FLORILEGIUM 12, 1993

STEINGERÐR'S NICKNAMES FOR BERSI (*KORMÁKS SAGA*): IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER, POLITICS, AND POETICS

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When the marriage contracted between Kormákr and Steingerðr is not realized due to the curse by the sorceress Þórveig and Kormákr's vacillation, the young woman is given by her family to the widower Bersi Véleifsson of Saurbær, a cousin of Óláfr pái and descendant of the matriarch Auðr djúpauðga. 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 Þórveig, 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.[1] 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 Steingerðr 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, Þórðr, returns his lost healing stone, Steingerðr's judgmental sentiments come to the narrative surface in direct speech:

> Við þessa atburði lagði Steingerðr 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 kallaðr Eyglu-Bersi, en þá Hólmgǫngu-Bersi, en nú máttu at sǫnnu heita Raza-Bersi," — ok segir skilit við hann. Steingerðr ferr norðr til frænda sinna, hittir Þorkel bróður sinn, biðr hann heimta fé sín at Bersa, mund ok heimanfylgju, ok kvezk eigi vilja eiga Bersa ørkumlaðan. Þorkell lastar þat ekki ok heitir fǫr sinni. (1939: 254)
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> [As a result of these events Steingerðr 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 *Hólmgǫngu-Bersi*; but now you might rightly be called *Raza-Bersi*," and declared herself divorced from him. Steingerðr 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 Steingerðr 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 Steingerðr'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 *bjǫrn* "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 *skógbjǫrn, híðbjǫrn, bjarndýr, bessi* "he-bear," *birna* "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.

Ørkumlaðan 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 *ørkumlaðan* 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 *Hólmgǫnga-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 *Svarfdœla saga* but *Hreðu-Halli* in *Valla-Ljóts saga*.[2] *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, *Hólmgǫngu-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 triptych 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 Steingerðr's characterization is wry but not negative.

Hólmgǫngu-Bersi is an identification prepared by the preceding action and even more by the explicit description of Bersi as *vígamaðr ok hólmgǫngumaðr* "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 Steingerðr's coinage and was attached to a number of other saga age figures (see, for example, 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 *einvígi*, 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 authenticity 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 Steingerðr'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. Steingerðr'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 Steingerðr is well aware, such an injury was associated in law with the *klámhǫgg* "shame stroke" (Miller 1990: 101; note its execution as next-to-last blow when Þórðr Kolbeinsson kills Bjǫrn in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, 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.[3] 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 Svínafell 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 Steingerðr's third taunt. One of Snorri's *heiti* for the bear is *jǫlfuðr* (1931: 211), which Faulkes renders as "yellow-bum" (1987: 164). Support for this reading and its application to Bersi is found in *brunninrazi* "brown-arsed," used of the bear (Falk 1928, de Vries 1962: 294f.). The specular relationship of *Raza-Bersi* and *brunninrazi* recalls the frequent metathesis (involving primarily the liquid *r*) in words, broadly speaking, related to procreative and execratory functions: *ragr* : *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), *raz* : *ars* "arse," *reðr* : *eðr* "penis," *fretr* : 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 *ragr* : *argr* pair, one might claim that *Raza-Bersi* puns as a near-tautology: *raz* + (*b*)*ers*, with an effect like that of "Bare-Arsed Bersi" in English. With a kind of aesthetic logic and basis in verbal magic, *raz* 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 Steingerðr's second husband. His tone toward Bersi, however, is respectful. He calls him the "den-dweller of the woods" (*híðbyggi holta*; st. 30) and punningly employs the verb *berjast* "fight" (for Kormákr playing on Steingerðr'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., *Jǫlfuðr*, *Jalfaðr* "yellow-arsed" (de Vries 1935–37, I.363, II.65, Polomé 1990: 454f.) and in his disguises may use the alias *Bjǫrn* (*Harðar 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 Steingerðr'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 *Hólmgǫngu-* (for "arm").

Just how were Steingerðr's three names received? They accompany a public statement of divorce.[5] 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.[6] 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" (*hvǫt*), 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 Steingerðr'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. Steingerðr'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, Steingerðr's views are given in a *style indirect libre*, which employs her vocabulary (*ørkumlaðan*) 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, Steingerðr'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 Þorvaldr, 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 Steingerðr'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 Steingerðr's brother Þorkell to challenge Bersi to combat in order to settle the claim on Steingerðr'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 Steinvǫr is abducted by Þórarinn, 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 *hólmganga* 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 Óláfr pái, 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 Þórarinn, 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.[8] In these verses, his topics are retrospection and age, repeatedly opposed, 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 . . . gunnþeysandi*, st. 37), but this is a statement of relative experience. After the divorce, age is an absolute matter. Typical phrasings are: *þás œri . . . vǫrum* "when I was younger" (st. 40), *þótt elli* "despite age" (var. *þótt eldisk* "although I am growing older," st. 44), *opt hefk ýfzk . . . of minna* "I often became angry for less" (st. 49), *Kominn es Ullr við elli / alna grjóts af fótum* "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 grjóts* (god of the forearms' stones = bracelets), he has the firm forearm alliterate with age (*ǫln* : *elli*) but contrast with unsure feet (*af fótum)* (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 Skallagrímssonnar* 1933: 296, st. 60), where *ekkjur allkaldar tvær* puns on *ekkja* "ankle" and "widow," the latter the two cold testicles of lost virility (Sørensen 1983: 86).

