Women and Witchcraft:

Magic Use as a Tool of Autonomy for Marginalized Groups in Early Scandinavia

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Women's associations with witchcraft in pre-industrial Europe had for centuries been one that was negative, with accusations of sorcery being potential death sentences for many women. However, prior to the witch hunts of the 14th and 15th centuries, women's association and employment of sorcery and it's related practices were treated and perceived differently within the context of early Scandinavia. Gender still dictated how women conducted their lives within Norse society. However, Nordic shamanistic practices that correlate closely with modern conceptions of magic were used by women to subvert, challenge, and navigate these roles and restrictions. This practice, known as seiðr, was used by particular men, potentially genderqueer individuals, and primarily women to cross gendered boundaries. This history is significant as it explores women in positions that were often exceptional within the context of the Middle Ages. Women used forms of Nordic magic such as seiðr as a means of exercising autonomy and crossing gendered boundaries in a period where there were limited opportunities to do so.

Knowledge of seiðr and its practitioners stem from two primary sources. The most significant of these is the various sagas written over the course of the Viking Age. Stories within these sagas are often sensationalized, with magic used as a literary device. However, though episodes may be exaggerated, they are not entirely fabricated, and likely contain historical elements or reflect social attitudes and standards at the time. The practice of seiðr appears within various Sagas, however most notably it is featured within the *Íslendingasögur,* or *Saga of Icelanders*, which is known for its relative realism.[1] Primary knowledge and examples of how seiðr operated are found within the sagas. The episodes detail seiðr as a 'mind magic' that

[1] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur," *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 4 (2009): 412. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40920876.

involved divining the future, inflicting misfortune, inflicting sickness upon people, dictating the weather, and more.[2]

Because of the hyperbolic nature of these sources, the validity of seiðrs representation within sagas like the *Íslendingasögur* could be debated. However, further supporting seiðr's existence and women's dominion over it are various burial sites and their contents that were discovered within Scandinavian nations, ranging from Sweden to Denmark.[3] Burial sites contained objects theorized to relate to ritual practice, such as wooden staffs, jewelry, and psychoactive drugs such as cannabis seeds.[4] Remains found buried with these ritual items were predominantly female. However, male remains buried with these culturally 'female' items and dress related to seiðr were also discovered.[5] This is significant, as male involvement in the practice of seiðr was incredibly stigmatized to the point it evoked both fear and disgust.[6] However, if practicing seiðr meant social ostracization, why did some men continue engaging in the practice?

Using queer theory, some scholars have suggested that these men existed beyond the gender binary. Other cultures that participated in shamanistic practices involved rituals that blurred the lines of gendered boundaries or involved the existence of a third sex.[7] Because seiðr was considered a culturally female practice, male practitioners may have had to "[transgress]

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[2] Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* 2nd, 2nd Edition ed. Oxbow Books, 2019, 57. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhhhgz3

[3] "The Magic Wands of Viking Seeresses?" NATMUS, Accessed November 22, 2023. https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/theviking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/the-magic-wands-of-the-seeresses/.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Price, *Viking Way,* 172.

[7] Brit Solli, "Queering the Cosmology of the Vikings: A Queer Analysis of the Cult of Odin and 'Holy White Stones," *Journal of Homosexuality* 54, no. 1–2 (2008): 197. doi:10.1080/00918360801952085.

gender borders … [to be] allowed into a female cosmology from which ordinary men were excluded".[8] Furthermore, the stigma, also known as ergi, ridiculed men for being cowardly or effeminate; however, it carried connotations that related to male practitioners sexuality.[9] It is possible that in the context of the Viking Age, more 'effeminate' men gravitated toward the practice of seiðr whether it was their intent or not. Much like for women, seiðr was a tool for men who existed outside of gender expectations and restrictions as an outlet and expression of autonomy. Interestingly, Odinn, the Mighty God Father of All was considered to be the "supreme master of seiðr", despite the immense social stigma of seiðr and its taboo associations.[10] Further analysis using queer analytical frameworks could potentially deconstruct this contradiction between Odinn's accepted use of seiðr versus male practitioner's stigmatization.

