers of the
sea fire to be swathed in red, possessor of the
road of the land fish. Let the people hear the
poem I have spoken.

Her performance has its effect: the boys rush off in hot blood, Þuríðr with them.

Obviously these two scenes have much in common: a general structure, climaxing with a speech; the mealtime setting; and a function in the longer narrative. Where they differ is in the content of the women's speeches. Þorbjörg's is a lament, Þuríðr's a whet. I suggested before that Þorbjörg's lament implied a whet, and I'll now propose that there is even in Þuríðr's furious whet a trace of lament--specifically in the references to the dead son and the ancestry. But more to the point: the stanzas in both cases fill a slot in the typescene, and the slot itself confers meaning on what is in it. Another way of saying this is to note that the two stanzas could be transposed without doing violence to the sense of either scene. The whet and the lament are functional equivalents. (Recall the double-duty stanza in the Guðrún poems.)

The third passage is Chapter 116 of Njáls saga, in which Hildigunnr goads her paternal uncle Flosi to avenge her husband Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, slain in cold blood by the sons of Njáll. This is one of the more savage whetting scenes in the sagas. But it is also one of the scenes most obviously invested with funereal features--though they are not noted as such, but *have rather been* ignored or dismissed as odd details. The scene opens with Flosi's arrival at Hildigunnr's just in time for dinner. She greets him in strong terms, and he answers rudely. When he sees that the high seat has been prepared for him, he knocks it aside, saying he won't be mocked. The next item on the agenda is a torn towel she provides for Flosi's use. When he sees its condition, he *flings it down*.

in anger and tears a piece from the tablecloth instead. Now she leaves the hall. When she returns, she begins to cry:

Þá kom Hildigunnr í stofuna ok gekk fyrir Flosa ok greiddi hárit frá augum sér ok grét. Flosi mælti: "Skapbungr er þér nú, frændkona, er þú grætr, en þó er þat vel, at þú grætr góðan mann." "Hvert eptirmáli skal ek nú hafa eða líöveizlu?" segir hon. Flosi mælti: "Sóekja mun ek mál þitt til fullra laga eða veita til þeira sætta, er góðir menn sjá, at vér sém vel söemðir af í alla staði." Hon mælti: "Hefna mundi Høskuldr þín, ef hann atti eptir þik at mæla." Flosi svaraði: "Eigi skortir þik grimmleik, ok sért er, hvat þú vill." Hildigunnr mælti: "Minna hafði misgert Arnórr Örnólfsson ór Forsárskögum við Þórð Freysgöða, fegur þinn, ok vāgu bræðr þínir hann á Skaptafellsþingi, Kolbeinn ok Egill." Hildigunnr gekk þá fram í skála ok lauk upp kistu sinni; hon tók þá upp skikkjuna, er Flosi hafði gefit Høskuldi, ok í þeirri hafði Høskuldr veginn verit, ok hafði hon þar varðveitt í blóðit allt. Hon gekk þá innar í stofuna með skikkjuna. Hon gekk þegjandi at Flosa. Þá var Flosi mettr ok fram borit af borðinu. Hildigunnr lagði þá yfir Flosa skikkjuna; dunði þá blóðit um hann allan. Hon mælti þá: "Þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi, Høskuldi, ok gef ek þér nú aptr. Var hann ok í þessi veginn. Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek séri þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns niðingr ella." Flosi kastaði af sér skikkjunni ok rak í fang henni ok mælti: "Þú ert it mesta forað ok vildir, at vér tókim þat upp, er qllum oss gegnir verst, ok eru kǫld kvenna ráð." Flosa brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum fǫlr sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel. Þeir Flosi fóru til hesta sinna ok riðu í braut.