The motif of age in contrast to youth is explicitly thematized in the scene with his foster son, Halldórr Óláfsson. The verse was well enough known in its day to be cited in *Laxdœla saga* in slightly variant form:

Liggjum báðir í bekk saman, Halldórr ok ek, hvergi fœrir; veldr œska þér, en elli mér, þess batnar þér, en þeygi mér. (1939: 261, st. 48)[9]	We both lie on the same bench, Halldórr and I, neither capable. Youth is the cause in your case, but age in mine; you'll be cured of it, but not I.

In *Kormáks 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 Halldórr's untried youth. In *Laxdœla saga* the generation gap motif is more pronounced; Halldórr 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 Skallagrímsson'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 *klámhǫgg*, 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.[10] 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, Steinvǫr Sighvatsdóttir in *Þórðar saga kakala* (Ch. 2, in *Sturlunga saga*) threatened to exchange gender roles with her husband, Hálfdan, 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.[11] 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 Steingerðr 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.[12] 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).[13] In the scene between Steingerðr 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. Steingerðr

would like the name to stick. At the same time, and on another less conscious 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 matter 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 continues 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 Steingerðr'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 thematics 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 scurrilous 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 contoured 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 Óláfr pái and Bersi,[14] even Egill Skallagrímsson, who plays a small part in *Laxdœla 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 *Ölkofra 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, Þórveig. 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 *Svarfdœla saga* (Ch. 32) as the brother of Karl rauði, but in *Valla-Ljóts saga* (Ch. 1) is called Halli Sigurðsson, grandson of Karl. In the latter work he gains the nickname *Hreð u-Halli* for his strongarm tactics in support of the Mǫðrvellings (cf. *hræða* "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, *Svarfdœla saga* exhibits numerous defects of composition or transmission. The equation with *Hreðu-* would also appear to explain Niedner's translation of *Eyglu-Bersi* as "Schreckens-Bersi."

[3] Other essential and recent studies are Almqvist 1965, Ross 1973, Ström 1974, Louis-Jensen 1979, Sørensen 1983, Gade 1986, Sayers 1994 "Scurrilous Episode."

[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 (*bjǫrn*) 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 þáttr vestfirzka* (1945: 195) well illustrates, the large animals were certainly appreciated: [*Eirekr*] *hafði veitt bjarndýr eitt á kafa fagrt 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 Þráinn, Unnr (*Njáls saga*), and Þórðr and Guðrún (*Laxdœla 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, Andersson 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.

[6] The scenes of incitation (*hvǫt* "whetting") have attracted considerable recent critical attention after Heller's 1958 inventory: Mundal 1978, Miller 1983, Jochens 1986 "Medieval Icelandic Heroine," Clover 1988, Sørensen 1988 "Guðrún Gjúkadóttir."

[7] Andersson 1967, 1969, Bjarni Einarsson 1971, 1976, von See 1977, Hofmann 1978–79, Frank 1990, O'Donoghue 1991 (on the last named, see Cook 1993). Other general characterizations and studies of this saga are Carney 1955, Hallberg 1958, 1969, Bjarni Einarsson 1964, Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1966, Bredsdorff 1971, Durand 1979, Schottmann 1982, Frank 1986, Sayers 1992.

[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 *mansöngvar* 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 "maiden, 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 *Laxdœla saga*, also given in Finnur Jónsson's collection of skaldic verse (1912–15: 1B.88) is as follows:

> Liggjum báðir
> *í lamasessi*
> Halldórr ok ek,
> hǫfum engi þrek;

veldr elli mér,
en œska 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
But not for me. (1969: 109).

[10] Studies bearing on fundamental conceptions of sex, gender and woman are Thomas 1952–53, Fidjestøl 1976, Kress 1979, Judd 1984, Clover 1986, 1993, Jochens 1986 "Medieval Icelandic Heroine," 1990, 1991 "Old Norse Magic and Gender," Heinrichs 1988, Sørensen 1988 "Guðrún Gjúkadóttir," Jesch 1991, and, from a wider European perspective, Biddick 1993.

[11] On Old Norse flyting and *senna* see Harris 1979, Bax and Padmos 1983, Sørensen 1988 "Loki's *senna*," Parks 1990, Sayers 1991, Swenson 1991, Miller 1992.

[12] Relevant are Ross 1981, Martínez-Pizarro 1990, Quinn 1990, Swenson 1991. For the European perspective, Dexter 1992; Old English, Rowe 1989.

[13] 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*).

[14] Bersi is named in the *Hauksbók* recension of *Landnámabók* 1968: 89 and *Íslendingadrápa* st. 24 (see *Kormáks saga* 1939: 224n2), as well as the earlier noted passage in *Laxdœla saga*.

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