

The Deterioration of Warrior Women in Celtic and Germanic Literature

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Introduction:

Throughout the middle ages, different outlooks have existed on whether or not it was acceptable for women in literature to take up arms, and if it was, if this was considered a good thing or not. Early Celtic and Germanic literature frequently features warrior women, but over the course of the Middle Ages fewer new female heroines feature, and the ones that are already preserved in history and legend tend to take a different position in newer copies of the manuscript. The primary Celtic and Germanic texts – the Irish *Ulster Cycle* and the Icelandic *Hervarar Saga* – contain examples of epic heroines whose narratives have been adapted in later copies so that their actions have become less heroic, and more villainous. Their degradation in literature can be an important indicator of the shifting positions of women in historical societies. A society which produces an epic in which heroic women are described while wielding weapons is likely to have had warrior women in real life as well, and if it didn't, it at least did not dismiss the concept as impossible or shameful. On the other hand, a society which changed an already existing epic featuring a heroic warrior woman into an epic featuring a one-dimensional female villain is likely to have disapproved of the suggestion of a woman wielding weapons or assuming a position of traditionally masculine authority. It is my intention to show the connection between the Celtic and Nordic early medieval societies' perceptions of gender identity, and the martial heroines these societies produced.

Following this brief introduction, chapter 1 will offer an introduction to the theme of the literary European warrior woman, and the possibility that this theme was rooted in Indo-European reality. After the analysis of the primary texts in chapter 2 and 3, chapter 4 explain the possible reasons for the deterioration of the literary warrior woman in later literature.

Chapter 1: the origin of the warrior woman as a literary theme

To understand the position of the warrior woman in early European literature, it is the best to begin at the beginning: the possible origins. The image of the mortal warrior woman shows up in literature that goes back to early tribal societies such as those that existed in the Irish and Norse territories, as well as in medieval cultures such as the Anglo-Saxon. There are clearly observable similarities between the warrior women of these cultures, which suggests a connection between the cultures mentioned, Celtic and Germanic. These early societies stood in contact with one another, and so the literary theme could have been passed on through for example trade or migration, but a shared Indo-European origin seems a more likely source.

To find an Indo-European origin for a type of literary character, it may be best to start by looking at mythology. Donahue mentions a general Indo-European tendency to worship warrior goddesses (3). Examples include Athena and Minerva who are depicted wearing helmets, the Celtic Morrigan, the Germanic Valkyries, and the sparse evidence of a continental Celtic war goddess named Baduhenna (1, 7) to whom a grove was devoted. Donahue continues to describe the ways the Nordic cultures went from properly worshipped goddesses of war to Valkyries, female deities, perhaps best compared to a type of demons who could be benevolent or malevolent. They were powerful, supernatural beings of divine origin, but they were not worshiped in their own right (5). Donahue argues for the emergence of the Valkyrie as a Celto-Germanic development, as certain Celtic warrior goddesses resemble the Nordic Valkyries and their continental Germanic counterparts such as the Idisi of the *Meseburg Charm* or the Anglo-Saxon Walcyrge (3, 7). Interestingly, mortal warrior women often appear in literature as well, being described in similar ways and in similar situations as the supernatural Valkyrie warioresses.

The Nordic shieldmaidens were mere mortal women, but they fought alongside men on the battlefield, were socially more powerful than other women, and were often described as similar to Valkyries – Snorri Sturluson writes in the Edda that a brightly adorned noblewomen should be likened to a goddess or a Valkyrie in poetry (Damico, 182; Jesch 154-155). It must be noted that the Old Irish warrior woman has some distinct differences compared to her Nordic peers, but like them, she is powerful, dangerous, and respected. The change from god to hero is one that many mythologies go through. Although the transformation from warrior goddess, to Valkyrie demon, to mortal warrior maid of legend is a likely explanation for the emergence of fictional warrior women in Germanic and Celtic literature, there are additional issues to consider which suggest the topic is more complicated.

Though Donahue argues that the warrior goddess type derives from Indo-European mythology, he does not mention actual living women of history who took up weapons and went to do battle alongside men. However, a closer study of Indo-European culture unearths further examples of women who dabbled in traditionally male pursuits such as fighting and warfare, and these women were mortal rather than divine. Watkins points to the surprising similarity between law texts in ancient European societies, and many of these law texts have specific content on women who inherit when no male heir is available. In some cases, the woman gains traditionally masculine privileges by inheriting, and in other cases she is required to ‘become’ a son, having to take on duties such as taking vengeance on those that harm members of her family. This suggests that a woman with a weapon was not just a feature of literature in many early Indo-European civilisations, though this is still a far cry from the epic heroines of Nordic and Irish literature.

There is widespread consensus that Indo-European society was male dominated, patriarchal, and most of the time patrilineal (Gimbutas, 169-170, 191; Mallory, 123; Benveniste, 175-176). Gimbutas describes the male-centred funeral sites which provide

archaeological evidence for the prominence of the man in the family. Mallory explains that the surviving cognate words for family structures suggest that there was an important distinction between relatives from the mother and the father's side, and they suggest that the woman was taken into her husband's family. Benveniste explains that the words to describe marriage are different for men and women in languages deriving from Proto-Indo European; it is an action for men, while it is a state of being for women. This indicates that marriage defined a woman's identity, while this was not the case for men. However, an interesting exception is that of the Slavic female heiress, discussed by Benveniste. Characteristics of the phenomenon of the heiress figure, which Benveniste introduces, appear all over Indo-European cultures, and may be key to understanding the position of the historical women who gave rise to legends of warrior maidens.

Benveniste describes the South Slavs as 'one of the Indo-European societies which have longest preserved the ancient structure' (176). To illustrate the Indo-European family structures he describes the so called *zadruga*, a great extended family living together, which is rigorously patriarchal in structure. When a woman marries, she becomes part of her husband's *zadruga*. However, there is one case in which a woman remains in her own *zadruga* after she marries, which is when she marries a foreigner. Offspring that results from the union also becomes part of the woman's *zadruga*. Benveniste notes that 'the son in law is incorporated into his new family to the point of losing his own status. It goes so far that he takes the name of his wife, the other members calling him by a possessive adjective derived from this name' (176). This illustrates how drastically the power dynamic is suddenly reversed when the woman brings in more family relations than the man. Though Benveniste seems to imply that this happens when a foreigner marries *any* daughter of the *zadruga*, not just one who inherits, he notes that 'the line is continued through the heiress' (176).