Then Hildigunnr came into the room and walked right up to Flosi and swept her hair back from her eyes and wept. Flosi said, "You are suffering, kinswoman, to be crying so--yet it is a proper thing for you to cry for a good husband." "What action can I expect from you, what help?" she says. Flosi said, "I will pursue your case to the full extent of the law or else arrive at a settlement that all good men will regard as fully honorable for us." She said, "Høskuldr would have avenged you with blood if he were in your place now." Flosi answered: "You're nothing if not ferocious; and it's clear what you want." Hildigunnr said: "The injury that Arnórr Örnólfsson from Forsárskogar did your father, Þórð Freysgöði, was less than this, and yet your brothers Kolbeinn and Egill killed him at the Skaptafellsþing for it." She went to the far end of the room, unlocked her chest, and took out the cloak that Flosi had given Høskuldr, the one in which he had been killed and that she had saved, blood and all. She came back with it and silently walked up to Flosi. He had finished eating and the tables had been cleared. Hildigunnr threw the cloak over his shoulders, and the bits of blood showered all over him. Then she said: "This cloak, Flosi, you gave to Høskuldr, and now I give it back to you: it is the cloak he was wearing when he was killed. In the name

of God and all good men, I charge you by all the powers of your Christ, and by your manhood and your valor, to avenge all the wounds on Hǫskuldr's body in death--or else be held in contempt by all men." Flosi thrust the cloak back into her arms, saying "You fiend! What you want us to do will be the ruin of us! Cold are the counsels of women!" So stirred was he that his face changed colors--red as blood, pale as straw, and black as death. Then he and his men went out to their horses and rode away.

The meaning of the high seat detail is clear enough: on one hand it announces Hildigunnr's widowed status and on the other designates Flosi as the male kinsman she expects to serve as her guardian and act on her behalf. Less clear is the torn towel. If we take the scene as a hvot pure and simple, the torn towel seems a dangling motif, and so it is treated in the commentaries; but if we acknowledge the funereal dimension of the scene, the towel as a piece of torn cloth comes into focus as a venerable emblem of female mourning--yet another reminder of Hildigunnr's bereft condition. It must mean something like that to Flosi, because he casts it down in anger and rips the tablecloth.

Having failed to engage Flosi with concrete mnemonics, Hildigunnr now sweeps her hair from her face and weeps. At this point, subtext becomes text; weeping is clearly lamentational, and Flosi takes it as such: "You are suffering, kinswoman, to be crying--but it is a proper thing to cry for a good husband." We are to understand, I think, that she is crying for effect, and that she pulls her hair from her face to expose her tears. But what was her hair doing in her face to begin with? I wouldn't venture to assign meaning to an offhand detail were not the sagas in general, and this saga in particular, precisely a literature of offhand detail. Hildigunnr's hair means just what her torn towel means: that she is a widow in mourning, with claims on her kin.

Teary-eyed and disheveled, she now comes to the point and asks Flosi directly to seek revenge. When he refuses, she produces the cloak in which Hǫskuldr was killed, shakes it over him so that the clotted blood rains about his shoulders, and launches into her remarkable speech. Structurally speaking we have arrived at the speech-slot--a slot occupied in Harðar saga by a memorial stanza, ^{and} in Heiðarvíga saga by a bloodthirsty one. Hildigunnr's speech is of yet a third kind: it has the ring of a legal incantation with sacred overtones, and it is in prose.

Prose of a sort: the final sentence piles period on period, alliteration on alliteration (guðs/góðra, krapta/Krists, heit/hvera), and internal rhyme on internal rhyme (sóeri/fyrir, mann-/mennsku, sára/peira). This is not quite verse, but it comes close; it is in any case not prose of the normal kind.

Hildigunnr is one of the top whetters in Norse literature. What I am suggesting here is that her success lies not only in her strong words and the deployment of the cloak, but in the set-up of details right from the beginning of the chapter, details that sign her condition as a mourning-widow: the over-eager greeting, the high seat, the torn towel, the loosened hair, the bloody cloak, the speech. For her, and obviously for Flosi as well, lamenting the dead and whetting the living are one and the same thing.

The argument so far can be summarized as follows. My hypothesis is that there did in fact exist a tradition of female death lamenting in early Scandinavia, and that it is exactly the sort of lament tradition we might expect to find in a feud society: a verbal display, possibly staged, in which the element of incitement is either implicit or explicit and more or less elaborated depending on the situation. I have arrived at this conclusion on the basis of cross-cultural analogues; on the basis of Eddic poetry, in which the fusion is clear (and I have argued that the correspondences between those poems and the quasi-historical Sonatorrek validate them as sources on this point); and on the basis of the sagas themselves, in some of whose whetting scenes the dimension of lament is discernible.

