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Words Speak Louder Than Actions: The Power of *Vocality* and Oral Communication in
Medieval Viking Literature

by

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It is often argued that what separates mankind from other species are our abilities to think rationally and to communicate articulately with one another. Before we became a culture obsessed with the practice of writing and keeping written records, we were first and foremost a culture of oral communication. Therefore, it is no surprise that many ancient and early civilizations valued verbalization and speech practices. In particular, we see this prominently thematized throughout medieval Viking culture. Although our modern notions of medieval Vikings are often conflated with images of brutality, violence, and bloodshed, the Vikings actually possessed a culture of sophistication bounded by strict legal principles and effective vocality. While much of our understanding of the Norse people stems from written literary texts and records, these texts were transcribed centuries after they were first produced orally. Nevertheless, it is through these scripted works that we gain a sense of the significance of vocalization within medieval Viking society. In Viking literature, language and oral speech were considered as powerful and as impactful as actions committed on the battlefield. Oral discourse could just as significantly elevate or degrade a Viking's reputation just as one's behavior during war could. In essence, words functioned as a tool for demonstrating masculine might and intellectual prowess, attributes that were profoundly esteemed by medieval Viking society.

Language and communication were considered as such significant characteristics that they were often a sign of high status and wealth in Viking culture, separating those in power from those of lowlier standing. We see this demonstrated throughout one of the most famous texts, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, wherein speech often represents a quality associated with regality. Regin, the foster-father to Sigurd, becomes somewhat of a mentor to him: "Among

many other things, he also taught Sigurd to speak in several tongues, as was custom for a king's son" (Volsungs, 56). Here, it is evident how powerful the art of language is for Viking royals.

To know how to communicate with others – most likely for trade dealing and peace making with other cultures – is a sign of one's royalty. It is expected for the king's son to be able to use his gift of communication in order to rule. Furthermore, while Sigurd's status may not have truly been one of monarchical proportion, he equates himself with kings, hinting that his communication skills grant him social mobility and other monetary/material benefits afforded to kings. The following exchange between Regin and Sigurd is evidence of such:

Regin came another time to talk to Sigurd and said: "It is strange that you want to be the stableboy of kings or to go about like a vagrant." Sigurd answered: "That is not true, for I rule over everything with them. I can take whatever I want." Regin said "Ask him to give you a horse." "It will be done as soon as I wish," answered Sigurd. (Volsungs, 56)

It is clear how Sigurd positions himself on par with kings. He believes that they do not possess any power or control over him. Even more interesting is that Regin propositions Sigurd to "ask" for a horse – to use his oral communication skills for gain – and Sigurd notes that it can easily be done, for he has the ability to persuade, using his vocality as a tool to his own advantage.

Similarly, Richard Bauman proposes that hierarchy in medieval Icelandic society can be viewed as "semiotic systems" or "systems of communication" (142) in which honor and status could be codified by one's performance; in the case of Sigurd, his oral communicative performance is what establishes his position in society, or at least elevates it. Thus, we see just how significant of a role vocality plays in the social construction of Viking hierarchy. Even slightly earlier in the text, in describing the character Sinfjotli, the narrator states: "This man knew how to speak with kings" (Volsungs, 49), which indicates that there is a certain etiquette of speech that delineates hierarchical positions. Sinfjotli goes on to verbally insult his opponent – another area of oral

communication of strong significance in the medieval Viking culture that will be discussed further on.

One of the most well-known medieval literary works, *Beowulf*, incorporates much of the same emphasis on speech acts throughout the text. While the story mostly concentrates on the heroism of Beowulf himself, rather than focusing on tangential family drama and/or widespread socio-political issues of the characters, the narrative still stresses the significance of vocality in medieval Viking literature as can be found in other texts of the genre. In fact, the very opening lines of the text focus our attention on the verbal nature of the story, reminding us of *Beowulf*'s oral origins. The text begins with "Listen! We have heard..." (line 1) ["Hwæt! Wē Gār-Dena" (Chickering, 1)], immediately situating us, the readers, in the context of the original medium of the text, an oral performance. From the very beginning and throughout, we are told that the story was once a tale disseminated by word of mouth – an homage to and product of oral culture. Additionally, there is further stress on the way that language/speech functions as a manifestation of one's royal power/status in society. What separates *Beowulf* from the other Norse sagas considered here is that *Beowulf* was actually composed by an Anglo-Saxon poet, the original manuscript dating from about 975 – 1025 AD. However, the tale itself is representative of and celebrates Old Norse culture and customs. *Beowulf* is set in Scandinavia and the story occurs roughly between 500 – 700 AD, a good couple of hundred years before it was copied in manuscript around the year 1000. This creates an interesting distinction between *Beowulf* and the other Viking texts. Yet, *Beowulf* clearly follows the same structure and pattern of the original Norse works, incorporating the same values and themes in the Medieval Viking texts after which it is fashioned. These Nordic influences were a result of the diverse nature of England during this

period, which was largely under Danish rule yet which also contained multiple cultural identities such as Angles, Saxons, Germanic peoples, Nordic groups, and even Irish/Celtic populations.

Much like in *Saga of the Volsungs*, the conception of oral communication as a regal ability is referenced within *Beowulf*. We encounter this at the start of the text, as the narrator provides somewhat of an overview of Beowulf's connection to Hrothgar and the Danes. In describing the creation of Hrothgar's mead-hall, the text states: "it came to pass swiftly among men, and it was soon ready, the greatest of halls; he gave it the name 'Heorot,' he who ruled widely with his words" (lines 76 – 79) ["Ðā ic wīde gefrægn weorc gebannan/ manigre mægþe geond þisne middan-gearð,/ folc-stede frætwan. Him on fyrste gelomp,/ ædre mid yldum, þæt hit wearð eal-gearo,/ heal-ærna mæst; scōp him Heort naman,/ sē þe his wordes geweald wide hæfde" (Chickering 75 – 80)]. Here we are met with an interesting epithet attributed to Hrothgar: "he who ruled widely with his words" – a phrase in which power is married with language. This marks speech as an expression of one's authority. It does not indicate that his ability to rule comes from lineage or financial power (attributes commonly associated with royal status), but rather that it is his words that give him authority. The phonetics and alliteration of the line, with the repetition of the "w" sound in both the modern English translation as well as the original Old English text, stresses the importance of "words" in both the object and the sound sense. As John D. Niles discusses, *Beowulf* can stand as a testament to the way that Norse culture valued royal authority in conjunction with speech. Because orality was so tied to power and is a significant theme in the text, we can then infer that hierarchical status was also an essential part of medieval Viking society. Niles states: "Members of warrior aristocracy, in particular, could have found their value-system reinforced, with its royalist bias and its emphasis on hierarchical rule" (Niles 153). Moreover, Hrothgar's rule is especially powerful for the fact that its scope

extends “widely.” Language and oral communication become somewhat of a boundless form of power. The extent of his rule really cannot be limited, only increased with words. If we think about it, having a large amount of financial capital can really only extend to the amount of monetary wealth that one possesses. Similarly, possessing a large army or a having power over a great expanse of property can also only extend so far. There are limitations to these physical forms of royal authority. On the other hand, the power of one’s words can spread to regions outside of one’s immediate control, and additionally, the fame and renown of one’s status could be spread by word of mouth across many towns, cities and countries even. Thus, this fitting epithet captures the force of language in medieval Viking culture.