The legal rights of women, similar but not identical to the rules of the *zadruga*, seem to be reflected in events in the Ulster Cycle, where the warrior queen Medb wages war on a neighbouring kingdom in order to acquire the amount of cattle necessary to maintain her superior position within marriage, as will be further explained in chapter two. Old Irish law recognised the superior position of a woman who brought in more property than her husband (Corrain 2-8), and Medb finds herself in this position, having inherited a great share of property from her father, and having married a foreigner, Ailill. This is not just a feature of myth; Corrain gives examples of laws that dictated that an unmarried woman could inherit when there was no available male heir (11-12).

Carol Clover (Maiden Warriors, 43-45) gives the example of the Albanian women who became 'sworn virgins'. The feud-based way of maintaining order which is generally associated with stateless societies has held there until recently, and according to Clover, observers have reported meeting women armed with rifles, dressed like men, who eat and smoke like men in public. Clover reports it to be a shameful and embarrassing for a woman of a feuding family to take vengeance in her feminine role, though it did happen. However, as soon as all the woman's brothers are dead, she may forswear her womanhood and participate in the feud. She is expected to act like a man from then on, and can kill and be killed in the feud, extracting a full wergild as opposed to a woman who dies as a woman, who is only worth half a man's wergild. This was not the only way for a woman to take on a male role in Albania according to Clover; apparently a woman could also choose sworn virginhood if she did not want to marry a suitor her family had chosen for her, as a way to reject a proposal without eliciting a feud. Unsurprisingly, the third way a woman could become 'male' was by inheriting, in the absence of a male heir.

Clover (Maiden Warriors, 43) uses the example of the Albanian sworn virgins to compare them to the warrior woman of Icelandic literature, one of them Hervör, who takes up

the sword when there is no male continuation in a family line of heroes (38-41). It is likely then, that the old Nordic societies had their own version of the powerful heiress figure. Judith Jesch describes the strong position women held in Nordic society, functioning as head of the household with their husbands often away from home to go raiding (35). Women frequently inherited (53-59) and actively participated in the settling of new land, at times even without the aid of any men. Women such as Þorgerðr and Ásgerðr did so specifically after their husbands died (80-83). Though there are more than a few pseudohistorical mentions of women taking up weapons and leading or participating in violent raids, there is no way to verify if this was fact or fiction (108-109). Nonetheless, it seems that the age that gave birth to these epics had similar laws regarding women as those mentioned above, even though no actual law text written before the settlement of Iceland has survived.

It seems to be the case, then, that the powerful, influential heiress was not an uncommon occurrence in Indo European society, and that in certain cases women like these also donned weapons, perhaps also influenced by the Valkyrie and warrior goddess image, as Donahue's idea does not necessarily contradict the heiress argument. Perhaps the two theories are both correct, reinforcing each other. The warrior goddess might have deteriorated into a Valkyrie whose imagery would have been used to glorify literary heroines, but at the same time the historical, mortal Indo-European heiress who took part in feuds might be a source for the existence of the epic human heroine as well.

The widespread phenomenon of an heiress who obtains rights and duties usually reserved for males suggest that there was some sort of Indo-European proto-law, permitting the occasional woman to step out of their feminine role and assume the position of warrior. The theory is heavily contested – as Donahue has suggested, there might be another way these customs have spread (1). Nonetheless, the literature seems quite anchored in older tradition. It often coincides with old law texts, which have the tendency to reach quite far

back in most Indo-European cases. Watkins treats the idea of a collective Indo-European body of proto-law with the necessary caution; however, he claims the conservatism of legal language has been so duly noted that it ‘scarcely needs comment’ (321). Later texts tend to contain pieces of rhetoric that are clearly much older, though it is not always clear how old; in the Irish and Nordic literature studied for this thesis they tend to take the form of verse paragraphs, surrounded by much later prose. Gregory Toner explains the use of verse as a mnemonic device of great authority in the days before the Irish had a written type of law (83). If the verse would allow an important text such as a law to pass generations practically unaltered, as Toner suggests, that means that there was a consistent way to conserve law texts long before written text was introduced to at least some of the Northern Indo-European tribes. That makes it not at all unthinkable that the most ancient known law texts of the countries in this study resemble each other because they still reflect their common Indo-European origin (Watkins, 322).

Littleton, like Donahue, warns against judging a feature as Indo-European right away. He describes the way a cultural feature can creep in halfway, and compares it to modern day Christianity (396-397). Just because Christianity is widely spread through most Indo-European areas at the moment, it does not mean that Christianity is an Indo-European feature in origin – and indeed it is not. Though the warrior woman in literature theme does not seem to have an overt non-Indo-European source, it is very possible that the theme developed in one single place and from there spread to other Indo-European cultures, making this theme not Indo-European but later, originating in one of its descendant cultures. A good example might be Grendel’s mother from the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. Anglo-Saxon England did not feature the warrior woman in literature as heavily as the Irish and the Nordic people did; the few Anglo-Saxon literary heroines the reader does encounter have the tendency to handle the metaphorical sword rather than a physical one. Although the Valkyrie theme is very

present in Anglo-Saxon writing (Damico, 182-187), even the famous stories of Judith, Juliana and Elene do not feature an heiress-like figure, or a woman taking up many aspects of a male martial persona at once. They are often described in the same way as Valkyries are, but this refers to looks more often than deeds, and except in the case of Judith, most of the weaponry is allegorical. This makes *Beowulf* specifically stand out from other Anglo-Saxon literature. Unlike the majority of other women, Grendel's mother handles physical weapons with her own hands and appears to wear armour, and she physically goes to battle against men in their full strength, she personally extracts vengeance for the death of her son and her underwater cave is like a parallel of a mead hall, complete with her own monster-comitatus (Chance, Structural Unity, 249). She is without doubt a villain of the story, and Jane Chance argues that her image was used to specifically give an example of how *not* to act, as a queen (Woman as Hero, 95-103; Structural unity, 248, 254). This does not detract from the fact that her appearance is that of a kind of shieldmaiden or demon-like Valkyrie of Nordic myth – and indeed this story is said to take place in Scandinavia. It is not difficult to see the possibility that the story was originally Danish, and brought to England with Danish traders or raiders, where it was heavily adapted to suit an English, Christian audience, though most of the plot and the characters' personalities remained intact. This means that Grendel's mother as a person is representative of Scandinavian culture rather than Anglo-Saxon, though the precise descriptions in Anglo-Saxon can be interesting to consider.