Two questions remain. One is whether the female death lament actually took poetic form, and the other is why, in the sagas, the dimension of lament is so overshadowed by the dimension of whetting, and why the women who do it are seen in such a bad light.

As for poetic form, it should be remembered that women did compose poetry in early Iceland. The names and in a few cases some verses of a handful of female skalds have come down to us, and the phenomenon of dream women who speak in verse reinforces the idea that poetic recital by females was at least a possible notion in the early Scandinavian mind. Theoretically, at least,

there is no reason to doubt that women could have composed and performed mourning poems. Preservation is another matter. Women's mourning songs in general seem to have a poor rate of survival, even in cultures where their existence and even their artistic quality is documented. In Scandinavia, the association of a women's lament tradition with bloodfeud would have led to its devaluation during the Christian period (more on this later), and this, together with the conspicuous lack of interest in the female sphere that we find in our texts in general, would hardly have been congenial to the fair recording of such traditions as did exist. Under these circumstances, traces of verse are all we can reasonably hope for--and traces are what we get. The poetic form of Þorbjörg's and Þuríðr's utterances is in my view a rather hefty trace, as is Hildigunnr's near-poetic speech in Njáls saga. I take these scenes as evidence that verse was a possible if not an expected vehicle in the inciting-lamenting situation. The ascription to the Eddic Guðrún of what I take to be the diction and themes of traditional lament constitutes another such trace.

Two more traces may now be added to the list--traces pertaining to historical widows. One is Gunnhildr, wife of Eiríkr Bloodaxe. Following his death, Fagrskinna tells us, Gunnhildr "had a poem composed about him" (lét yrkja kvæði um hann). The fact that Gunnhildr evidently did not compose the poem herself but had someone else do so--a queenly prerogative--should not detract from the observation that she evidently regarded the production of a memorial poem to lie in her province. The second widow is a certain Gyrid, whose name is recorded on one of the Bällsta runestones in Sweden. The inscription consists of fourteen metrical lines, which Jón Helgason reads as follows: "There shall be no mightier memorial found than the one Ulf's sons set up after him, bold youths after their father; they raised the stones and made the staff, the splendid one, as a sign of honor. And Gyrid too loved her husband; therefore she will commemorate him in a lament" (því mun [hon] í gráti láta [hans] getit [vera]). Note first of all the division of labor between the sons and the wife of the dead man: theirs is to provide a stone, hers to provide a lament. Whether she composed it herself or had someone else do so is

unfortunately not clear from the wording; either reading is possible. But I would in either case point out that if Jón Helgason's interpretation is correct, then the first named literary genre in Scandinavia would seem to be "lament" (grátr); and if Gyrðid did indeed compose the poem herself, then the first practitioner of that genre, not to speak of the first named poet in Sweden, was a woman.

Finally there is the question of saga bias. If whetting and lamenting were once one and the same thing, why do we see so much whetting and so little lamenting in the texts that have come down to us, and why are the perpetrators, the women themselves, depicted in such negative terms? To answer this question we need to consider the historical role of women in bloodfeud. It is well known that the sagas persistently associate women with blood revenge, and that the alternative of legal commutation of wergild, when pursued at all, is pursued by men. An earlier generation of scholars took this as a reflection of historical reality, sometimes arguing on the basis of some fairly offensive assumptions about female nature that women were indeed predisposed to violent solutions. The present view holds that the hvot is a literary motif, inherited from heroic tradition and nurtured by medieval misogyny, but finally without historical content.

There seem to me good reasons to suppose that women might in fact have preferred revenge to wergild--but reasons that pertain to social and economic factors, not qualities of gender. One blatant reason has to do with women's minimal stake in the wergild system. Less economic benefit ran directly to women as a group in that system, which means that they had less financial incentive to settle in court. (Even women who were compensated had limited control over, and hence limited enjoyment of, their gains; and widows--who account for the majority of saga whettors--saw no direct compensation at all.) Another reason is that women were excluded from the legal arena and hence from whatever agonistic satisfaction and prestige might be had from the successful prosecution of a case--satisfaction and prestige that, according to the sagas, could be considerable. Yet another reason is that women played, in the old blood revenge system, the key role of choosing, within limits, both the avenger and in some cases the

