When the marriage contracted between Kormákr and Steingerðr is not realized due to the curse by the sorceress Þórirveig and Kormákr’s vacillation, the young woman is given by her family to the widower Bersi Véleifsson of Saurbær, a cousin of Óláf rói and descendant of the matriarch Auðr dýafugl. Bersi is wealthy and is renowned as a juridical duellist. Like the hero of the saga Bersi is a poet, but their temperaments and reputations are significantly different. The quarrelsome Kormákr continues to pay his attentions to Steingerðr long after the marriage. This leads to two challenges to single combat according to the formal rules of hólmganga. The alternating blows, from which the antagonists were protected by shields held by their “seconds,” were suspended at first blood. Bersi and his party win the first encounter in ambiguous fashion, when the tip of Bersi’s sword is broken off but still splits Kormákr’s thumb. Given the erotic ambience of the saga, this injury is consonant with the psychological impediment or sexual dysfunction resulting from the curse by Þórirveig, whose sons Kormákr had killed (Sayers 1992). Kormákr rejects the magical stone associated with Bersi’s sword to assist the recovery from the injury, just as he is impatient with the ritual associated with magically endowed weapons or the acquisition of partial invulnerability in combat. In a second duel Kormákr’s uncle Steinarr, also a fighter of repute, faces Bersi, while the irascible poet holds...
the shield. Steinarr’s sword glances from the shield held before Bersi, clips one buttock, and buries itself in the bone at the side of his knee. Yet Bersi is able to strike a blow that splits Steinarr’s shield and reaches his chest. A halt is called and the dubious victory goes to the other party. Bersi’s leg wound is the more serious of the two and is slow to heal.

The saga, to this point, has provided no details on the conjugal life of Steingerôr and Bersi, which began with the woman a less than fully willing partner. In the course of Bersi’s convalescence, which is finally assisted when a temporarily disaffected client, Þórór, returns his lost healing stone, Steingerôr’s judgmental sentiments come to the narrative surface in direct speech:

Við þessa atburði lagði Steingerôr leið endi á við Bersa ok vill skilja við hann, ok er hon er búin til brottfarar, gengr hon at Bersa ok mælti: “Fyrst vartu kallaðar Eyglu-Bersi, en þá Hölmöngu-Bersi, en nú máttu at sønnu heita Raza-Bersi,” — ok segir skilli við hann. Steingerôr ferr norðr til frænda sinna, hittir Þorkell brôður sinn, bôr hann heimta fé sín at Bersa, mund ok heimanfylgju, ok kvezk eigi vilja eiga Bersa ørkumlaðan. Þorkell lastar þat ekki ok heitir fyr sinni. (1939: 254)

[As a result of these events Steingerôr developed an aversion to Bersi and wanted to divorce him; and when she was ready to leave she went up to him and said: “First you were called Eyglu-Bersi, and then Hölmöngu-Bersi; but now you might rightly be called Raza-Bersi,” and declared herself divorced from him. Steingerôr went north to her kinsmen. She met her brother Þorkell and asked him to fetch her property from Bersi, both morning-gift and dowry, and said she didn’t want to be married to that disfigured Bersi. Þorkell did not blame her and promised to look after it.] (adapted from Hollander’s trans., 1949: 43)

The initial subject of this study is the three nicknames that Steingerôr gives Bersi. It will then consider the immediate and longer term effects of their public use and, lastly, their relevance to gender roles in the world of the family saga and skaldic verse. Consideration begins with the formal name Bersi and with Steingerôr’s last word of judgment, the descriptor ørkumlaðan, which is rhetorically positioned in the episode to appear as the justification for her decision to seek a divorce. Bersi is a hypocoristic name for the bear, expressive of the ambivalence that saw in the animal not only a predator on farm stock and perhaps a totemic model for young warriors and pre-battle shape-shifters (credited with drinking bear’s blood), but also a semi-tamed farm-watch and performer. Snorri’s Skáldskaparmál (1931: 211) lists twenty-four names or epithets for the bear under the head-word bjørn “brown” (cf. Eng. bruin), which also achieved status as a personal
name. Snorri's list is intended as a lexical resource for poets; its nominal substitution also encompasses the putative pre-literate tabu practice. The simplex, the "bear-word" *ber, is not given; bersi, the feminine bera, and the perhaps infantile term bassi are derivations. Other ON terms are skóghjǫrn, húðbjǫrn, bjarnýr, bessi "he-bear," bínna "she-bear," bjarnhúnn "bear cub" (Fritzner 1883-96, Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874). While Bersi was doubtless a historical figure from the early post-settlement years (see infra), his name is appropriate to the dual image of the saga, a kindly Winnie-the-Pooh running his farm, composing verses, helping indigent women, fostering another's child, sharing a healing stone, and offering a sister in marriage to reconcile political and personal differences, but also a combative Grizzly.