Whether or not warrior women were real, and whether or not they were common, is not as important as the realisation that the literary image of these women was strongly connected to the culture they spawned from – even Anglo-Saxon England apparently had an audience that could understand and appreciate a figure like Grendel's mother, though she existed in the role of villain. Whether these stories had been part of that culture from the Indo-European origin or not is equally unimportant – it matters that they were a deeply

ingrained feature of the cultures which produced them at the time that they wrote them, and that this feature appeared to have been universal for possibly all Indo-European cultures. Its presence suggests a fascination with, and perhaps an acceptance of the idea that women could be warriors. Even when it was considered a bad thing, it still signals that the idea in itself was not considered unthinkable, which in turn says a lot about the image that existed of women at the time. A civilisation that featured a martial female villainess must have at least believed that women as human beings were capable of martial prowess. The portrayal of women in literature can then say a lot about the image that existed of women at the time. A shift in the portrayal of warrior women in literature can give an indication of the shifting of values of a culture; if the image of the warrior woman shifts from positive to negative, or disappears entirely over time this can indicate a change in how these societies saw women, apart from how those women actually acted.

Chapter 2: Medb of Connacht

A good example of a literary warrior woman whose position shifted over the ages is Queen Medb of Connacht, primary antagonist of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*. Wishing to be richer than her husband Ailill, Medb leads an army to capture a legendary bull from the neighbouring nation of Ulster, herein fully supported by the very husband she tries to outdo. She appears as a woman with her own property, of a size and quality to rival her husband's (Book of Leinster, 137-138), a warrior who physically combats both men and other warrior women (137-138, 188, 237, 266), commands her army in person (277) and brags to Ailill himself about the number of lovers she has had, both in and out of wedlock (138). In the oldest manuscripts that have survived, she is the antagonist of the story, but McCurry (35) suggests she could just as well have been the protagonist – she is a fully developed character whose actions are motivated by logic and self-preservation rather than evilness. As a mythological figure, Queen Medb is of course not a reliable reflection of the average Irish woman around the first century, but it is clear that the society that originally produced this kind of female character was no complete stranger to values like Medb's, regardless of whether they considered them a good or bad thing (Dominguez, 60-61).

There are two complete versions of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* that we know of, though there are several twelfth-century fragments that seem to be part of yet another version. The first and oldest version, known as the first recension, is the one found in the *Book of the Dun Cow* (Lebor na hUidre), written in Old Irish in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. The manuscript is incomplete, but a fourteenth-century manuscript that contains the missing parts, called the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, overlaps with it and seems to be a copy of an original that linguistic evidence dates back to around the eighth century (Alewine, 8). However, it contains parts in verse which linguistic evidence dates back to the seventh century (Faraday,) xvi; it is supposed that these parts were part of the oral tradition before they were written down. The

twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* contains what is called the second recension. The manuscript itself may not be that much older than the *Book of the Dun Cow*, but it is written in Middle Irish and restructured to be more consistent than the first recension, which suggests that this manuscript was not only written but also composed in the twelfth century or shortly before (Hull, 54; Faraday, xvi). It is styled to be more coherent, though it still contains ancient pieces of verse, and the manuscript contains pieces of text that are not found in the earlier manuscripts, pieces such as the *Aided Meidbe*, the death of Medb.

Even if the second recension was written around 1050, as Faraday mentions is possible (xvi), Hull sees clear linguistic evidence that the *Aided Meidbe* at least was composed in the mid twelfth century (54). This is interesting because this part has Medb killed while she is bathing, by a youth who launches a piece of cheese at her with a slingshot in revenge for her killing of his mother in the past. Diana Veronica Dominguez explains this humiliating death by saying the twelfth century author found Medb's behaviour throughout the *Táin* inappropriate, and wanted to remind the audience that female behaviour such as this was undesirable and would be punished (302-304).

Later depictions of Medb are even less tolerant. The Celtic Revival, which witnessed a renewed interest in Irish literature in the nineteenth century, was known to take liberties with the translation of ancient Celtic manuscripts. Dominguez describes Standish O'Grady's early translations of the Ulster cycle in which he tries to create a version of Medb who is somehow both a fainting Victorian lady and on the other hand a bloodthirsty warrior (243). This suggests that the authors of the Celtic Revival had difficulty with Medb's character, which did not fit in with the existing view on women at the time. McCurry describes the influence that Lady Auguste Gregory's views on women were to have on her retelling of *Cuchulain of Muithemne*. She focuses on the way that Deirdre was turned from a strong-willed protagonist into a meek housewife. Gregory's portrayal of Deirdre is typical for the

Victorian era's sentiment that women are somehow more virtuous than men, or at least should aspire to be (Dominguez, 82). A similar development is visible in Medb as well. Gregory's Medb is called Maeve and she is still a warrior, but she is resented for it; most notably the hero Cú Chulainn refuses to sign a truce as he sees it as shameful to give in to a woman or to be under her rule (Gregory 202). In Gregory's version of the story, Ailell (Ailill) takes offense at Maeve's affair with Fergus as well (Gregory, 199-200), which he did not do in the original, suggesting a shift in the sexual freedom of women. Ailell is more prominent in the story compared to Ailill, so that it seems Maeve and Ailell lead the army together instead of Ailell merely accompanying Maeve on her expedition.