Furthermore, the connection between orality and power/royal status is seen again in the text when Hrothgar and Beowulf meet, and Beowulf promises to rid Heorot of Grendel. Hrothgar’s response to Beowulf’s oath is to entrust him with the responsibility of protecting the Danes. The way that Hrothgar does so is by verbally decreeing his relinquishment of authority. He essentially allocates a certain amount of power to Beowulf – the text states:

Hrothgar to Beowulf, wished him luck,
gave him control of the wine-hall in these words:
‘I have never entrusted to any man,
ever since I could hold and hoist a shield,
the great hall of the Danes – except to you now.
Have it and hold it, protect this best of houses,
Be mindful of glory, show your mighty valor,
Watch for you enemies! You will have all you desire
If you emerge from this brave undertaking alive. (lines 653 – 661)

[Hrōðgar Bēowulf, ond him hæl ābēad,
wīn ærnes geweald, ond þæt word ācwæð:
'Nǣfre ic ænegum men ær ālfyde,
siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,
ðrȳþ-ærn Dena būton þē nū ðā.
Hafa nū ond geheald hūsa sēlest,
gemyne mærþo, mægen-ellen cȳð,
waca wið wraþum! Ne bið þē wilna gād

gif þū pæt ellen-weorc aldre gedīgest. (Chickering 653 – 661)]

This oral contract of power delegation is quite striking – the narrator stresses that Hrothgar gives up his control through his speech. It is through his spoken words, rather than through actions or a written document, that Hrothgar relinquishes his power and offers it to Beowulf. So not only do words and oral communication function as a manifestation or a reflection of one’s royal authority, but so too can words work as a contractual – binding – agreement between two parties. Robert Bjork, an expert on the subject of speech in *Beowulf*, says “conversation is a generative exchange where words, like artifacts, pass from one person to another” (Bjork 998). In this case, Hrothgar’s conversation becomes transactional, an exchange for Beowulf’s pledged protection. This is very similar to the notion of oath-taking that is especially common within this culture and that will be discussed more thoroughly later on. However, this moment is fascinating because it is not quite an instance of Hrothgar making an oath to Beowulf. It is actually Hrothgar’s response to Beowulf’s oath of protection. That is, we have an instance of a verbal oath (as proclaimed by Beowulf) answered with an oral bestowment of power unto Beowulf, who is granted authority through Hrothgar’s speech alone. The “have it and hold it” portion of his entrustment truly shows the severity of Hrothgar’s “gift,” if you will. Hrothgar is not only asking Beowulf to defend Heorot and its people, but to actually protect and take it as his own. John Hill makes a similar point, writing that

Hrothgar says that never, since he could raise hand and shield, has he entrusted the best of houses to any man, except now to Beowulf. ‘Entrusted’ is carried by the word ‘alyfde’ and seems to mean more than special hope and more than just leaving the hall to yet another brave retainer or would-be defender. ‘Alyfan’ is related to ‘permission,’ and to ‘praise.’ It implies proper possession of the hall, as though Hrothgar were leaving Heorot to Beowulf in trust, to be not just its defender, but its rightful possessor for the night. (Hill 80)

Thus, Hrothgar's stated will functions in the same way that much of oral poetry functions in Old Norse texts. Just as Hrothgar uses speech to cede authority to Beowulf, so too could an oral poet gain a sense of authority in reciting poetry. For, as we know, anyone who can hold the attention of a group of people with his words possesses a special kind of command – a command of influence and attention. Hence, speech/verbal communication stands as a testament to power, both within the text as well as beyond it. For it is on these particular occasions when the word becomes somewhat of a material deed that speech is able to grant one authority. As Bjork argues, "Since words for the Anglo-Saxon community had the status of objects, they also bore the material fate of such objects. They could be manipulated, used as weapons to reinforce a warrior's heroism, dispensed with, or sequestered as treasure..." (999). In the moment under consideration, it is the speech itself – acting as a symbolic object of value – that grants Beowulf his newfound authority in Heorot. Moreover, there are several instances in the text that reflect other categories of material speech that have been identified by Bjork and that we will examine subsequently.

Orality in medieval Viking culture was often conflated with power and authority, an idea that is manifested quite interestingly in *Beowulf*. As we know, *Beowulf* is primarily viewed as a story of war-glory, and the major plot of the text concerns Beowulf's heroism in defeating various monsters/creatures. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that orality is often depicted as a tool for battle. In fact, one's words could work just as sufficiently and effectively as a weapon. When Beowulf first arrives to the land of the Danes he is met by one of Hrothgar's men who greets him as such: "This Thane of Hrothgar rode his horse down to the shore, and shook mightily his strong spear, and spoke a challenge" (lines 234 – 236). ["Gewāt him þā tō waroðē wicge rīdan/ þegn Hrōðgāres, þrymmun cwehte/ mægen-wudu mundum, meþel-wordum frægn"

(Chickering 234-236)]. Notably this moment captures the way that words are somewhat symbiotic with war/weaponry. The narrator emphasizes the movement of his spear, which is then immediately followed by his spoken “challenge.” Yet, while we would expect this “challenge” to be a physical confrontation – perhaps some kind of provocation for Beowulf to fight – he merely questions Beowulf’s presence and intentions. This suggests to us that although war is an essential component of medieval Viking society and that violence and battle are common practices within this culture, there is still an element of courtesy and protocol that is expected of men within this society. The Thane does not immediately attack Beowulf and his men for showing up unannounced. In fact, he uses his words to understand Beowulf’s business. Moreover, this line clearly captures the relationship between speech and battle in that it levels both “weapons.” He shakes his spear and he speaks, both acts constituting a form of defense as well as offense against these unexpected visitors. Likewise, throughout the text speech is treated as material possession, usually equated with weaponry. We see this in the repeated phrase, “unlocked his word-hoard” (line 259) [“word-hord onlēac” (Chickering 259)], which is referencing the act of speaking as a physical/material action. As Eric Jager notes: “Pectorality is variously used to suggest that spoken words are physical events or objects; that speech activity, both productive and receptive, is centered within the physical and psychological ‘interior’ of the speaker; or that certain kinds of utterance are ‘inspired’ in the speaker by other agents” (Jager 846). Thus, speech becomes an object that is valued by not only the speaker himself but also by those around him. This materiality is similar to the way that intricate battle shields and impressive weaponry would be admired. Likewise, one’s “word-hoard” – that central physical region in which speech is hoarded/retained – becomes an object of value, a prized possession that could defend one against an attack or could very well instigate an attack as well. Jager also makes a point to reference

wordplay as not only an object, but also an “event,” a term that further enlarges the scope and significance of speech. While an object can be valued and treasured, an event *occurs*. It is not a static “thing,” but rather an experience that involves the participation of many people and that can effect greater change – for example, war, or a court session. For Jager, such events are on par with wordplay.

Furthermore, if we examine the etymology of the Old English word “onlēac,” it is defined as not only to “unlock” or to “open” but also to “reveal” or “disclose,” both of the latter terms often associated less with physicality and more with legality or serious matters that are confidential and/or significant. This suggests the duality of the “word-hord” as being physically material and psychologically valuable. The word functions as a manifestation of authorial power. Speech is taken as weaponry to a great degree a bit later in the text, before Beowulf initially meets Hrothgar. The same guard who challenged and questioned Beowulf and his men shepherds them to Hrothgar, stating: “let your battle-shields and deadly spears await here the result of your words” (line 396). [“lætað hilde-bord hēr onbidian, wudu, wæl-sceaftas, worda geþinges” (Chickering 397-398)]. This suggests that language is not only perceived as a tool for battle, but in fact it trumps the very physical weapons that are actually used in combat. It implies that oral communication is far more significant than physical combat in this society. There are clear customs within this culture – specifically pertaining to courtesy and honor. This particular expression displays how substantial words can be for the Anglo-Saxon people. Again, as when the guard first encounters Beowulf, he does not immediately attack or move defensively, but rather he speaks to Beowulf initially. It is the “result” [“geþinges”] of the verbal communication with Hrothgar that will ultimately determine whether or not Beowulf and his men are a threat to the Danes. Therefore, the weaponry and the battle-mentality come secondary to the verbal

conversation that Beowulf and Hrothgar will have. In addition, the Old English “geþinges” translates to mean multiple things: result/fate, or terms/agreement. It is interesting that this word would be chosen in this context, as it implies once more that there is a contractual bind involved in verbal conversation. Until terms are made between Beowulf and Hrothgar, or until the two come to an agreement, physical altercation is halted. There is a clear privileging of speech over combat that renders orality as not only an essential part of Viking culture, but that renders it probably the most significant aspect of the culture.