Orkumlaðan was the label Steingerðr attached to Bersi after the injuries of the duel. The slow healing wound to the knee would be sufficient justification but, as Steingerðr's third and last sobriquet makes evident, it is the gashed ham she has in mind. The social dimension of this wound will be considered below. Initially, we note that the semantic nucleus of orkumlaðan is kuml, kumb "mark, sign." This is obscured in current translations that privilege outcome over process, e.g., "cripple" (Hollander), infirme (Durand), verstümmelt (Niedner). Steingerðr's essential charge is that Bersi has been dishonourably marked by another male, not only in the sense that all back wounds suggested cowardice to the spiteful, but also that the injury to the buttocks carried grave connotations for sexual identity and male adequacy.

Steingerðr's jibe, coming before the formal divorce statement, has the conventional tripartite structure of the joke. The taxonomic incongruity (from a social perspective) of the third component provokes laughter; its symbolic congruity, its applicability to the victim of the joke provides the satisfaction of Schadenfreude (Amory 1991). Kormáks saga is rich in failed expectations: Kormákr and Steingerðr's marriage contract, the meeting on the shore, etc. If our reading of the multipart insult is roughly correct (Apte 1985), some historical foundations could be sought for the appellations Eyglu-Bersi and Hölmgǫnga-Bersi and the third could be viewed as a deflating projection on Steingerðr's part of future defamatory usage. Certainly, the second term invites a historicist approach.

Eyglu- as an onomastic element is used of a figure called Eyglu-Halli in Svarfdæla saga but Hreðu-Halli in Valla-Ljóts saga. Eyglu- is most plausibly associated with a Germanic root meaning "eye." The -l- formant may be a diminutive or, in a verbal context, a frequentive, also suggesting a familiar attitude. English ogle and other Germanic congeners (OHG ougili "little eye," Sw. ögla "eyelet," LG oegeln, G äugeln) come readily
to mind. The young Bersi could have been a terrifying sight (taking the
cue from hræða “frighten” and the alternate name Hræðu above) but this
would anticipate, and thus defuse, the second nickname, Hólmgöngu-Bersi.
The quality of Bersi’s own vision seems a more likely referent. Bersi could
have been squinting or wall-eyed, but pronounced strabismus would be hard
to reconcile with his success as a duellist, for which sharp vision and co­
ordination were essential. If the nickname means something like “ogler,”
the case can be made that all three bynames have sexual connotations,
the first two active, the third passive. We leave this panel of the tri­
ptych with the provisional idea of the young Bersi having had an “eye” for
women; his predatorial gaze was within the conventions of his society, so
that Steingerór’s characterization is wry but not negative.

Hólmgöngu-Bersi is an identification prepared by the preceding ac­
tion and even more by the explicit description of Bersi as vígamaðr ok
hólmgöngumaðr “fighter and dueller” (Kormáks saga 1939: 224) when he
is introduced. These capsulized descriptions and authorial or community
judgments on character are never subsequently disproved, and then serve
as proleptic summaries of what the public may expect to find more fully
illustrated in the course of events. The nickname is not Steingerór’s coinage
and was attached to a number of other saga age figures (see, for exam­
ple, the index to Landnámabók 1968: 471). It seems appropriate to this
explicit designation of Bersi as a duellist that Kormáks saga provides the
most detailed description in the saga corpus of the layout of the hólmganga
site and the procedure followed. Early studies have focussed on the implied
distinction between this and the less structured einvígí, which Bersi offers
Kormákr prior to their first encounter as a combat mode in which he might
be less disfavoured by his inexperience, and on the formal, legalistic aspects
of bounded fighting arena, degrees of withdrawal and retreat, alternating
blows, quota of three shields, etc. Since the account is sui generis, its au­
thenticity has been questioned with the same scepticism as evoked by the
neutral, purportedly factual, rather full descriptive technique employed in
the recreation of pagan temples in the family sagas. For present purposes,
we note such detail as the backwards, head between the legs approach to the
site, the pegs staking out the field, their association with pagan sacrifice,
and post-duel slaughter of animals. These situate judicial duelling in the
world of pre-Christian belief and, more specifically, among fertility rites.
My focus is on the associational field(s) summoned up in Steingerór’s three
names, not on the historicity of the name-giving or the names themselves.
At the end of his career as a duellist Bersi claims thirty-five victories; most
of these must predate the encounters with Kormákr and Steinarr. Bersi may have sought to advance his economic and political interests by this legally sanctioned means. Success and reputation as a fighter promoted envy and attracted a younger generation to establish social credentials by victory over a celebrated fighter, as the career of Gunnarr in *Brennu-Njáls saga* makes evident (1954: 84). Bersi has none of the qualities of the berserk or others for whom violence was a readily employed social option; instead ability, preference, chance, and finally reputation appear to have brought Bersi to and successfully from the hólm more frequently than other men. Steingerór's second nickname reflects the popular view of Bersi, from the apex of his career, and was perhaps already in general use, although he is not so named by the author. The come-down is in her third name, which moves from general to specific and renames him on the basis of the fight with Steinarr.