As Dominguez mentions, if the male characters like Fergus or Conchobor can be morally ambiguous even in Gregory's writing, it is only realistic that women like Medb are so, too (297). To see Medb as merely a villain instead of a protagonist on the other side of the battlefield is to take away a layer of agency. It transforms her from a complex, multi-faceted character into a flat one as much as Gregory's Deirdre is 'flattened'. A realistic writing of female characters, whether they are antagonists or protagonists, suggests that the author accepts the woman as a human being who has good and bad sides as much as men do. Dominguez advocates the acceptance of the 'bitch' character in literature as a sign of a woman-friendly society, the word 'bitch' here indicating a woman who is not afraid to be 'not nice' (296) to get the things she wants or needs to survive. Medb fits in this image as she had a stronger motivation than simple greed and jealousy to require more property than her husband. Irish law recognises three types of marriages, based on the amount of property the wife brings into the marriage, compared to her husband. A wife who brings in less property than her husband has no rights over their joint property unless it directly concerns traditionally female tasks like cooking and weaving. In the case where the wife contributes the same amount of property as the man, both man and woman have to give consent before an

important decision about the property is made. In the cases where the woman brings in more property, the man is not allowed to buy or sell land, cannot make decisions without his wife's consent, and has to follow her lead when she makes a decision (Corrain, 2-8). This means that for Medb, there is more at stake than just a particularly fine bull; she could lose her sovereignty if Ailill turns out to have more possessions than she does. In early Irish society this would have been evident; in later historical revisions this detail is lost, making Medb an incredibly greedy woman willing to lead two countries to ruin for the sake of a single piece of cattle.

This shows a very gradual but interesting progress in Medb character. The Ulster cycle of which the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* is part allegedly takes place in the first century AD. Though the story is considered to be fictional, some pieces are hypothesized to date back as far as the sixth century (Dominguez, 37), written by a poet or author who recognised a culture where women regularly joined in battle as his own, or at least saw the past of his people this way. Medb is not exceptional for going into battle; all versions of the Tain feature multiple women who make appearances while armed, doing battle, or teaching young men to handle weapons. There is little reason for any author of a tale to compose it in this manner, unless they truly believed that it made sense for so many women to feature in a martial position in a mythological depiction of the past. This means there was a time frame in Ireland located possibly between the first century and the sixth, where it was accepted for women to feature in battle. In what was probably the eighth century, an author composed the first recension from older material, featuring a female adversary who might as well have been the hero, so understandable do her motives seem to the attentive reader. In the twelfth century, the author of the Book of Leinster found it necessary to add a humiliating death to the more neutral eighth-century narrative, to make it clear once and for all that women did not belong in battle, whatever the old epics said. The Victorian era, known to severely restrict women at every

level, again turns Medb into more of a villainess, focussing on her adultery and the unnaturalness of her tendencies, making her more dependent on her husband and less of a rounded character. This incites the unsurprising observation that that the position of women in literature corresponds with their position in real life. Whether Old Irish women really joined battle in numbers as large as in the Ulster Cycle is difficult to prove, but it is known that early Irish law allowed women more freedom than later Irish law did. Women were allowed to inherit or to otherwise acquire property of their own, specifically when there was no available male heir (Corrain 11-12), and to have a say in what happened to said property even after her marriage. Other examples are given of women who, fulfilled positions in the justice system, or worked as poets (Corrain 2-8, Peden 91-93). This changing paradigm has not only had its influence on the portrayal of newly appearing heroines, but even on already established ones like the fierce queen Medb of Connacht.

Chapter 3: Hervör Angantýrdóttir

The *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks* is a saga which takes place against the décor of the wars between the Goths and Huns in the fourth century. The earliest manuscripts containing the saga are from the fourteenth century and the composition itself is thought to be not much older than that, though certain parts in verse are believed to be a lot older than the rest (Tolkien, vi, xxiii, xxix; Tullinius, 452-453). The motif which provides coherence to the narrative is the magical cursed sword Thyrfing, which is passed down the family line for many generations, eventually ending up with the wise king Heidrek. The sword's bearer who is of most interest for this thesis is the shieldmaiden Hervör Angantýrdóttir, who claims it from the ghost of her father Angantýr in a sequence which is among the oldest parts of the saga. Though the tale presents itself as a history, Christopher Tolkien claims in the introduction to his translation that the Nordic audience was aware that the tale was pseudohistory at best, but enjoyed it for its entertainment value (viii). Kathleen Self describes the way the Icelandic tales of mythology as they were recorded in the Eddas were considered fantasy literature by the Icelandic people, who were already Christians at the time. They did not have to worship the giants and gods of old to enjoy their histories, or to imagine 'possible human relations and ways of being human that do not reflect social reality' (5). This has led scholars like Judith Jesch to strongly consider the possibility that warrior women were a literary construct rather than a historical fact, despite their frequent appearance in literature. Whether this was the case or not, the fact that the Old Icelanders could imagine a world where women were capable warriors implies a lot about their culture, just like it did in the case of Medb in Ireland. It meant that the Norse saw women as people who could, at least on occasion and when given the chance, be warriors as worthy as men, even if this never happened in everyday life.

Hervör's story begins with the death of her father, before she is born. She grows up with her grandfather on her mother's side, showing more interest in archery and sword practice than in embroidery and other feminine work. When she is older, she goes off on her own and kills men to rob them – she is described as an unpleasant woman who mistreats whoever she meets. One day, her grandfather tells her about her father, the berserk Angantyr, who was buried with his magical sword Thyrfing on the island of Samsey. Hervör dresses as a man, arms herself, takes on the male name of Hervard, and sets off to find the sword, believing it is her right to have it. On the way she joins a band of Vikings, becomes their leader, and acquires her own ships. When she comes to Samsey, they see fires in the distance, and a local tells her that the fires are caused by ghosts. Hervör's crew, and the local man refuse to go near, so Hervör sets off alone. She meets her father's ghost, convinces him with great difficulty to give her the sword, and continues to travel around with it. After some time she returns home and begins to behave like a woman again. She is apparently very desirable, as a prince agrees to marry her, even though he nearly fought with her for killing one of his men when she was still in male guise. The pair produces two sons, one of whom kills the other. The surviving son, Heidrek, takes Thyrfing along on the exile that is his punishment.