As the text continues, Beowulf encounters various other trials that test his heroism. The epic battle scene between Beowulf and the dragon at the end of the story is another example of the power of voice/speech within the work. Right before his demise, Beowulf – in the midst of combat – speaks his dying words, as a verbal last will and testament:

Beowulf spoke – despite his wound...
 ‘Now I should wish to give my war-gear
 to my son, if there had been such...
 I awaited on earth, held what was mine;
 I sought no intrigues, nor swore many
 False or wrongful oaths...’
 ...he [Wiglaf] began once more
 to sprinkle water on him, until the point of a word
 escaped from his breast. (lines 2724, 2729 – 2739, 2790 – 2792)

[Bīowulf maþelode -- hē ofer benne spræc...
 ‘Nū ic suna mīnum syllan wolde
 gūð-gewādu, þær mē gifeðe swā
 ænig yrfe-weard æfter wurde,
 līce gelenge...
 mǣl-gesceafta, hēold mīn tela,
 ne sōhte searo-niðas, nē mē swōr fela
 āða on unriht...’
 ...hē hine eft ongon
 wæteres weorpan, oðþæt wordes ord
 brēost-hord þurhbræc. (Chickering 2724, 2729 – 2739, 2790 – 2792)]

What is different about this speech is that while it does not quite function as a weapon in the ways that we have witnessed previously, his speech still acts as a physical entity that propels him forward in battle – ultimately to his death. However, the emphasis on Beowulf’s strength and his persistence to speak, regardless of the fact that he is on the brink of death, characterizes him as a true warrior. It is as if his speech becomes an extension of his heroism. Similar to the way we might praise a soldier for continuing to fight despite being injured, so too do we see Beowulf fight against his physical pain in order to declare his last words. Examining the verbal exchanges during this scene, Jager writes: “Beowulf’s *word* is thus reified into a weapon-like object traveling independently away from its source in the warrior’s chest. The dragon’s utterance, of course, is a weapon against which Beowulf must defend himself with his special iron shield. The vocal exchange, like the boasting (*gilp*) between warriors on the battlefield, is tantamount to an exchange of blows” (Jager, 851). What Jager points out is that the verbal cries/words emanating from both the Dragon as well as Beowulf himself are tools of combat:

Enraged, the ruler of the weder-Geats
 Let a word burst forth from his breast,
 Shouted starkly; the sound entered
 And resounded battle-clear under the gray stone.
 Hate was stirred up – the hoard-warden recognized
 The voice of a man; there was no more time
 To sue for peace. First there issued
 The steam of that great creature out of the stone,
 Hot battle-sweat; the earth bellowed. (2550 – 2558)

[Lēt ðā of brēostum, ðā hē gebolgen wæs,
 Wder-Gēata lēod word üt faran,
 stearc-heort stymde; stefn in becōm
 heaðo-torht hlynnan under hārne stān.
 Hete wæs onhrēred, hord-weard oncnīow
 mannes reorde; næs ðær māra fyrst
 frēode tō friclan. From ærest cwōm
 oruð āglæcean üt of stāne,
 hāt hilde-swāt; hrūse dynede. (Chickering 2550 – 2558)]

The emphasis on Beowulf's voice as a combative attack against the dragon and the dragon's fiery breath that causes the earth to "bellow" suggest that vocal ability was a form of weaponry. Thus, the sound of the scene becomes the most prominent aspect about it. Likewise, Jager believes that the "verbal exchange" becomes a manifestation of one's strength and power. The Dragon's voice acts as an expression of his monstrosity, while Beowulf's final words act as an expression of his humanity – verbal communication functioning dichotomously in this moment, but ultimately for the same purpose of displaying authority.

Continuing with this idea of speech as a manifestation of Beowulf's humanity in contrast to the Dragon's monstrosity, if we look back at the beginning of the text, Beowulf's initial foe – Grendel – behaves similarly to the Dragon. The lack of speech of the creatures that Beowulf battles shows a clear distinction between the hierarchy of species, if you will. Because human speech is still considered to be a definitive feature of our kind, and thus a mark of our superiority, we can see why Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon are not given this particular quality – the skill of language. In fact, the text makes specific mention of Grendel's vocal abilities in order to further villainize and dehumanize his character: "the wailing cry – God's adversary shrieked a grisly song of horror, defeated the captive of Hell" (line 785). ["Godes andsacan/ sige-lēasne sang, sār wānigean/ helle hæfton. Hēold hine fæste" (Chickering 786 – 789)]. His voice is depicted as a "wailing cry," a "shriek" and "a grisly song of horror," all very much negative and somewhat pathetic in description. The Old English vocabulary indicating an even stronger desperation in its connotation, 'wānigean' translating to mean 'lament,' which expresses a strong sense of failure in Grendel's defeat. His way of communicating pain, or even anger is clearly animalistic and unsophisticated. This provides a nice contrast to that of the human characters (Beowulf in particular) who often speak with great articulateness and

confidence. Therefore, in some way, Grendel's cries (like that of the Dragon's) could be perceived as a dangerous weapon, a cacophony of sound from which Beowulf must shield himself. More importantly, however, it establishes this distinction between words and mere sounds. It is not only orality or sound-making that is valued in this culture, but rather it is the actual words and the meaning behind them that become valuable in the eyes of the public. Just as an Anglo-Saxon poet would be praised for his original kennings and other inventive verbal elements, so too would a medieval Viking man be praised for his inventive insults, and his articulate verbal oaths and speeches. In this text, we see a strong parallel between how the Anglo-Saxon literary form reflected Medieval Viking social values, binding the two cultures together with the thread of vocality. As a result, these creatures that Beowulf battles against become not just enemies, but inferior enemies because of their inability to communicate in the same (refined/sophisticated) way that man does.

As alluded to previously, one of the most powerful expressions of honor in Viking culture is oath taking. An oath in Medieval Icelandic literature functions as a binding contract – one from which there is no escape. Characters often take oaths more seriously than any other form of exchange. If one breaks an oath, he or she is dishonorable, untrustworthy, and should feel a sense of self-shame. Thus, this type of oral transaction is granted a very meaningful position in Viking society. For example, Brynhild in *Volsungs* states: “I swore an oath to marry that man who would ride through my wavering flames, and that oath I would hold to or else die” (Volsungs 88). Because she is unable to marry the man to whom she swore a marriage oath – due to the fact that she is technically betrothed to another man – Brynhild becomes enraged and depressed, so much so, that she jumps into the funeral pyre of Sigurd, the “rightful” object of her marriage oath. Brynhild feels a sense of responsibility to herself in carrying out the oath that she

has spoken. More than anything, she is distraught over having unfulfilled her oath even more than the actual death of Sigurd and the treachery that has been befallen her. Likewise, Jeffery L. Slusher argues, “oaths are particularly powerful, since they contain within them a curse that takes effect against the oath-taker in the event he fails to keep his word or perjures himself in court” (30). We see this metaphorical “curse” through Brynhild’s suicide. Oath breaking was a matter of life and death in Viking society.