the avengee; to this extent, then, women were directly involved in the politics of kin hierarchy and honor. Finally there is the matter of emotional and artistic outlet, a point repeatedly stressed in the larger literature on women's role in feud societies. If Norse women too took comfort from and pride in the production of lament poetry, it is no surprise that they might cling to the system that gave them their moment. (We recall here the explicitly cathartic effects of verbal lamenting on Egill and the Eddic Guðrún.) Without meaning to romanticize the position of women in the early period, I would suggest that in the formal judicial system that came to prevail, women lost something and gained nothing. If we see women tilting in the sagas, we should understand that they are probably not tilting toward something as much as away from something else. Women's attachment to the old system, I submit, is in direct proportion to their disenfranchisement from the new one.

If women's mourning behavior played a functional role in the system of bloodfeud in early Scandinavia, as I have suggested it did, it can be assumed to have continued to do so, in one form or another, for as long as bloodfeud flourished, which in Iceland was well into the Christian and medieval period. During the two or three hundred years that the stories passed down orally, Christianity entered the picture; European political and cultural notions took root; and in Iceland, at least, the society drifted into oligarchic violence. The era in which the sagas took their final form was itself war-torn; by the time Njáls saga was written toward the end of the century, the Commonwealth had collapsed and the country passed under Norwegian sovereignty. It is no surprise that the authors of the thirteenth century, writing in an era of violence about an earlier era of violence, and with the causes and effects of violence very much on their minds as a social problem, should--like Solon nineteen centuries earlier--focus on and expose just that dimension in women's traditional behavior they saw as contributory. Or maybe those final authors were merely completing a process of selective memory and interpretation that had been in operation for some time in the course of oral transmission. In either case, the political and religious climate in medieval Iceland was precisely one in which

the vengeful element of women's dirges would have been over-perceived and overrecorded, and the element of lament under-perceived and underrecorded.

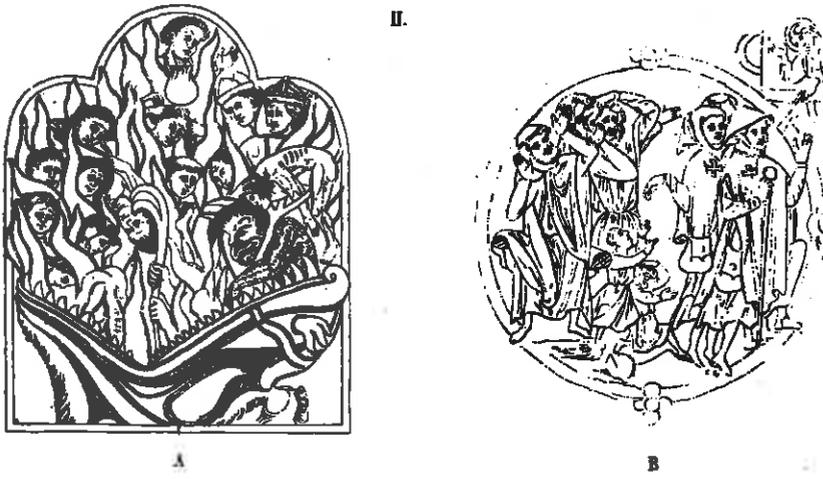
What I have suggested in this essay is that the element of lament has gone absolutely unperceived and unrecorded by modern literary historians. At least the medieval authors dropped loud hints. It is on the basis of these hints, and their resonances in other bloodfeud societies, that I have ventured to speculate that in Iceland, at least, and perhaps in the rest of Scandinavia as well, there existed a tradition of female lamenting: an articulate tradition that commemorated the dead person and the ancestry in elegiac terms, one that played on the themes of solitude and self pity, and one that might, when the occasion called for it, urge satisfaction of family honor in counsels that could indeed be cold. In short: the kind of tradition one expects of a feud society, and distorted in the ways one expects of an emerging Christian state.

1. Ueber den Ausdruck des geistigen Schmerzes im Mittelalter.

I.



II.



This is a short and oral version of an essay that will appear in fuller, documented form in Structure and Meaning: New Approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature, Viking Series, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, forthcoming).

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