Many women who practiced seiðr, like men, turned to sorcery due to preexisting conditions that limited their autonomy, authority, and agency. While some Viking-Age Scandinavian women did enjoy elevated positions of power, especially in relation to those in neighbouring countries, popular assumptions of the "powerful Viking woman" are often reductionist and fail to acknowledge hardships faced by women of this time.[11] Men occupied dominant roles relating to warfare, hunting, politics, etc., while women were largely relegated to

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Jenny Blaine and Robert J. Wallis, "The 'Ergi' Seidman: Contestations of Gender, Shamanism and Sexuality in Northern Religion Past and Present," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, no. 3 (2000): 403, 395. doi:10.1080/713676039.
[10] Price, *Viking Way,* 38, 63.
[11] Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, "Polygyny, Concubinage, and the Social Lives of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 13 (2017): 166, 167. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48501906.

the private sphere.[12] Furthermore, Scandinavian women's political influence was at most informal, as women were not allowed to act as jurors and could very rarely initiate prosecution.[13]

Aside from cultural subordination and political exclusion, gender-based violence was also present within this context. Infanticide overwhelmingly targeted female newborn babies.[14] Evidence of this can be found in the Landnámabók, an article closest to a census from this period, which outlines the list of Icelandic settlers and their descendants, where sons typically outnumbered daughters by four or five, or as many as nine to one.[15] Furthermore, laws from this period cite violence against a spouse amounting to 'major wounds' being grounds for divorce, suggesting that lesser transgressions of violence against spouses were not worthy of punishment, and were possibly socially sanctioned.[16] Not all women practiced seiðr, and many navigated gender-based issues without the exceptional opportunity for agency seiðr brought. However, these reasons are variables in why women may have turned to seiðr, to obtain power and control in their lives.

There are several ways in which seiðr is presented and employed, including the varying aforementioned disciplines of 'mind magic'. This mind magic is present within the *Fóstbræðra* saga, for example, where one woman named Grima uses her magic to heal and hide a man on the run.[17] Grima's primary motivations in doing so are to receive financial compensation from the man she is using her magic on, as she lived on a remote fjord in

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[12] Ibid, 187.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Clover, Carol J. "THE POLITICS OF SCARCITY: NOTES ON THE SEX RATIO IN EARLY SCANDINAVIA." *Scandinavian Studies* 60, no. 2 (1988): 160. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40918942.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Raffield, *Social Lives,* 195, 196.
[17] Friðriksdóttir, *Women's weapons*, 425.

poverty.[18] Seeresses were similarly commissioned within other sagas to keep peace and solve conflicts without violence; conversely, seeresses were also commissioned to cause one's death.[19]

Aside from financial incentives, women practiced seiðr to fulfill their personal motivations. This is seen within the Finnboga saga ramma, where a woman conjures a storm to prevent her spouse from setting out for a duel, after he disregarded her verbal warnings telling him not to go.[20] These women, at least in some respect, were also believed to be pillars of knowledge within communities. This can be seen in the Vatnsdæla saga where two men seek the advice of a seeress on the topic of their quarrels.[21] The men chose to seek this woman out, believing her to be "very worthy and knowledgeable in magic."[22] It is clear through these examples that seiðr benefitted women in many ways, via financial empowerment, elevated social statuses, and as a tool to perform agency, where women could more freely influence their fates. Though these women were unable to occupy positions of formal political power, they were able to exercise agency through modes of manipulation that aided in their empowerment and self-preservation.[23]

Aside from the perceived deviancy that arose with men's involvement in seiðr, perceptions toward women's use of magic contrast starkly with the condemnation of witchcraft seen in later centuries. As aforementioned, some seeresses were sought after by men for advice. However, some instances where women used seiðr were looked down upon, largely when it was employed to harm or kill someone. This is present within both the Gísla and the Laxdæla sagas

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 426
[20] Ibid, 427.
[21] Ibid, 426.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid, 428, 430.

where female seeresses are blamed for an avalanche and the fatal sinking of a ship where 12 people drowned respectively.[24] Whether or not these women intended to cause this level of carnage, or were involved at all is unclear, but they are nonetheless blamed for the events that took place. Negative perceptions seemed to persist to the 13th and 14th centuries, where outlined within the Gulaþing, the early Nordic code of law, use of "powerful" seiðr is condemned, and subject to severe punishment.[25] While this may seem that perceptions were largely negative, it is important to note that these women did not appear to be subjected to witch hunts as we see in later centuries. This is likely owed to the fact that seiðr and its practice were intrinsic to Scandinavian cosmology prior to Christianization.

Studies on seiðr continue to evolve, and despite practitioners being overwhelmingly female, only beginning in the 1980s did scholars increasingly center women and apply lenses of feminist theory when examining the role of women in Viking Age society.[26] Women's capacity to use magic as a way to subvert their gendered roles and restrictions is exceptional, and should be further analyzed, especially in the context of the Middle Ages where opportunities for women to exercise agency are fewer and further between. Evidence found within the burial sites makes it clear that, while this may not have reflected the lives of all Viking Age Scandinavian women, these women existed in some respect, making the phenomena of seiðr a lived experience outside of the sensationalized sagas. Women practiced seiðr to exercise their autonomy, prevent disenfranchisement and dictate their destinies where they were otherwise unable to.

[24] Ibid, 424.
[25] Price, *The Viking Way,* 42, 43.
[26] Price, *The Viking Way,* 71.

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