Oath-making in *Beowulf* is also taken very seriously as well and arguably to a much stronger degree – for it surpasses the relationship between oath and death. When Hrothgar first meets Beowulf, he discusses his past association with Beowulf’s father: “Your father struck up the greatest of feuds,/ when he killed Heatholaf by his own hand...Later I settled that feud with fee-money;/ I sent to the Wylfings over the crest of the waves/ancient treasures; he swore oaths to me” (lines 459 – 461, 470 – 472). [“Geslōh þīn fæder fæhðe mæste,/ wearþ hē Heaþolāfe tō hand-bonan/ mid Wilfingum...Siððan þā fæhðe fēo þingode;/ sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg/ ealde mādmas; hē mē āþas swōr” (Chickering 459 – 461, 470 -472)]. Hrothgar explains that Beowulf’s father had been involved in a blood-feud, killing a man of the Wylfings. His father then sought refuge with the Danes, Hrothgar paying tribute money on behalf of Beowulf’s father, and thus erasing his debt and saving his life. However, this particular discussion of oath-taking is interesting because it implies that oaths were deeds passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, if one died before fulfilling an oath, his sons would then be responsible for settling whatever debt he left behind. Therefore, Beowulf feels as though it is his duty to repay Hrothgar on behalf of his father by coming to Heorot and promising to protect the kingdom from Grendel’s wrath. This suggests that the entire plot of the story technically revolves around the verbal oaths that Beowulf’s father made to Hrothgar. If it were not for the

relationship that he had with Hrothgar and the circumstances that transpired previously, would Beowulf offer his assistance to the Danes? As Hill states, “Hrothgar interprets Beowulf’s arrival and proposal as a reciprocal settlement, a return for Hrothgar’s earlier settlement...Hrothgar further underlines this reciprocity by suggesting that Beowulf has come out of ‘arstafum’ (‘marks of favour or kindness,’ I.458a), ‘ar’ being part of the reciprocal, ethical vocabulary of the *comitatus* – favour given for favour received” (Hill 77). Hence, Beowulf’s “act of kindness” is in fact dripping with compensation, rather than kindness for the sake of kindness. So we can assume that Beowulf’s primary intention (aside from his desire for honor and glory – which he knows he will inevitably receive) is to repay the Danes for their loyalty to his father. On the subject of reciprocity and gift giving in Anglo-Saxon culture, Bjork argues: “Only through reciprocal exchange can one solidify alliances and friendships within and between groups” (Bjork 995). The oath, in this situation, becomes a plot device – a physical gift – that sets the events of the story in motion, granting the notion of orality a certain power and influence over Beowulf. He becomes enslaved to the words of his father.

Moreover, examining another classic medieval Icelandic text wrought with the theme of vocality, *Njal’s Saga* also provides numerous instances of oath taking, especially in conjunction with the law. The Allthing was an annual court session to which thousands of Icelanders and Vikings from various regions flocked for weeks of legal disputing. The Allthing is particularly present throughout much of *Njal*, as we see Viking families engage in heated debate over financial matters and even familial bloodshed. Oaths are paramount: “In this court all the oaths shall be of the strongest kind, and two men shall follow every oath, who shall support on their words of honour what the others swear” (*Njal* 166). From this pronouncement, the concept of oath taking is expressed with precise diction. Honor and strength are characteristics enmeshed

with the declaration of an oath. It is as if the oath were a weapon used to gain a sense of integrity among members of society. Robin Waugh argues that many medieval Icelandic heroic sagas fuse together skills associated with both battle and poetry because of the equal weight of value attributed to both (364). Waugh also provides an interesting close analysis of the connotation of Old Norse words that further reflect the power and authority associated with vocality. In particular, she notes the term “hygegar,” often used in the sagas to mean something similar to “thought-spear” (366) again balancing ideas of weaponry with wordplay – the two functioning interchangeably. Likewise, examining the etymology of the term, May Lansfield Keller cites “hygegar,” as a “wile-device” (139), making speech into somewhat of a material object – a device or weapon that is tangible and substantial. Therefore, in understanding the nature of words in medieval Viking culture, we must associate words as tools of force, and as concrete objects, rather than as the abstract concept that we commonly consider them to be. Yet, if we truly meditate on the auditory and oral nature of words themselves, they are somewhat physical, or at least somewhere between the margins of material and abstract.

Additionally, the practice of involving two men within the process of oath-taking further expresses the sacredness of the oath. It is such a significant aspect of Viking culture that others must support the establishment of an oath in order for it to be legally and honorably sound within the Allthing courts. Subsequently, we see how oath was a matter that affected not only the individual oath taker, but others involved as well. Flosi, angered by Ingjald’s betrayal says: “That man...has broken his oath and all faith with us. Do you want to let him go, or shall we go after him and kill him?” (Njal 226) Unlike in Brynhild’s case, in which the actual individual who broke the oath felt internal shame and thus, punished herself, this instance suggests the consequences enacted by other parties. Flosi and the other men whom he enlists to go after

Ingjald are not directly involved in the matter of the oath. Yet, oath-making becomes a collective, societal concern. When an oath is broken, those around the oath-breaker lose “faith” in him/her. Ingjald becomes somewhat of a heathen to Viking society by not abiding by the codes vowed in undertaking an oath. Further still, the repercussions of breaking an oath could involve murder. Thus, one’s words had the power to instigate one’s own death.

Across the Old Norse literary canon, we also see numerous instances of reputation/character as expressed by word of mouth. Essentially, a Viking’s identity is often constituted by what others say of him. Therefore, we continue to understand the worth of words and how problematic or how influential speech can be when relating information about a particular person. One specific character description that illustrates the concept of oral reputation is found in *Njal’s Saga*, as Solvi and his men discuss a man named Thorkel Geitisson: “Even Thorkel Geitisson is running, and a lot of lies must have been told about him – many have said that he’s all valour, but no one’s running faster than him now” (Njal 273). In this moment, Solvi actually criticizes the notion of oral reputation. He argues that it is often not always accurate; Nevertheless, the words spoken about an individual still dictate how others perceive him, whether it is true or not. While Thorkel may truly be a coward – running at the first sign of conflict – his reputation is solidified as a valorous and brave man because of the positive words that have previously been spoken of him. Yet, after seeing the reality of Thorkel’s character, Solvi and his men could essentially disseminate a more accurate account of Thorkel and brand him a coward for life. We see this notion of altered reputation also carried out during a conversation between Gudbrand and Hrapp in *Njal’s Saga*. Seeking refuge with Gudbrand, Hrapp states: “I see that a lot of lies have been told about you...I’ll tell a different story if you don’t take me in” (Njal 142). Here, Hrapp uses Gudbrand’s reputation as leverage in order to get

what he wants. He threatens to tarnish Gudbrand's name if he does not take him in. It is interesting because in a moment such as this, we might expect a Viking to physically intimidate his opponent due to our preconceived notions of Viking culture as being strictly savage and violent. Yet, on the contrary, it is through not only verbal intimidation but also a threat involving one's reputation as voiced via word of mouth that we see Gudbrand come undone. He immediately assents to Hrapp's proposition for fear of a slandered name. Thus, this passage further illustrates how influential words could be in Medieval Viking culture.