The existence of the strong women with martial tendencies in Nordic literature may be explained with the Indo-European argument, but it also seems to be the case that Nordic women specifically took up a strong position in their society. Judith Jesch argues mostly against the existence of actual warrior women, but has to admit that women often held extraordinarily independent positions. For one, their men were often away from home, and left it to their wives to lead the household (35). Icelandic history writing attests to the fact that women took up an important position in the settling of Iceland, sometimes even acting independently as the head of a household without the help of a father or husband (80-83). Women could inherit in the case where there was no available male heir, and sometimes

acquired substantial property this way (53-59). Jesch sees evidence that women sometimes accompanied their husbands on seafaring missions, though she severely doubts they participated in raiding trips (35-37). Though supposedly historically based tales exist of women committing to warfare as well, as in the case of the 'red maiden' that led a group of raiders in Ireland, Jesch suspects those tales may be sensationalised or entirely invented (108-109). However, the existence of such contemporary tales of warrior women does showcase a great fascination for this kind of woman in a setting that was not purely mythological, which suggests again that the Vikings did not find the thought of a woman in arms unthinkable.

Carol Clover claims that in Old Nordic communities, gender was more fluid a concept than it is nowadays. The Germanic, and specifically Nordic Germanic societies were extremely focused on masculinity, and anything that was not masculine enough was considered bad, femaleness falling inside that category. This meant that women held a position inherently inferior to men, but not that they were necessarily fixed in this position (Clover, *Regardless*, 6; *Self*, 3). In the case where a man died without any sons, an unmarried daughter assumed the position of heir which would traditionally fall to the son otherwise. Sometimes this included taking up arms to defend the family honour (Clover, *Maiden*, 43-46). Like Clover's Albanian sworn virgins, a Nordic woman could perhaps also decide her own fate by choosing to behave like a man on her own volition, as Clover thinks Hervör does (*Maiden*, 37). This way she could win renown for overcoming her inherent female weakness (*Regardless*, 7).

Men could stoop to female status as well, for displays of cowardly or otherwise shameful behaviour. The belief that men could get pregnant from taking the submissive 'feminine' position during sexual intercourse nicely illustrates the fluidity that Clover speaks of (*Regardless*, 9). Voicing the mere implication that another man had given birth could result in punishment as severe as exile, which illustrates clearly what a serious affront this was considered to be (*Regardless*, 9-10). It was not a bad thing if a woman acted masculine

though, and she often even seemed to have been flatly admired for it (Regardless, 7). Clover even suggests it might have been desired of her, as some theories claim the Norse followed a 'one sex' model, which claims that there is only one sex which is male, and that there are only people who adhere to it in a greater or smaller amount (Regardless, 12-13). This point of view suggests the featuring of shieldmaidens in literature was an accurate reflection of historical Norse society at least at some point of time.

Clover also claims that it was not the privilege but the duty of a woman to take the place of the male heir when needed, and that this was less the choice of the woman herself than a societal dictate (Maiden, 43-46). From this perspective Hervör's saga can be read not only as the story of an adventurous girl, but also as an example of a family line that is continued through a 'proxy son'. The sword Thyrfing was buried with Hervör's father Angantyr, together with, it seemed, his family line (Maiden, 38-40). As soon as Hervör finds out she is of illustrious heritage, she asks her mother to dress her as if she were her son (Tolkien, 12). Clover does not touch on the fact that Hervör had been acting as a man before, training with weapons and killing and robbing men for money, even being mistaken for a highwayman, which implies she had already been acting and dressing as a male to begin with. It is true that she only takes on a male alias, gathers her own band of warriors and starts committing memorable deeds after this specific episode, but even young male heroes in epics typically need a specific incident to mark the start of their life as warrior. The quest to reclaim an ancestors' magical sword is as good a start of a heroic career as anyone can ask for, whatever their gender. Nonetheless, the crux of Clover's argument makes sense. Hervör learns of her ancestry and decides the family line needs to be continued. She visits her father's grave and convinces his ghost of the need as well. She takes his sword and makes her mark on the world, like a son of a family line of heroes would be expected to do. She only discards her male attire when she is ready to marry, and she only passes the sword on to that son when she

considers him worthy of handling it. Thus, the continuation of the family line is assured due to Hervör's gender-defying behaviour.

A point worthy of closer inspection is the juxtaposition between housewife and warrior, which differs from Irish literature. Queen Medb is wife and warrior; she has several children with Ailill, who not only allows her to do battle but even supports her and lets her take charge. This aspect is completely lacking from Norse literature; all of the warrior women featured, Valkyries and shieldmaidens alike, are unmarried (Maiden, 36; Self, 151).

Valkyries, the supernatural counterparts of the shieldmaidens, never marry, though they may have sexual relations with men (Self, 151). Shieldmaidens have the tendency to either die in battle or lay aside their weapons and marry – when they do this, they never return to the life of a warrior again. Even when they marry, their stories have the tendency to end on a tragic note. Much like Medb's humiliating death, this seems to suggest that the writers of Old Norse literature had an underlying need to show that a woman warrior in the end was not the right way of the world. Self has another explanation, though it does not rule out Tolkien's theory.

The positions of Valkyries and shieldmaidens as objects of male sexual desire as well as their frequent descriptions as being exceptionally beautiful, leads her to conclude that warrior women were not considered a type of man as Clover seems to suggest, but rather as a whole new type of person, a third gender of kinds. They are women, with the agency of men, and necessarily unmarried. This can be illustrated by the description Saxo Grammaticus gives of Danish warrior women, who possessed the “bodies of women . . . [but] the souls of men” (Damico, 179). Elsewhere, he says these women “courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves” (Clover, *Maiden Warriors*, 35).