*Raza-Bersi* "Arse-Bersi" is a reference, coarse and direct, to the first injury before the sword struck Bersi's knee. The random outcome of the blow (the ham was not Steinarr's conscious target nor had Bersi turned aside) is of no consequence in the cruel world of the nickname. As Steingerór is well aware, such an injury was associated in law with the klámhögg "shame stroke" (Miller 1990: 101; note its execution as next-to-last blow when Þórir Kolbeinsson kills Bjørn in *Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa*, Ch. 32, a saga replete with insult). The implication was that the man who would flinch from an opponent and receive a sword blow on the buttocks would also be insufficiently manly to protect himself against exploitation as the passive partner in homosexual acts. This is the chronic charge of "unmanliness" made so frequently in the family sagas but also treated in the early laws. Such an accusation was a killing matter and in the saga world usually leads to armed action. The truthfulness of the accusations was not at issue, and the fanciful nature of some, such as Skarpheðinn's claim that Flosi was the regular sexual partner of the Svinafell troll (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 314, Dronke 1980), proves that private behaviour or even public male rape was not a true referent. Gender and gender adequacy according to societal norms were given a metaphorical sexual expression according to the perceived biological dichotomy that made the feminine the sole alternative to the masculine, so that what was not male or not sufficiently male was female and could be so used in sexual activity (Itnyre 1991, Linke 1992, Clover 1993). Just how women's public and private acts figured in this reductivist paradigm and reasons why conceptions of gender should be so important in this society will be further explored below.
There may also be a faint ursine echo in Steingerôr’s third taunt. One of Snorri’s heiti for the bear is sjôlfrôr (1931: 211), which Faulkes renders as “yellow-bum” (1987: 164). Support for this reading and its application to Bersi is found in brunninræzi “brown-arsed,” used of the bear (Falk 1928, de Vries 1962: 294f.). The specular relationship of Raza-Bersi and brunninræzi recalls the frequent metathesis (involving primarily the liquid r) in words, broadly speaking, related to procreative and excretory functions: râgr : argr “unmanly; prone to homosexual activity” (abstracts regi, ergi), stroðinn : sorðinn “fucked” (these two sets were legally actionable words that authorized a man to kill his accuser), râz : ars “arse,” reðr : edr “penis,” freðr : OHG furz “fart.” Perhaps these developments in this elemental but always sensitive area run parallel with what might, broadly speaking, be called the euphemistic treatment of the name of the bear in bera, birna, bersi, bessi, bassi. In any case, recalling the râgr : argr pair, one might claim that Raza-Bersi puns as a near-tautology: râz + (b)ers, with an effect like that of “Bare-Arsed Bersi” in English. With a kind of aesthetic logic and basis in verbal magic, râz and bersi could be called the phonetically and associationally closest of the three pairs of compounds and this third name then claimed as the truest and deservedly most lasting.

Kormákr also employs ursine imagery in references to Bersi, as he will disparagingly speak of tinning with regard to Steingerôr’s second husband. His tone toward Bersi, however, is respectful. He calls him the “den-dweller of the woods” (hiðbyggi holta; st. 30) and punningly employs the verb ber-jast “fight” (for Kormákr playing on Steingerôr’s name, see Frank 1970). In another stanza, a recalcitrant sword is likened to a bear reluctant to come of out its lair (st. 32). In an episode with a richly allusive nexus of motifs, Steinarr disguises himself in a bearskin cloak and mask and under an alias when he sets up the scene for his challenge of Bersi; Bersi acknowledges the defiant gesture and its symbolism in st. 36. Óðinn is on occasion described with bear-heiti, e.g., sjôlfrôr, Jálfaðr “yellow-arsed” (de Vries 1935–37, i.363, ii.65, Polomé 1990: 454f.) and in his disguises may use the alias Bjôrn (Hardôr saga, Ch. 15). He is also the patron of poetry. Steinarr, also a poet (st. 38), confronts Bersi in a disguise suggestive of the god, the bear, his cospecificity with his opponent, even a future nickname (fuðr = ras).4

At this point, we may summarize the associations surrounding Steingerôr’s taunting labels, none of which recognizes Bersi as a skald. A chronological axis is apparent, and I contend that it runs from adolescence through
adult vigour to what Steingerðr wants recognized as the first sign of decrepit old age. The sequence also progresses from the public and summary (epithets one and two, admitting unresolved difficulties with the first) to the personal, specific, and topical. The connotive field is sexuality, with a slightly demeaning aura: first the heterosexual attentions of the young male on the prowl; then male adults fighting over women (as well as over economic, social status, etc); lastly, victimization in homosexual violence. Just as the triad of names is pegged to the three ages of man and the three stages of sexuality (stylized as adolescent desire, sexual maturity, and impotence, in both its aggressive and defensive dimensions), so it exhibits the homological thinking of early western European societies, movements among macro-, meso- and microcosms. For example, the dismemberment of the giant Ymir resulted in the formation of the cosmos from the matter of his body. The anecdotal structuring of Bersi’s career as male is based on a tripartite division of his body into head, arms and upper torso, and lower body, more specifically in two metonyms, “eye” (Eyglu-) and “arse” (Raza-Bersi) and one functional indicium Hólmongóu- (for “arm”).