Just as a Viking's name could easily be soiled by the words of others, so too could his name be elevated by what was spoken of him. In essence, oral reputation was perceived as a type of currency in the Medieval Icelandic era. One could accumulate great status and renown just by having others report one's great deeds and character. In *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, for example, the plot of the text revolves around Gisli's outlawry and his journey to escape those seeking vengeance against him. Therefore, throughout the tale, we witness Gisli struggling to survive in places in which his reputation precedes him, and it can either harm or benefit him. When Gisli and Vestein attempt to purchase a share in Beard-Bjalfi's trading ship, he says "that he had heard that they were decent men and agreed to the deal" (Gisli 508). Without even speaking to Gisli and Vestein, Beard-Bjalfi immediately makes the deal because he trusts the words of others, so much so that he can gamble the success of business on what others have said of Gisli. Likewise, Bauman argues, "praise was a necessary instrument of honor" (142). In order for one to be perceived as having a sense of integrity and goodness, others must know of it. And so, it seems that there is a preoccupation with status and prestige in the culture. You could not be considered – and essentially you *were* not – a good person unless other people were talking about it. There was no clear notion of individual or rather internal worth. It did not really matter what you

thought of yourself, it was only through others that one could gain a high status. The words spoken by society (or people in society) were how one's identity was constructed. You could not become an important, good person unless someone said you were an important, good person. Therefore, words had the power of identity creation. It was the words rather than the deeds that formed one's character.

This brings us back to the relationship between vocality and Viking hierarchy as discussed earlier. Similar to the way in which language skill could afford one regal-like status, so too could one's oral reputation be considered valuable in the eyes of kings and other royal figures. In *Egil's Saga*, which stands as a testament to the significance of vocality in the medieval Viking literary canon, we are provided with a similar circumstance to that of *Gisli's Saga*. At the beginning of the saga, before we meet Egil, the text explores Egil's early lineage and familial context. In describing Egil's grandfather, Kveldulf, messengers of the king state: "He [the king] has heard that you are a man of high birth and standing...you have the chance to receive great honor from the king because he is so eager to be joined by people who are renowned for their strength of body and heart" (Egil 12). Therefore, not only is it evident that oral reputation was significant among society in general, but it is also clear that reputation was something treasured by even the most esteemed figures in society. The thought of the king's eagerness to work alongside Kveldulf simply because he is "renowned" indicates that this fixation with interpersonal perceptions reaches even the highest of ranks – for the king is not immune to the desire to associate with people who are well-thought of. This coincides with Waugh's assertion that "power manifested itself in oral acts" (291). She argues that the connection between orality and power stems from a religious perspective. Early Western Medieval societies would associate language and communicative skill with their deities. This

skill was then filtered down to those of noble status – as it was believed that those in power were descended from the gods. For example, if we look at some of the earlier Prose Eddas of Norse Mythology, we see that the significance of poetry can be traced all the way back to early origin stories of Odin. As Snorri Sturluson relates in the “Odin Seeks Mead” tale, Odin gave mead “...to those men who know how to make poetry. For this reason we call poetry Odin’s catch, find, drink or gift” (86). Thus, the notions of praise poetry, oral reputation and any form of vocality would thus be deemed sacred (Waugh, 291). To be able to construct verse was a skill gifted by a much higher power. This is especially depicted in works such as *Egil’s Saga* in which poetic skill and verse construction are repeated themes at the forefront of the text.

Egil’s Saga is unlike many other texts in the medieval Icelandic literary canon in that it features uncommon themes involving agricultural life, the significance of lineage, and of course an emphasis and continuous use of the verse form. While many classic texts within the genre turn to verse format from time to time – mainly at the conclusion of a saga or as a brief interlude spoken by significant characters, *Egil’s Saga* is wrought with verse throughout the tale, sometimes extending for pages on end. In addition to the actual usage of the poetic form, the saga discusses its value within the narration of the text to illustrate once more the prominence of vocality in the culture. It is stated that Egil “became talkative at an early age and had a gift for words” (51). From his childhood, Egil could compose verse well beyond his years, and was often rewarded for his poetry by his maternal grandfather, Yngvar, with material items such as shells and duck eggs (52). This automatically sets up a system of monetization associated with poetic skill. As stated previously, it is a commodity, traded and exchanged for either abstract goods such as status, or in this case even tangible goods of monetary/sentimental worth. There is, however, much to say about the nature of these tokens rewarded to Egil. Armann Jakobsson

argues that there are psychological implications tied to Egil's family life, noting that it is not Egil's parents who recognize and value his poetic skill. In fact, both his mother and his father consider him to be somewhat of a useless monstrosity of a child (Jakobsson 8). Thus, this might prompt questions regarding the true value of poetic/verbal skill. Is it as significant as it often appears? Why then do Egil's parents not celebrate their child for having such a gift? As Jakobsson posits, there is psychological tension between Egil and his father from an early age. He sees himself in Egil, and dislikes that. In addition, Egil was often known for his troublesome behavior throughout the community, which could explain Grim's indifference and/or hostility towards his son (Jakobsson 5). So perhaps it is not that Grim does not appreciate poetry/verse because it is unimportant, but rather he simply cannot appreciate anything that Egil does because his own negative biases against his son cloud his perceptions of him. Furthermore, the excessive use of verse and discussion of it over the course of the text render it an attribute of high significance.

One of the most significant moments of the saga is when Egil attempts to win the king's favor by composing a poem for him. It is Egil's close companion, Arinbjorn, who advises him to praise the king and construct a poem on the king's behalf in order to reconcile past violent conflicts he has had with the king. Arinbjorn states: "If Egil has spoken badly of the king...he can make recompense with words of praise that will live for ever" (112). Thus, the notion of verse as commodity is once again depicted in this scene – for we know from various other texts that monetary/material compensation was a common practice in medieval Viking culture, and in this particular moment Egil is given the opportunity to recompense the king with his words rather than objects of value or money, which again suggests that words were equivalent to financial capital, if not greater than it. Arinbjorn mentioning that Egil's poetry of the king "will

last for ever” presents a greater alternative for the King. While money and material possessions could be lost, stolen, or traded away, words are objects of permanence and stability that can even outlive those they reference. Additionally, it is through Egil’s poetry that his life is spared by the king. After hearing Egil’s praise, he grants him a safe escape out of his land instead of carrying out his initial attempt to execute him (118). Similar to the way oaths function as a matter of life and death, so too does Egil’s poetry act as shield that safeguards his life from the king’s vengeful intentions.

Furthermore, examining Egil’s verses more closely there is an element of self-referentialism throughout much of his poetry – as he continuously reiterates the value of poetry within his poetry. Egil will often call attention to the significance of his skill while he utilizes that very skill. For example, in composing a poetic verse after the deaths of his sons, Egil chronicles his lineage – including his own merits – as such:

A field of teeth there
and my tongue I took back,
and my flapping ears
endowed with sound;
such a gift
was prized higher
than the gold
from a famous king... (161)

Here, he boasts of his “gift,” claiming that it is worth more than any material value even those given by kings. In this particular verse he recounts his experience with Arinbjorn and the king as if it were a battle. The reclaiming of his “teeth,” “tongue,” and “ears,” – all parts associated with his ability to compose verse, and parts of him threatened by the king’s revenge – suggests the sheer importance that Egil places on orality and sound. It is as if in regaining his favor with the king, in using his poetry to settle disputes, he has won a battle – his body parts like land that is regained from a usurper. Waugh analyzes this exchange as a moment of, “the shifting of roles

that both ruler and poet undergo” (296). She argues that through Egil’s poetic composition, he almost becomes greater in status than the king himself – for he is tasked with the act of creation, and ultimately “demands attention” from the audience as he orally transmits his words (296) – both clear actions of one in power. This is similar to the notion discussed previously of oral poets having a sense of authority over those to whom they recite. *Egil’s Saga* celebrates the poetic figure as a prominent and powerful member of Viking society. Hence, the notion of poetic skill, and rather any type of vocalicity could not only afford one a sense of commercial/monetary value, but could also figuratively advance one’s authority.