Marriage makes the shieldmaidens women again, which diminishes their ‘personhood’; they are no longer defined by their own actions, but by the deeds of their husbands. They have

very little say in their own lives anymore, and have to extract vengeance by urging their husbands on to battle (Clover, *Regardless*, 157).

If Norse society indeed had an underlying feeling that female warriors were unnatural and would result in disaster unless they returned to their natural feminine state, then this is a feeling that might only have developed in later centuries, in a similar way Medb's tale was changed with time. Hervör's story is interesting to consider from this perspective for the specific reason that the composer of the *Hervarar Saga* chose to incorporate older pieces of verse, rather than to paraphrase them, as was more common in Iceland at the time (Tolkien viii). Tolkien describes an old version of the story, found in a damaged manuscript, which he calls the 'R' version. Besides this, a revised version exists which appears to be newer, and can be found in a fourteenth-century manuscript which Tolkien calls 'H', and a seventeenth century one which he calls 'U' (vii). Tolkien dates the 'R' manuscript to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century (xxix), but Tullinius dates the composition to around the late thirteenth century (449). He also claims that scholars in general agree that the verse parts of the composition are not written by the same composer (453). These verse parts are considered legitimately old, but how old exactly is unclear (Tullinius, 452; Tolkien, vi). It is a shame that it is not known how old these parts are exactly, as the positives of Hervör's character predominantly show in the oldest bits of the text, while her bad sides are more visible in the newer parts. In the piece of verse known as *The Waking of Angantyr*, she visits her fathers' barrow despite the great fires that burn around and inside it. She is shown as fearless where male warriors flee. She persuades her father to give her the sword. She takes on the responsibility of continuing her family line by becoming the missing link, claiming the sword. In the morning, she dramatically emerges from the barrows unscathed.

In comparison, the newer pieces of text are mostly concerned with men, though another shieldmaiden by the same name is briefly mentioned. In the piece that precedes *The Waking*

of Angantyr she is described as doing more harm than good, mistreating people and robbing men for her own gain (10). Once married, her own personality is no longer described – Clove’s theory would see this as evidence it has truly disappeared; she has given up her masculine right to personhood to become a wife. She is now defined by the deeds and attributes of her male kin. There are no insights into her thoughts except that she is said to prefer her mischievous son over the well-wishing one. All of the above seems to indicate that the older piece of text shows Hervör in a more favourable light than the newer text does. Besides the differences between the old verse and newer prose, an interesting shift in attitude can also be discerned between the different manuscripts. As previously described, the R manuscript, written in the late fourteenth century preserves an early version of the tale, and tells a somewhat different story from the later versions in the H and U manuscripts, called the HU version by Tolkien (vii). In both versions of the tale, Hervör’s eldest son Angantyr the second is killed by his brother Heidrek. In the HU version, Heidrek is exiled for misdemeanour in his father’s hall. Hervör gives Thyrfing to Heidrek as a parting gift, and Heidrek slays his brother with the sword before he leaves. In the R version, however, Heidrek leaves the house at night, and throws a stone in a general direction where he hears voices. He accidentally hits and kills his own brother, and is exiled for the unintentional murder. Only then does Hervör give Thyrfing to Heidrek, after which he leaves (Tolkien, xi). The distinction is important, as in the later HU version Angantyr’s death is a direct result of Hervör’s possession of the sword, whereas in the R version Thyrfing had nothing to do with the murder, apart from the curse of bringing ill luck to the family of the wielder. The newer version again paints Hervör in a worse light than the older version did, and seems to imply that the combination of women and swords eventually leads to tragedy.

It is hard to pin a definite conclusion on a piece of text as small as this; first of all we do not know what the original old text said in the parts that are lost, and we cannot really tell what

the tone of the ancient verse epic was, the way we can in the *Ulster Cycle*. However, analysis of other Norse literature seems to support the idea that the later Norse were less positive about their shieldmaiden heroines than the more ancient Norse. The Danish, Christian Saxo Grammaticus, writing in the early thirteenth century, describes many shieldmaidens (Damico, 179; Clover, *Maiden Warriors*, 35; Grammaticus, 238-239, 242, 244, 246), but though he describes them as expert warriors (238) or marvels that one of them is “surpassing a woman’s temperament in her strenuous military activities” (246), he does not seem to condone this behaviour:

“And if they were forgetful of their true selves they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm’s embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances”. (Clover, *Maiden Warriors*, 35)

The Icelandic Snorri Sturluson, probably writing around 1220, was a Christian as well, but the idea behind Snorri’s *Edda* is that just because old lore is no longer the main religion of the country, it does not mean it no longer has value and does not deserve to be conserved. The existence of the idea of fiction, of a tale of which everyone knew it was made up but that was still told due to its entertainment value, meant that Sturluson had a greater freedom in how he depicted his heroines. The female warrior as she appears in Norse literature may not fit inside a Christian ideology, but within pagan fiction she certainly has a place, so that Sturluson could depict her in the way he believed his ancestors saw her when he wrote the *Edda*. Though the *Prose Edda* does not feature an abundance of martial women, the giantess Skadi secures a place among the gods because of her martial skills. When Odin kills Skadi’s father, Skadi dons armour and makes her way over to Asgard. She threatens to get revenge for her father’s death, and apparently the gods would rather avoid conflict with her,

as they decide to pay the wergild instead, which, among other things, means that she can choose a husband from the male gods. She has to choose this husband by his feet, and fails to get the man she prefers, but nonetheless, she gets her way and is fully recompensed (Sturluson, 84-85). What is more, her marriage is by no means the end of Skadi's independence as it tends to be in the case of the heroines Clove describes (in what article?). Though the sea god Njord is not the man Skadi was aiming for, she gives him a chance. However, she does not enjoy living by the sea, and Njord does not feel at home in Skadi's native mountains, so they separate (Sturluson, 49) and Skadi later marries Odin (228). What is exceptional in this case is that Skadi takes up her full responsibility as heiress to her dead father's mountainous property even after she is wed, and even chooses her traditionally non-feminine role over the benefits of her husband (Clove, Maiden, 40). She displays agency and independence even as a married woman. Despite the fact that her father was the antagonist in previous stories she is not portrayed as a villain when she acts as a goddess in Asgard after her marriage to Njord – Jesch reminds us of the time she threatens Loki with violence after her marriage (Jesch 141), indicating that she has not given up on her martial lifestyle. One must take note that Skadi is a giantess and later a goddess-in-law, and so, as a creature of myth, she is no proper representation of the average Icelandic woman. Goddesses were and always have been allowed privileges that mortals are not. However, the description of a goddess says something about the way people think. Skadi managed to do a thing the mortal shieldmaidens of literature perhaps tried and failed to achieve: to maintain their independence after marriage (Jesch, 139). This could be another indication that earlier Norse culture was more accepting of martial women than later Norse culture - or it could just be Sturluson's sense of artistic freedom.