Just how were Steingerðr’s three names received? They accompany a public statement of divorce. For the saga public they provide an immediate, topical motivation for the legal action, even if it was also recognized as a pretext for a path of action that Steingerðr found desirable for other reasons. None of Bersi’s verse is addressed to Steingerðr and we know nothing of their life together, save that no offspring are mentioned. There is no signal from within the saga that speculation is encouraged on the course of events behind the foreground figure of Kormákr, in distinction to awareness of kinship, alliance, and obligation that often assists in motivating the decisions taken by characters in feud (Byock 1982, Miller 1990).

From a more formal perspective, Steingerðr’s words can be compared to those uttered by women (or senior male family members) in the scenes of incitation to vengeance. Both are speech acts directed at males by social inferiors. In this lies their efficacy, since insults or innuendo concerning unmanliness would not be tolerated without violent physical reaction if delivered by a male peer. In the sagas only the most powerful chieftains, Guðmundr and Snorri, can disregard such comment without suffering a loss of honour (Gehl 1937, Sørensen 1983). Steingerðr’s remarks differ from “whetting” (hvøt), however, in that they are not an act of empowerment—to take justified revenge on behalf of family interests—but of disempowerment, a verbal emasculation. Hers is not a performative utterance intended
to goad Bersi to action but a *non sequitur* intended to leave him as powerless and passive as her third insult insinuates. One dimension of this disempowerment is to deprive his household of its interior administrator and to withdraw her material share from the marriage agreement. Another aspect is the verbal act of public shaming, with a view to tarnishing Bersi's public image.

In the effort to evaluate Steingerór's words, one may question, firstly, the impact they can have had on the subsequent life of Bersi, and, secondly, how appropriate they might have been judged to the mediaeval Icelandic conceptions of female agency. Steingerór’s act of public humiliation is not presented as a true dialogue scene. With the exception of the statement of the three nicknames, awkward in other than direct speech, Steingerór’s views are given in a *style indirect libre*, which employs her vocabulary (*árkumlaðan*) but has not the immediacy of reported speech. But, as the sagas were read aloud, this should not be over emphasized. More significantly, Bersi is given no reply. Does Bersi seek to rise above the insult through silence, or is he silenced by it?

For reasons to be more fully treated from the perspective of gender, Steingerór's agency in the saga is limited. A passive or at best reactive stance is most evident. Kormákr makes free with her physical person, borrowing combs, wiping sweat on her cloak, giving her kisses, obliging her to sew for him. But her volitional actions are restricted to informing Kormákr of her impending marriage to Bersi, divorcing Bersi, agreeing to the second marriage to Þórvalldr, taking the tiller and ramming a ship in which Kormákr was travelling, and, lastly, refusing Kormákr even when her husband is ready to relinquish her. Among these the divorce action and the ship-board incident stand out, the latter because of its physical nature and masculine overtones. Ramming ships was not woman's business in mediaeval Iceland. Perhaps the divorce action set a precedent for female initiative, furthered by her second husband's reported lack of spirit.

To turn to Bersi's subsequent life as possibly affected by Steingerór's defamatory divorce action, Bersi's response is not verbal, at least not as recorded, but legal. He refuses to divide their estate. Perhaps predictably, this leads Steingerór's brother Þorkell to challenge Bersi to combat in order to settle the claim on Steingerór's marriage portion. Þorkell is killed on the third blow. Bersi's thirty-first victim. Bersi occupies centre stage at this point in the saga (O'Donoghue calls the section a "digression," 1991: 89–109), suggesting to some that the author had drawn on a lost **Bersa saga** to create a portrait in counterpoint to that of Kormákr, with the common
details of prowess in arms and poetry (Kormáks saga 1939: xcviii). In the reconciliation with Þorkell’s second, Váli, Bersi marries his sister and spends a number of years in peace. Superficially, then, Steingerðr’s taunt about Raza-Bersi would seem to have done nothing to diminish his self-confidence or his standing in the community. Topical in its reference to the recent duel and perhaps a pretext to act on deeper seated dissatisfactions, it appears inconsequential, mere women’s words.

After an unspecified number of years, Bersi is named in a semi-ritualized exchange that involved two men comparing their choice of eminent persons (mannjafnaðr). Bersi is the more outstanding according to Oddr, and Bersi is later obliged to intervene on his behalf when Oddr’s daughter Steinvør is abducted by Þórarin, who had been promoted by Oddr’s fellow-contestant. The middle and longer term consequences are (1) a number of justifiable killings by Bersi outside the hölmganga setting, (2) the offer of protection to the young woman who seems to have become his concubine (Karras 1992), (3) a deterioration in his relationship with his wife and her family, (4) eventually the request to foster one of the sons of the powerful Óláf rón, his cousin. This last, stated in conjunction with his awareness of his advancing age (1939: 260), is a clear indication of Bersi’s perceived need for political protection, in the tense world of tenth-century economic and political relations. These events and the conflicts with Þórarin, Þórdís, and her brother Váli have sufficient narrative volume to have borne up an independent saga, but are not central to my further discussion.