Poetry was also seen as an act of immortalizing one’s deeds. This idea of oral memorials is quite common not only in medieval Viking culture, but also across many ancient traditions – including classic Greek and Roman epics – and even in more modern contexts, such as funeral eulogies. This furthers our understanding of the medieval Icelandic oral tradition as Egil frequently incorporates his own honorable deeds and actions as subjects of his poetry. Before he recites his verse dedicated to King Eirik, Egil states: “I have acted as you deserve, sparing nothing in word and deed to enhance your renown” (113). He levels two components: “word,” and “deed,” in order to express how both are of equal importance. As argued previously, it is not simply one’s deeds that construct an identity, but more so it is the words said about one that construct it. The word, thus, becomes much like a tomb for one’s identity – encasing and solidifying that person’s reputation forever, a reflection of the related Old English concept of the “word hoard.” Similarly, Bauman writes: “in the quest for honor and reputation, Icelanders explicitly sought to act in such a way as to be worthy of a story or poem; their behavior was artfully staged with an eye – and ear – toward being artfully reported and praised” (145). This

social staging is executed throughout various sagas, especially *Egil's Saga*. Even Egil himself recognizes this aspect of his culture:

I am quick to sing
A noble man's praises.
but stumble for words
about misers;
freely I speak
of a king's deeds,
but stay silent
about the people's lies. (159)

There is this desire - or rather, this obsession – to highlight the actions of those who are honorable. Like the binding permanence of an oral oath, verse had the same lasting effect: a declaration preserving one's reputation for eternity. *Egil's Saga* is especially innovative within its literary canon because of its “meta” quality of referencing its genre. Unlike many other Viking texts that certainly do include an abundance of instances that privilege and highlight speech acts for various reasons, as we have examined thus far, *Egil's Saga* takes this concept a step further and constantly self-references the culture's fixation on orality as well.

Another repetitive trope found in medieval Icelandic literature is the oral insult competition, which can have an emasculating effect on Viking men. Often male characters in these sagas would engage in various insult-battles in order to assert their masculinity over other men, a practice that underlies the sheer significance of word power in Viking culture and literature. A striking example of this trope can be found in *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, in which we witness a scene between two drunken Viking men participating in a verbal contest:

Speak to us of your honor,
Let's settle this, I ask you:
have you seen the raven shiver,
sated with blood on its perch?
More often you sat at feasts,
sprawled upon the high-seat,

than you carved bloody carrion
for corpse-birds in the valley. (Ragnar Lodbrok 38)

What is especially comical about this scene is that the two men involved in the battle are not major characters who are significant to the overall plot, but rather they are simply unnamed Viking soldiers, only identified as “man,” or “the one.” This suggests that these Viking insult battles were so prevalent in the culture that nearly everyone engaged in them. This is not a battle solely for the elite or for the lower-class characters. It is an activity imbedded within the fabric of the culture. Furthermore, this Viking’s emphasis on vocality from the very first line of his oral slander, “Speak to us of your honor,” calls attention to the previously discussed notion of highlighting one’s deeds, which is exactly what these verbal competitions function as: a way to overstate your personal valor, while simultaneously degrading that of your opponent. Likewise, the actual construction of most of these verbal declarations (whether a piece of verse created to venerate a subject, or an offensive attack) often includes complex and intricate semantics imbedded within the verse. Most notably, medieval Icelandic literature incorporates the use of kennings, or compound words, to create new connotations. For instance, the above quotation includes kennings such as, “high-seat” and “corpse-birds,” which work to display the speaker’s own creativity and ingenuity in constructing verse. The inclusion of the kenning could arguably be viewed as an assertion of authority. Similarly, Zoe Borovsky argues that oral contests in medieval Viking literature are equivalent to “Verbal and intellectual combat” (9). Thus, it is understood that to be able to fight with one’s words was a demonstration of one’s might, particularly valuing intellectual capacity over the physical – the kennings an additional mark of one’s cleverness, almost akin to the act of creation in that these Viking men would birth new words from the recesses of their minds.

In response to the above provocation, the other man involved in the slander competition replies in an interesting fashion – a tactic that once more emphasizes the value of vocality. He states: “Be silent, you sluggard!/ Shabby wretch, what have you done?/ You have dared no deeds that/ Outdo my own glory” (Ragnar Lodbrok 38). Not only does this insult illustrate the impact of name-calling and word choice with “sluggard,” and “shabby wretch,” but it also begins with the speaker commanding his opponent to “be silent” – essentially stripping the other man of his weaponry: his voice. It feels much like a symbolic castration, knowing the underlying gender implications associated with these word battles. The speaker is thus more orally equipped in this fight; he has disarmed his opponent with a simple pronouncement. As Carl Phelpstead argues, “A clash of values between different understandings of what constitutes appropriate masculine behavior is, then, demonstrated not only by the insulting verse but also by the differing responses to those insulted” (14). Hence, the reply is equally as significant in the word battle as the initial insult. While the first Viking uses wordplay to degrade his opponent, the second Viking does the same, but also figuratively usurps the words out of the first’s mouth. While discussing the phenomenon of the oral insult battle – or “flyting” as Walter J. Ong refers to it – Ong explicates the force of such an act as it would be perceived in medieval Viking society, stating: “...orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one. Bragging about one’s own prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings of an opponent figure regularly” (Ong 43-4). The idea of orality being utilized during situations of struggle is especially prominent in Nordic culture. In fact, many people would argue that a majority of the cultural norms and values of medieval Viking society revolve around struggle and violence, which is why the Vikings are so

often conflated with brutality and war. Thus, it seems only natural that most instances involving the use of orality for authoritative purposes and purposes pertaining to power would be instances in which there is some kind of struggle surrounding these moments. For example, as we have seen above, moments in which man attempts to trump man with his words in order to display his superior authority, or as we have seen and will see more of, moments in which words are used to disarm opponents or deflate tension.

Another strategy employed by medieval Vikings in relation to oral slander is seen in *Njal's Saga*, when Mord and Valgerd plan to enact revenge against Njal and his family. Valgerd suggest to Mord, "You must invite the Njalssons home and send them away with gifts. You must begin spreading slander only when the friendship between you is strong and they trust you no less than they trust each other" (Njal, 183). While not exactly an insult *contest*, Valgerd still insists on using words to attack Njal's family. Like the tactical maneuvers committed on the battlefield, words were used to fight in medieval Viking culture. Thus, further implying the significance of vocality and equating what is arguably the most acknowledged aspect of the culture: warfare, with speech – speech being a practice usually perceived as less volatile, yet in this instance, just as significant and dangerous as war. Furthermore, in understanding the etymology of Old English terms, there is one word in particular that holds a significant amount of power and consequence. In *Njal's Saga*, much attention is paid to the word "ragr," which is defined as cowardly and effeminate, but which has sexual undertones. If one were called "ragr" he would be likened to a passive recipient of male penetration. This word, as William Ian Miller writes, was "a word that can get you legitimately killed if you call someone it" (Miller 92). And in explaining such, Miller notes that in order to goad Atli into completing his task of killing Kol, it is suggested that he is not "ragr," and therefore, he should be able to do what he is tasked with

– the term here being used in the negative to threaten Atli’s reputation of manhood. But what is more significant is the fact that such a word could carry with it immense consequence. To be killed over the utterance of one simple word suggests the nature of this culture as not only centrally focused around manhood/status, but also implicitly revolving around speech, granting the act of speech the authority to instigate one’s death even. And while it seems so arbitrary in the modern mind to severely punish a person for what he/she says (especially with our so-called Western notions of “freedom of speech”), this idea circles back to the fact that orality held such a foundational place in the society. Words on their own carried their own weight and identity in Medieval Viking culture.