On the whole, it can be said that there seems to be a tendency for the newer texts and newer adaptations of old texts in Nordic literary history to adjust the position of martial women so

that they appear villainous, tragical, or both, rather than heroic. This could be due to religious or social pressure after the introduction of Christianity, or it could mean that the Nordic society had changed in such a manner that it seemed logical that a weapon in a woman's hands would lead to tragedy because it was a situation that was unnatural. Both explanations would indicate that gender roles in Norse societies became more rigid, making it less socially acceptable for women to act in a masculine manner than it was before.

Chapter 4: Possible causes for the degradation of the female warrior type

The previous chapters indeed show that women like Medb and Hervör enjoyed a less positive status with the passing of time, which was probably representative of a change in attitude towards women in the late Middle Ages. McLaughlin describes such a change, claiming that reference to martial women in both fictional and historical sources was most numerous throughout all of Europe between the tenth and the thirteenth century, which indicates that actual warrior women were probably more numerous as well (199). Before the tenth century, McLaughlin states, less material is available so that it is more difficult to say what the position of these women was (200), but the Old Irish sources and the theory of an Indo-European origin suggests that a similar situation was the case before the tenth century as well. McLaughlin furthermore notices that only from the eleventh century onwards chroniclers start displaying astonishment upon describing these warrior women, who are from then on increasingly often pressed with charges of witchcraft and unnatural behaviour. Later medieval writing, according to McLaughlin, tended to paint already existing tales of heroic women in a very negative light (200), and the history of the tales of Hervör and Medb support this idea. The twelfth-century Middle-Irish death-tale of Medb that was added to the Ulster Cycle seems to convey an unnaturalness about Medb's bloodthirsty violence that was not present in the earlier version. The alterations to Hervör's tale make her a worse person and a worse mother than she originally was. The Irish women probably already stopped being warriors during the sixth century, while Saxo Grammaticus describes warrior women throughout his *History of the Danes* persist until much later in the Nordic world. Yet Nordic society also gradually became less accepting of the female warrior in the time it took to adapt to Christianity. It is clear that the declining status of the warrior woman went hand in hand

with her position in literature, but raises the question of what exactly caused this decline in status.

To explain this, we will move over to Wales. Dorothy Dilts Swartz suggests that Welsh law was more restrictive to women than Irish law due to the stronger a Roman influence in Wales. Indeed, Welsh women have diminished property rights compared to the Irish (Dilts Swartz, 115-116). The oldest known Welsh Celtic literature dates from the fourteenth century, and the primary roles of the women there is to marry a man or to be rescued by one. Heroines like Branwen from the second branch of the Mabinogi often cause great changes in society, but they are a passive cause. Invariably, they do not act themselves, but are the reasons for men to act. Arguably these women are from a much later period of time than the Irish ones, but the older stories haven't been preserved. The difference between the position of oral tradition in the two cultures was probably crucial in the preservation of these legends. According to Roberts (62-63) oral transmission of histories and genealogies was seen as a type of storytelling meant only for entertainment, not as an accurate form to preserve official material as was the case in Ireland (Toner, 60). Storytelling was considered a job for a lower grade poet or a poet's apprentice, so it did not enjoy great status either (63). This stands in contrast to Ireland, where we see texts being preserved in oral form, and traditional law being maintained this way even after written Roman law made its way to Ireland, following the introduction of Christianity in the early fifth century. This resulted in a dual law system where people respected the Roman law as an ideal situation, but followed the traditional law in everyday life. This system was still in place in the eighth century (Tatsuki, 196). The older pieces of the Ulster Cycle were written in verse, which suggests they are directly transmitted from the oral tradition without changing their shape. As the twelfth-century manuscript illustrates it is easy to change bits and add pieces during and after the copying of a manuscript. This frequently happened for example to give the family owning the

manuscript a prestigious genealogy which reached back into the mythological past. In comparison it is difficult to make changes to verse. An addition or change will likely disturb the rhyme or metre (Roberts, 66), and to recompose the verse will make itself immediately visible through the process of language change. The poet will be using a less archaic form of a language, which linguists can retrace by using rhyming evidence. The very tradition of honouring oral tradition might have caused the oldest pieces of the Ulster Cycle to remain in the same form until they could be written down. If the Ulster Cycle has any basis in reality, or even if it just manages to semi-accurately portray a culture in which warrior women were numerous and culturally accepted, the oldest pieces of narrative might indeed even trace back to the first century as the chroniclers claim it does. The difference between the preservation of Oral tradition in Wales and Ireland may have been caused by the authority of churches as keepers of the written Roman Law, which could have caused writing to be seen as the authoritative medium, branding the oral tradition into mere entertainment by association. The disappearance of the heroine with agency then shows the great influence of Roman culture and religion on Welsh culture – according to Hennesey Olsen the Latin literature traditionally depicted a good woman as a passive force (224, 227).