While neither the wound nor Steingerðr’s coarse joke appears to have impaired Bersi’s subsequent family, social, and political life, the latter does appear to have affected in a symbolic sense one aspect of the saga’s thematics: the content of the verses ascribed to Bersi. Here, we must forego attempts at determining the authenticity of the verses, not their fundamental attribution to Bersi, against which nothing argues, but as concerns their place in Bersi’s reconstructed life-story, their circumstances of composition and correct sequence. This would pose a subset of the questions that have been traditionally associated with Kormáks saga, centred on the relationship between the prose narrative of Kormákr’s life and the content and context of his poetry.7

Fourteen poems are attributed to Bersi in the saga (st. 45 is considered a variant of 37), four associated with the juridical duels against Kormákr and Steinarr, four with his immediately following dealings with Þórðr, the remainder with his later life, i.e., with events subsequent to Steingerðr’s
jibes. In these verses, his topics are retrospection and age, repeatedly op­
posed, in the usual dichotomy of the two skaldic stanzas, to his readiness
and ability to continue the armed encounters that have made his reputation.
Before the fight with Steinarr he said that he was old in the ways of war
(gamall emk . . . gunnhøysandi, st. 37), but this is a statement of relative
experience. After the divorce, age is an absolute matter. Typical phrasings
are: þás æri . . . vprum “when I was younger” (st. 40), þótt elli “despite
age” (var. þótt elli disk “although I am growing older,” st. 44), opt hefj úfzk
. . . of minna “I often became angry for less” (st. 49), Kominn es Ullr við
elli / alna grjôts af fotum “because of age I have begun to be shaky on my
feet” (st. 50). In the second helming of stanza 47 and in bear-like solitude
he invites the troll to take his life when and if he is no longer capable of
fighting. Bersi exhibits the self-irony of the aged Egill when, through the
warrior kenning Ullr alna grjôts (god of the forearms’ stones = bracelets),
he has the firm forearm alliterate with age (ţln : elli) but contrast with un­
sure feet (af fotum) (cf. the Ullr : elldisk alliteration in st. 9). While there
is movement here from upper to lower body, the sexual dimension is not
as explicit as in Egill’s last ascribed verses (Egils saga Skallagrísson
1933: 296, st. 60), where ekkjur allkaldar tvær puns on ekkja “ankle” and
“widow,” the latter the two cold testicles of lost virility (Sørensen
The motif of age in contrast to youth is explicitly thematized in the
scene with his foster son, Halldôrr Óláfsson. The verse was well enough
known in its day to be cited in Laxdela saga in slightly variant form:

Liggjum báðir
í bekk saman,
Halldôrr ok ek,
hvergi fœrir;
veldr œska þér,
en elli mér.
þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér.
(1939: 261. st. 48)9

In Kormâks saga the circumstances are a temporary illness (these are not
Bersi’s last verses nor has he fought his last fight) and the twelve-year-
old Halldôrr’s untried youth. In Laxdaela saga the generation gap motif is
more pronounced; Halldôrr is still an infant while Bersi is in his dotage.
Presented as Bersi’s only verses in the work, they are then also his last. The
poem bears comparison with Egill Skallagrísson’s final verses and invites
consideration of a senex heroicus motif in Old Norse and early Germanic
literature. In Kormáks saga, however, most of the heroic has been expended by the time of the late verses composed in the demeaning circumstances of the kitchen. Although Bersi is still capable of coming out of hibernation to fight, in the poetic tension between duelling and age the resolution is inexorably in favour of the latter.

The motifs of past prowess and age are gradually strengthened in stanzas that post-date Bersi’s divorce. Naturally, the intervening years of peace, which otherwise offered no grist to the sagaman’s mill, provide a justification. But within the world of the literary artifact, the composite prosimetrum, the sword blow to the buttocks, its legal reflex in the klómhög, and the Steingerðr’s mocking inference of inability to defend against victimization, introduce as a new and dominant theme the decrepitude of age. In the capsulized biography of the three bynames the sequence moves from bright eye and strong arm to clipped rump, the lower body symbolizing the physiological processes through which aging takes its toll.