Like the oral insults as expressed in various medieval Viking works, we see a similar battle of words in *Beowulf* between Beowulf and Unferth in the mead hall of Heorot. This particular insult contest is quite different from the name-calling in *Ragnar Lodbrok*, and more closely resembles the oral slander that we see in *Njal Saga*. While the Danes and Geats sit down to feast before Beowulf’s battle against Grendel, Unferth attempts to challenge Beowulf’s reputation by claiming that he has heard that Beowulf is not a man of strength: “Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca/in a swimming contest on the open sea...and he outswam you,/and had more strength...So I expect a worse outcome from you –/ though you may have survived the storm of battle,/some grim combats – if for Grendel you dare/ to lie in wait the whole night long” (lines 506-28) [“Eart þū sē Bēowulf, sē þe wið Breca Wunne...hæfde mære mægen. Þā hine on morgen-tide...wyrsan geþingea/ ðēah þū heaðo-ræsa gehwær dohte/ grimre gūðe, gif þu Grendles dearst/ niht-longne fyrst nēan bīdan” (Chickering 506 -528)]. Here, Unferth engages in a kind of verbal challenge against Beowulf. He uses oral rumors that have been circulating by word of mouth to attack Beowulf’s honor. In response to this, Beowulf

completely dispels these rumors, emphasizing that he “will tell the truth” (line 532). [“Sōð ic talige” (Chickering 532)] and thus restore the honor of his name. Hence, there is a very strong correlation between how one is perceived and the words spoken about one. Furthermore, Beowulf retaliates against Unferth via verbal assault, stating, “I have never heard a word about any such contest concerning you” (line 581). [“Nō ic wiht fram þē/ swylcra searo-nīða secgan hýrde” (Chickering 581-2)]. This blow is especially piercing because it takes the very weapon that Unferth attempted to use against Beowulf, the institution of oral reputation, and throws it back in his face. He basically suggests that what is even worse than having a reputation-tarnishing rumor spread about you is having no rumor said of you at all, because that ultimately implies that you are not even worth being spoken about in the first place. Hill refers to Unferth’s verbal assault as a “challenge-speech” (77). Yet, he believes that Unferth’s challenge stems from a place of concern and counsel, rather than that of jealousy and that his expression of skepticism is warranted. However, while this may be true, it is also important to note that Unferth chooses this moment in the mead hall, in front of all of the Danes and Geats to verbally challenge Beowulf’s honor. If this was merely the result of true apprehension for the safety of his people, he might have more properly addressed his concerns in an official council with Beowulf, Hrothgar and the Danes. As we know, the Vikings were a people who valued proper protocol and procedure – it is what makes this society so complex and misunderstood. Therefore, it seems more likely to perceive Unferth’s behavior as a battle of masculine prowess and an expression of his envy against Beowulf’s impressive status.

While the oral insult in Norse culture was primarily a display of masculine authority, there are several instances throughout medieval Norse texts that allow us to explore the connection between language and femininity – which works quite dichotomously at times from

the way that orality is used to promote masculinity. Women and language function in two ways. Women either use vocality to emasculate their male counterparts, or, men use language to verbally assault women and shame them – both tasks that work to degrade a person’s status, rather than our usual understanding of language as a way to elevate and sometimes apotheosize an individual’s reputation. Thus, it appears that oral communication associated with femininity is a source of negativity in Norse culture. This is reminiscent of a psychoanalytic approach to gender as discussed in Alenka Zupancic’s book *What is Sex?* In it, Zupancic discusses the Lacanian notion of the non-relation; there is a certain negative space, or void often associated with women and femininity in relation to man that sets up a distinct gender hierarchy between the two (Zupancic 17). In the dynamic between orality and femininity in medieval Icelandic literature we see that same void/negativity in the way speech acts are used towards women or by women – never used to construct, but only used to undo and negate identities. We witness the former speech act of “female goading” in *Njal’s Saga* when Thorhild, the wife of Thrain, is angered by her husband and constructs an insulting couplet about him: “This gaping is not good,/Your eyes are all agog.” Thrain enraged by her comments acts out rashly and quite immaturely: “Thrain jumped at once across the table and named witnesses and declared himself divorced from her. – ‘I won’t take anymore of her mocking and malicious language’” (Njal 56). In this moment, Thrain feels so threatened by his wife’s mere insulting words that he uses them as a grounds for divorce, demonstrating the clear fragility of male confidence. He is so insecure that any little insult sets him on edge. Still, it is important to note that these words come from the mouth of his wife – a woman – and this probably escalates the tension. If it were coming from a fellow Viking man, Thrain would perhaps answer these insults with his own offensive words and engage in an insult contest. Therefore, it is interesting to examine the power and authority that

women possess in asserting their voices. Borovsky presents a significant point that while women were “powerless in the public sphere” (11), they did enjoy a substantial amount of power in the private sphere. Whether through their emasculating words towards men that could ultimately shatter the Viking male ego in one go, or through their goading of men to act with vengeance, women wielded their vocality much like the men did: as a weapon, or a call to action. However, while their voices are somewhat powerful in nature in dismantling male reputation, still their voices are never used to uplift female status – something that men have the power to do with their words.

Likewise, at the very end of *Volsungs Saga*, one of the most well-known and powerful instances of female goading is when Gudrun incites her sons to avenge their sister’s death. After Gudrun insults them for not seeking vengeance, Hamdir states: “We cannot endure your taunts; so persistently are we being urged” (Volsungs 107). Thus, Gudrun’s sons spring to action at even the most minimal taunting by their mother. It is an affront to their egos, and so they must act to preserve their reputation. In addition, examining the construction of the second clause in the above line, the syntax of the statement also reveals this sense of insecurity that Hamdir feels as a result of his mother’s goading. The reversal of the subject, “we” with the verb “are” indicates a sense of resignation of authority. The sons are no longer in command of their own actions – and therefore, this is reflected in their speech. They become secondary figures in the structure of their own sentences. While this could simply be a glitch in translation, or an antiquated syntactic style, it does seem quite glaring in relation to its preceding clause, and as Roberta Frank notes, in Old Norse poetry, “words are urged into place, drawn together into a logical structure...the pull of an invisible syntax dictates the ultimate meaning of a stanza” (49). Hence, we are invited to read and analyze such an irregularity as intentional and constructed out of the desire to create a

codified meaning. We might expect to see the phrase worded as, “We are being urged so persistently,” or even, “so persistently we are being urged;” Such a structural reversal, however, suggests feelings of timidity – it is as if the subject, the “we,” the two sons, are hiding behind the verb, rather than asserting themselves as authoritative figures who control their speech, and thus, their deeds. In this case, the woman – Gudrun – is in command; she holds the cards in the situation and consequently, holds her words more mightily than that of her sons. In line with this notion of female agency through orality, Borovsky states: “These powerful women – disenfranchised in the official, legal realm – insisted on rocking the boat and disrupting the official order, or ‘grid’” (15). Essentially, the woman could claim the domestic, private sphere as her sector, or her region of power because that was the place in which she would be allowed to assert herself. There is a sense of gender reversal in this moment and in the private sphere in general that is bestowed upon the woman by word power.