It is possible that the change in attitude towards women had as much to do with a change in government as a change in religion. If the way the law is preserved can have such an effect on the preservation of stories, the law itself is bound to have an effect on other parts of life, as well. Sanmark explains the spread of law texts concerning religion over Europe. In Ireland, Roman law arrived with Christianity and was inseparably connected to it (Tatsuki, 165-167), but elsewhere Roman law had also left traces. There is a connection between early seventh century Anglo-Saxon law and the law codes established by Charlemagne and the Frankish kings on the continent (Sanmark 146; Richards & Stanfield, 91). Both were used to forbid the population to follow pagan beliefs. According to Sanmark, the first provincial Nordic laws

contain clear similarities with tenth and eleventh century Anglo Saxon laws (141-142), and again, these laws are used to repress paganism and pagan rituals among the population. Like the situation Tatsuki describes for Ireland, however, what the law says and what people do can actually be quite different. Sanmark mentions that many pagan and animistic religions were still practiced in Scandinavia for many centuries after Christianity was adopted. The Sámi people, for example, were not systematically converted until the seventeenth century (148). Britain was Christian until the Romans left in the fifth century but it was invaded by the pagan Anglo-Saxons who were Christianised over the course of the sixth century. The new laws for this reason might have seemed less foreign to the Britons and Saxons accustomed to interacting with Britons, demanding a smaller change of behaviour compared to what they were used to. However, Whitehurst Williams claims that despite the relatively rapid Christianisation of the Anglos-Saxons, this happened on command, and the majority of the population held on to Germanic cultural customs (137), and Richards and Stanfield suggest that ‘the written law had relatively little impact on judicial procedure’ (90). However, where Richards and Stanfield still accept that Anglo-Saxon law can more or less give a representation on the position of women in the early middle ages, Clover points out that the enforcing of the official law as it existed in much of the Nordic world was impossible. The law itself already made exceptions for the Christian bans on the practice of infanticide and the eating of horseflesh, because there would not be a way to sustain the population if it was allowed to grow too large, and if they took away one of the main sources of food on top of that (Scarcity, 102 -103). Pointing at the large and consistent discrepancy that exists between specifically Icelandic law and Icelandic sagas (Scarcity, 100-101), Clover concludes that it was well possible that Nordic women enjoyed great power of the unofficial kind (102). Especially for Icelandic women this may have been the case, as the same development took place over all of the Nordic world but the largest amount of warrior women tales still comes

from the Icelandic sagas and from the Eddas. Much of the existing medieval Icelandic literature takes place in mainland Scandinavia, for Iceland was only settled in the 10th century – to write anything in a historical or pseudohistorical setting they would have had to return to their origins, but still, Iceland was the place where most of these stories were preserved. This was caused by the special position women held in Icelandic society as compared to the rest of the Nordic world: more than anywhere else, in Iceland women were scarce (114-128). The tenth century settlers would mostly be unmarried men, and if the men were married they did not always bring their wives, or they might only invite their wives over after they had established a safe home base (120-122). Besides this, Clover suggests that many mainland-born Icelandic women who divorced or lost their husbands otherwise would often rather return home than stay in Iceland to remarry (122). Combined with the Scandinavian practice of getting rid of the majority of female babies, Clover concludes that most of the Medieval Icelandic men ultimately remained without a wife, which she supports by presenting records of enormous amounts of men establishing a house, living there apparently alone, to die without any kind of heir, passing the house on to whoever else could claim it (123). She also suggests that societies with a sex ratio this high are usually marked by women who can initiate divorce and frequently do so, as well as by high rates of adultery (124-125). The possibility of a divorce in times of scarcity gave women a very strong position; Clover gives the story of Asgerdr in *Gísla Saga*, who suggests to her husband that he can deal with the fact that she is adulterous, or she will divorce him. The husband calms down immediately; quite understandably, as he may never find another wife again. This strong position came to women through circumstances, and because of those very circumstances it was not just unlikely but unpractical that women would adhere to a law that forbade them a custom like divorce. The laws could only gain a foothold when it came to women by the time the sex

ratio returned to near-normal again – and Clover suggests this might not have been the case until after the thirteenth century in Iceland (127).

The uncommonly large number of positive depictions of martial women and strong women in general in Icelandic literature then could be attributed to three circumstances: The first is the disconnect between official law and how Icelandic women actually lived their lives. Furthermore, Icelandic audiences recognised the old stories as fiction, which might have urged Christian scholars like Snorri Sturluson to record pagan myth without feeling that their religion was threatened. Besides that, Christianity might not have had such a firm foothold in Nordic areas at the time, so people did not feel compelled to follow this law at all times. Their exposure to Christian culture therefore never was as intense or as prolonged as it was in the areas that had been occupied by the Romans. Myths of warrior women were also produced later and thus had more of a chance of surviving up till the present day. The reason for the preservation of Irish warrior women such as Queen Medb similarly lies in a system in which the Roman law was not used for real judicial purposes, and the way ancient mythology was preserved in verse through the oral tradition. Note that a similar pattern can be observed in the *Hervarer saga*, which combines ancient verse with later prose in the fashion of the Ulster Cycle, which is non-typical for Nordic literature.

Conclusion

Early Celtic and Germanic literature frequently features warrior women, and it appears those early societies had a tolerant outlook on women taking up weapons, both in literature and in real life. An analysis of the Icelandic *Hervarar Saga ok Heidreks* and the Irish *Tain bo Cuiainge* shows that these cultures over time grew less accepting of warrior women, and responded by diminishing the positions of literary female martial heroines. Their degradation in literature can be an important indicator of the shifting positions that women took up in historical situation.

Though both apparently tolerant of women on the battlefield, the Irish and the Nordic cultures had a drastically different outlook on gender. Where the Irish did not seem to see a contradiction between a warrior and a woman who functioned as mother, wife and queen, the Nordic people seemed to consider warfare an ultimately masculine pursuit. Women who took up arms were admired, but while in the position of shieldmaiden, they were not considered to be fully female. A change in the accepting attitude toward female warriors seems to come when their pagan tribal societies slowly turn into feudal Christian ones under the influence of Roman law and the ideals of the Christian faith.

Further research should look into warrior women of other Indo-European cultures to see if a similar pattern manifests; this could tell us more about the way the introduction of Roman law and the Christian religion influences the positions of medieval women in Europe. It could also be helpful to compare these ancient stories with one another, to see if there perhaps truly was an Indo-European foundation for the presence of warrior women, despite the great differences between the cultural positions of Irish and Nordic warrior women.

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