Steingerðr’s divorce action, exclusively verbal, is realized in one of the few areas in mediaeval Icelandic law and the stylized world of the sagas where women enjoyed a degree of empowerment and the possibility of initiative. But as Carol Clover convincingly argues (1993), albeit without this metaphor, the default value for human agency in Icelandic society was always male. The sagas pay less attention to women exercising fundamental rights accorded their gender than to women momentarily and in quite limited circumstances assuming the freedom of action of men. In the scenes of women’s incitation, authorization (an unavenged killing in the family) and stakes (family honour and, concurrently, economic and political status) were imposed from without. Women take the initiative in a situation where communal judgment had likely already found men deficient (Vilhjálmur Árnason 1991), deficient in the same properties of manliness that Steingerðr insinuates Bersi has lost in the duel with Steinarr. Steingerðr may well be seizing an opportunity for personal motives rather than following the dictates of the community ethos. But the taunts of Bersi, like ramming Kormákr’s ship, are male-gendered actions undertaken by a woman, a male by temporary proxy. With some of the economy of linguistic or mythical paradigms, when a nexus of social imperatives obliges a woman to leave the normative gender role—to move “up” to the male plane of action—it is typically to occupy a void left by the inaction of men. This is often accompanied by the woman’s charge of deficient manliness, and in the constant sum game of honour this deficiency legitimates their sexual exploitation by other “integral” males as proxy women. Both men and women, in the Icelandic saga,
advance over the backs of other men. The question of the degree to which this case-specific freedom of action may be one of the idealizing tendencies of the family sagas is given relief by the relative rarity and inconsequential nature of female divorce initiatives and revenge incitation in the contemporary sagas. As a case in point, Steinvør Sighvatsdóttir in Æðskar saga kakala (Ch. 2, in Sturlunga saga) threatened to exchange gender roles with her husband, Hálfðan, and to muster a group of followers for a punitive foray. This threat was not realized, however, not because she vacillated but because no one paid her any heed.

Satirical comment is often non sequitur. The recourse of the satirized is to cap the remark from within the same generic register, witty one-upmanship. Alternatives may be perceived as stuffily principled or bathetic. On occasion, no answer may be better than any answer, since it denies acknowledgment but in a vengeance society leaves the future open. Since Steingerór is not Bersi’s peer, physical action is inappropriate. But in failing to respond or to be allowed a response by the author, Bersi has abdicated his position in a mythic type scene: the agonistic dialogue, often a knowledge test, between mortal hero and supernatural being, often female. As I have written in a consideration of the Irish epic hero facing the goddess of territorial sovereignty in her various guises: “The male hero is defined by what he is and what he does, but in no less degree by what he is not. Yet the dividing line between male and female as realized in action cannot be unilaterally drawn by the hero himself. In a variety of ways, the male protagonist is held up to the scrutiny of the supernatural female and judgment is passed on his adequacy as hero” (Sayers 1994: “Supernatural Pseudonyms”). Approaching this question from a somewhat different angle, Roberta Frank has asked “why skalds address women” (1990). Male identity and worth are completed only through confirmation by the female Other, who is often allied with the marginal, the monstrous, the supernatural, the chaotic. The hero’s interlocutor in these scenes of self-realization and self-definition may be giantesses, female trolls, land spirits, fetches, fairy mistresses, amazons, sorceresses, seeresses. Names, identities, and riddles — all parts of knowledge tests — are common elements and the control of discourse is decisive (Ross 1981, 1990, Quinn 1990). In the scene between Steingerór and Bersi, instead of one figure concealing an identity under an alias or disguise, names are awarded: the past is summarized, perhaps not without irony, and the future is projected in the third term that, while not a prophecy, is still a performative utterance, since meant to affect subsequent reality. Steingerór
would like the name to stick. At the same time, and on another less con-
scious level, Steingerðr's bynames for Bersi also replicate the old practice
of circumlocutionary terms for the bear in order to contain his aggression,
two flattering terms and one dismissive one.

Despite the inclusion of the later, nearly extraneous Bersi-related mat-
ter in *Kormáks saga*, this archetypical dialogue is only partially realized in
the divorce scene and is, in its own imagery, cut short, like the marriage.
The true effectiveness of the female speaker is in the displacement of Bersi's
poetic themes towards age and enfeeblement. Although — to move from the
level of myth back "up" to those of poetics and social agency — Bersi con-
tinues to compose verse and to fight with success and although Steingerðr's
discursive power is evanescent, it is she, in the verbal duel, who draws first
blood.

*Kormáks saga* is a tale of poets, Kormákr and Bersi, and even Stein-
gerðr's second husband, Þorvaldr, is an occasional versifier. Steingerðr, too,
proves to have a sharp tongue, in the oral sub-genre of repartee, and one
stanza is also ascribed to her (Ch. 6). The most frequent bi-polar themat-
ics of Kormákr's verses is combat vs. love/jealousy/defamation. In Bersi's
case it is martial readiness and time/age. In the spare prose medium of
the witticism Steingerðr covers these topics in turn: active heterosexuality,
duelling, passive homosexuality and age and their debasing condemnation.
However brief, her remark encompasses the rhetorical devices and figures
of prosonomasia, alloiosis, zeugma, synecdoche, cacemphaton, meiosis, that
is, nicknaming, breaking a subject down into alternatives, one word (*Bersi*)
governing several congruent words, the part for the whole (*Raza-*), the scur-
rilous jest, and belittling through a single word. As in this intentionally
pedantic listing of its rhetorical properties, Steingerðr's comment is marked
by incongruity, the sudden drop in stylistic level to the scabrous, defamatory
third term.