On the other hand, language is also used to damage female reputation, much like the slandering of Viking men. In *Njal's Saga*, Skarphedin verbally assaults Hallgerd after she whispers that he is unwelcome in Grjota. He says: “Your words don’t count, for you’re either a cast-off hag, or a whore” (Njal 155). Not only does Skarphedin use offensive terminology to disgrace Hallgerd – delineating her as one of the two most stereotypical gender roles associated with femininity – but he also attacks her speech as well, claiming that her “words don’t count.” This feels very much like a colonization of Hallgerd’s speech, and therefore, her authority, very similar to the symbolic castration exhibited in *Ragnar Lodbrok* in which the one Viking man commands his opponent to “be silent.” After this usurpation of Hallgerd’s authority, whatever she says now is thus tainted by Skarphedin’s assertion that her speech is meaningless and inaccurate. Furthermore, we see the idea of diminishing the speech of women as a topic

referenced in *Gisli's Saga* as well. Like Skarphedin's attack on Gudrun's words, Bork also questions the validity and truth of Thordis's speech, stating: "How much truth is there in what Thordis says. It's just as likely that there is none. Women's counsel is often cold" (Gisli 526). Rather than simply criticizing Thordis solely based on her character and past behaviors – which would arguably have been more valid – Bork instead attributes the possibility of Thordis's inaccurate words as an aspect of her femininity. It is not only Thordis who often lies, but rather, it is the entirety of womankind who cannot be trusted, for their speech is "often cold." The Old Norse usage of "köld" in the original text can translate to our modern understanding of cold as low in temperature, but also as "unfriendly, emotionally distant, or unfeeling," as a quick dictionary search of the term indicates. While not entirely gendered in context, the word choice of "cold" seems quite odd in the sentence and could potentially tie back to an attack on Thordis's womanhood. The idea of a woman being "unfeeling" or "emotionally distant" is quite a departure from stereotypical notions of femininity. It is a subversive and strange behavior for a woman to lack emotion, as perceived by patriarchal minds. Therefore, we can potentially read this moment in the same vein as the emasculation presented in male insult battles. Clearly, words functioned to the same degree of power they did for men as they did for women. The scope of significance associated with oral communication and vocality did not discriminate across gender barriers, but rather exhibited its strength in relation to both.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly is the relationship between speech acts and the court system in Viking Culture, which further establishes our understanding of vocality as an integral part of Nordic Society. We will focus on *Njal's Saga* because of its attention to legality and the court in the third act of the text, which takes place during a legal hearing after the death of Njal's sons. At the Law Rock, Mord is tasked with addressing the court on behalf of the

Njalssons in order to enact revenge against Flosi for his attacks on them. The text makes explicit mention of Mord's articulate nature stating: "Mord was exceptionally clever with words" (Njal 252) a necessity for one who speaks in front of a legal council. In addition, following his proclamation, the text also mentions, "There was much talk at the Law Rock about how well and boldly Mord had spoken" (252). Therefore, we get a sense of the value associated with one's speech. It is not only an assertion of one's masculinity, but also of one's authority in general. For the louder and more eloquent one spoke, the greater one's reputation increased. In addition, if we take a closer look at Mord's declaration, there are several significant features that must be highlighted. Mord states:

I call for witnesses that I give notice of a punishable assault by Flosi Thordarson, in which he assaulted Helgi Njalsson at the place where Flosi Thordarson assaulted Helgi Njalsson and inflicted on him an internal wound or brain wound or marrow wound which proved to be a fatal wound, and Helgi died of it. I declare that he deserves full outlawry for this offence, not to be fed, nor helped on his way, nor given any kind of assistance. I declare all his property forfeit, half to me and half to the men in the quarter who have the legal right to his forfeited property. I give notice of this homicide suit to the Quarter Court in which this case should be heard according to law. I give this lawful notice; I give notice in the hearing of all at the Law Rock. I give notice of the prosecution of Flosi Thordarson for full outlawry, to take place at this session. I give notice that the suit was turned over to me by Thorgeir Thorisson. (252)

In this lengthy speech, the notable repetition of declarative statements such as "I give," "I call," and "I declare," is impossible to miss. It represents the emphasis on the speaker to construct and express his authority for all to hear. He repeats these phrases so often that it is hard to separate the words from the speaker and so we, as readers, and the court audience are reminded of Mord's power constantly. Likewise, Thomas Bredsdorff provides a substantial point arguing that "the declarative speech acts of the courts, that is, the verdicts and sentences, involve an extralinguistic institution that was invisible, in that it consisted of neither procedure nor office but of a sociological fact emerging from the checks and balances enabled by a society with a relatively

large number of men of relatively equal wealth, and hence power” (Bredsdorff 39). What Bredsdorff speaks to is the notion that vocality was its own tradition – its own part of the culture, an extension of the world of legality in Viking culture, ruled by those in power. Thus, oral communication was indeed an indicator of one’s authority and social prowess. And because the legal system was such a fundamental part of Medieval Viking culture, the association between language and vocality and the law attests to the weight and value held by those who could speak in court and especially those who could speak well.

Additionally, regarding oral insult and the law, Miller breaks down the process of consequential insults and how they were handled in Viking court:

The law requires at least a half-stanza to be repeated when suing someone for malicious verse...Full outlawry is the lot of anyone who composes a mere half-stanza of insulting verse, and the same for anyone who teaches it and for anyone who learns it or repeats it. Sigmund’s verses meet that test easily. What Gunnar has announced to the assembled community in effect is: now you all know that we have not behaved unreasonably – and if you say these words, we are warning you now that we will hunt you down and kill you. (Miller 108).

There are several things at play here in Miller’s explanation that are quite significant. Firstly, in order to charge one for reciting verbal insults, the insult must be repeated, at least in partial at the court hearing. This tells us that for the verbal insult to come to life, so to speak (or rather, for it to be proven in court), it must first be spoken at the Althing. Therefore, the words become established when they orally repeated in court; They become like physical entities or objects as we have referred to them previously. There is an element of speaking the words into existence with this legal protocol. If it as if the insult did not really occur unless they first repeat it in court for all to witness. Secondly, Miller notes that insulting verse is not only a crime reserved for those who originate these words, but also for those who teach, learn or repeat these insults. Not even using the insult in its proper context could still get one outlawed from society, which again

furthering our understanding of the power and authority associated with words, which are allotted so much force that even those ancillary to the perpetrator of such a crime could also face punishment. And lastly, while Miller does suggest that this crime technically and officially yields the punishment of exile (“on the record”), he still also suggests that unofficially, it could be punishable by death by those who wish to take the law into their own hands, a very severe penalty for what would seem like a minor crime.

Medieval Viking literature contains no shortage of evidence of the power of words. From its connection to social status and royal hierarchy, to its emasculating effects on the fragile Viking male ego, to the infusion of vocality in legal settings, it is clear just how influential one’s speech could be in this society. So much so that we are left wondering why in fact are the Vikings associated most prominently with ideas of violence and bloodshed when in fact their voices and words held just as much substance as their battle glory? Again we can attribute this fascinating phenomenon to the fact that Norse culture was firstly an oral culture, and so it is no surprise that speech would be so sharply reflected in the literature. Yet, why do we find this same valuation of vocality in later sagas in which written communication and textual culture had been thriving for centuries? Furthermore, how do we reconcile the equality of war deeds and words? This could suggest that humans have always considered speech to be a fulcrum of our existence – an aspect that elevates us above other animals and thus, something to value and cherish. After all, our modern perceptions of speech have not really changed. We still hold one’s words to a high standard and we still associate vocality with privilege. Those who are often marginalized and oppressed remain silenced by those in power. Perhaps communication is and will always be a demonstration of our authority over other species, and more importantly, over other people.

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