It was suggested above that not only the scurrilous third nickname,
*Raza-Bersi*, but also the other two, albeit in varying degrees, had a sexual
frame of reference. With this in mind and with a view to a more sharply
countoured personality and discursive palette for Steingerðr, we may consider
the scene in which she has been rescued from vikings by Kormákr and his
brother Þorgils, and returned to her second husband, Þorvaldr, nicknamed
tinteinn. Her husband judges that she might now well stay with her first
paramour. But, by this stage — and a good number of years seemed to have
passed — Steingerðr, frustrated and exasperated, rejects the transfer of her
person. Her views on the matter are, as with the characterization of Bersi
as ørkumlaðan. given in indirect discourse, and read as follows: *Steingerðr kvazk ekki skyldu kaupa um knifa* (1939: 298). Durand’s footnote is typical for the interpretations that have been put on this remark:

*að kaupa um knifa*: expression insolite qui implique une transaction ayant pour effet de changer de couteau, ce couteau qui ne quittait guère la ceinture des hommes et des femmes du haut moyen âge et était une manière de symbole de leur condition. (1975: 82n2; cf. Hollander 1949: 70: “did not wish to change her state [in that fashion]”)

Unless the knife is a metonym for the food cut with it and the expression then refers to a change of residence, it is unlikely that everyday instruments like the short knife were the property of the landowner and thus returned on leaving a household. I suggest that this remark, like the nicknames, is drawn from the physical and sexual domain, and that Steingerðr is intentionally reifying herself, in cynicism and distaste perhaps (if we impute more psychological motive than the saga genre generally encourages), equating her body with the unmentioned sheath, and the male member with the knife (cf. Niedner’s translation of the passage 1964: 203: *sie hätte keine Lust zum Manneswechsel*).

One of the aesthetic pleasures, perhaps largely unconscious, of the family sagas, contributing to the credibility and cohesiveness of this fictional world, is the recognition of characters who appear in more than one saga (Hruby 1929). At the anonymous level we have stock figures such as female gossips, whose information transfer can have fatal consequences (Emmerich 1955), slaves whose positive acts may result in freedom or negative acts result in death, and berserks and revenants to be disposed of by normative heroes. On the level of individual identity, we find consistency in the narrative deployment of figures such as Óláf pái and Bersi, even Egill Skallagrímsson, who plays a small part in *Laxdæla saga* as well as being the protagonist in his own. Only on the level of the most powerful chieftains do we find differences from one saga to another, differences not so much in character as in judgment on character and actions. The treatment of figures such as Snorri the Priest or Guðmundr the Powerful depends on the political thesis and sympathies of the saga in question and doubtless also on the nature of original sponsorship/authorship. Aberrant treatment of the most powerful may also result from the choice of satire as genre, as in *Bandamanna saga* and *Ólkaðra þáttr*. Steingerðr’s three nicknames for Bersi may well be an authorial “back-formation” based on fairly discrete blocks of narrative material about Bersi, each ending in a minor key, including the duel with Steinarr, the divorce, Bersi’s conflicts with neighbours and
kin, and the corpus of verse with its progressive themes of martial ability, nostalgia, and debility.

Steingerðr’s nicknames for the husband she is discarding have the extemporaneous quality that the sagamen ascribe to the skaldic verses they incorporate in their works. Like them dense and terse, the three-part slur is also complex, both rhetorically and in its networks of allusions: to the personal name, totemic or tabu-charged animal and its attributes, gender identity, personal history, social status, and honour. Similarly, it realizes one of the time-honoured roles of poetry in early western European societies, not praise but censure. Given the limited reach of women’s social agency in saga Iceland, Steingerðr’s witty jibe, while it provides topical justification for her divorce proclamation, is not credited with significant effect on the subsequent external career of Bersi. Yet within the construct of the saga, Bersi’s post-divorce verses on themes of male adequacy, retrospection, and aging do take their cue from Steingerðr’s taunt and bear her mark.

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NOTES

1 Bersi employed a magical shield provided by the sorceress, Æórvig. While the shield holds, the blow proves injurious. Elsewhere in the saga evidence of less than fully efficacious magic (with the single major exception of the failure of Kormákr and Steingerðr’s union) is consonant with Christian conceptions of demonology, i.e., events may be facilitated by demons in order to entrap more deeply the souls of sorcerers. Christian miracles, on the other hand, tend to be more fully effective.

2 Eyglu-Halli is named at the conclusion of Svarfdæla saga (Ch. 32) as the brother of Karl rauðí, but in Valla-Ljóts saga (Ch. 1) is called Halli Sigurðsson, grandson of Karl. In the latter work he gains the nickname Hreið u-Halli for his strongarm tactics in support of the Múrvellings (cf. hraða “frighten” and the noun was used of the bogeyman). Andersson and Miller translate “Roughneck” (1989: 261). As Halli had a son called Bersi, and neither name is extremely common, the byname Eyglu- from Kormáks saga may have been attached to Halli along with the variant pedigree. Generally speaking, Svarfdæla saga exhibits numerous defects of composition or transmission. The equation with Hreiðu- would also appear to explain Niedner’s translation of Eyglu-Bersi as “Schreckens-Bersi.”


4 Factors conditioning Icelanders’ attitudes toward the bear would have been contact by early Scandinavians with the northern Eurasian cult of the animal. Significant elements in common are the belief in the bear as a son of the sky god and in the mating of bears with mortal women (resulting in women shying away from the dead animal for fear of pregnancy as part of the post-hunt, pre-feast ritual), and the euphemistic address of the dead animal. Another factor would have been exposure in Iceland to the larger and more variously qualified polar bear (Ursus maritimus) as a result of bears reaching the
northern coast on ice floes or captured in Greenland. In comparison, the European brown bear (the local variant of Ursus arctos) was not a native of Iceland. Even the euphemism based on colour (björn) would have been called into question by the white-furred animal. But none of Snorri’s heiti singles out the latter’s swimming ability, so that the poetic image of the bear seems to have remained the conventional continental one. As Auðunar þáttir vestfírskfa (1945: 195) well illustrates, the large animals were certainly appreciated: [Eirekr] hafði veitt bjarnadýr eitt á kafa faðrt og rauðkinna.

5 As a means to articulate the portrayal of strong-minded women, the family sagas make divorce readily realized, but the criteria are difficult to corroborate from the evidence of post-conversion legal texts. Nagging, sexual dysfunction, and cross-dressing are sufficient reason, if not always formal grounds, for Dráinn, Unnr (Njáls saga), and Þóðór and Guðrún (Laxdæla saga), respectively. The earliest extant legal codes, showing only moderate influence of Christian canon law, authorized divorce on the grounds of kinship, spousal abuse, forced emigration, economic pressure (too many children or too many of a spouse’s dependents to feed), and incompatibility (where impotence was likely to be counted), but not because of a largely symbolic injury like Bersi’s. Recent studies on marriage in Iceland include Frank 1973, Mundt 1976, Lönnroth 1978, Byock 1982, Jochens 1986 “Consent in Marriage,” Sørensen 1986, Anderson and Miller 1989. There is a necessary overlap in the scholarly literature on women in mediaeval Iceland in the consideration of gender, legal status (concubinage, marriage and divorce, property ownership, legal action), voice and discourse, treatment in poetry, etc. Despite their relevance, important recent studies will be cited only once in these notes, at points of greatest relevance to the instant discussion.


8 Bersi’s verse ranks among the less distinguished and is not generally anthologized. Durand (1975: xxiv) characterizes his imagery as less elegant than Kormákr’s and his knowledge (or use) of mythology as less extensive. As a normative figure in contrast to Kormákr, it is perhaps not surprising that Bersi has left no erotic verse. With regard to Jochens’s recent study on mansóngvar or erotic verses, the question of verse written by free men of the propertied class for the female slaves of their peers, a rather anomalous notion in the circumstances of mediaeval life, could be resolved if man were seen as a broad category — “female dependents” — rather than “slaves” with a subsequent extension to “maidens, wife” (Jochens 1992: 250). Erotic verse, defamation of male rivals, and malign sorcery were all relegated to the social margin. The law permitted the offended party (male kinsmen in the case of women as the target of erotic verse) to prosecute and, in the event of successful judgment, punish.

9 The version in Laxdæla saga, also given in Finnur Jónsson’s collection of skaldic verse (1912–15: 1B.88) is as follows:

Liggjum báðir
i lamasessi
Halldór ok ek,
þófum engi þrek;
veldr elli mér,
en óeska þér,
þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér. (1934: 76)

Magnusson and Pálsson translate:
Here we both lie in helplessness,
Halldor and I,
Both powerless.
Age afflicts me
And infancy you;
It'll get better for you

Studies bearing on fundamental conceptions of sex, gender and woman are
perspective, Biddick 1993.

On Old Norse flyting and senna see Harris 1979, Bax and Padmos 1983, Sørensen

Relevant are Ross 1981, Martínez-Pizarro 1990, Quinn 1990, Swenson 1991. For

Cf. Steinarr taking Bersi’s seat at the þing under an Odinnic disguise and alias
(Glúmr, Skúmr) and Gylfi before the thrones of the Three High Ones (Gylfaginning).

Bersi is named in the Haukbók recension of Landnámabók 1968: 89 and Íslendingadrápa st. 24 (see Kormáks saga 1939: 224n2), as well as the earlier noted passage in
Lazdela saga.

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—. See Andersson and Miller.


Padmos, Tineke. See Bax and Padmos.


