

The Double Impact of Christianization for Women in Old Norse Culture

by *Else Mundal*

The conversion to Christianity led to changes for everyone in Old Norse culture. Else Mundal considers changes to the status of women in the public sphere, the effects of marriage laws, and ideas on the nature of woman. The question of whether Christianity resulted in an improvement, or a worsening of conditions for women is still open to debate.

In Old Norse source material, conversion to Christianity is always referred to as a significant event which divides history into the "before" and "after". Although we acknowledge that Christian ideology was familiar in Old Norse society for a long time prior to the christianization when Christianity enjoyed the status of the sole accepted religion, the official transference to the new religion led to changes in daily life for both women and men from the very beginning. These changes became manifest, however, differently for women and men.

I

Conversion to Christianity led to changes for all

When Christianity was legalized, the worship of heathen gods and spirits was forbidden¹. Ceremonies concerned with birth and death were transferred from the home to the church; from the authority of the family to the authority of the Church. The introduction of holy days, and days of fasting, regulated people's lives in various ways. For marriage and the relationship between women and men in marriage, the consequences of Christianity were with time considerable. Polygamy was prohibited straight away. The prohibition of marriage within the family was probably regarded as important, but in this area the Church was willing to compromise. At the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the numbers of prohibited degrees were reduced from seven to four within the whole Church. The possibility of divorce in the Nordic countries was scarcely

1. In Iceland, heathen gods were worshipped in secret for a few years after Christianization in the year 1000, according to the *Íslendingabók*.

regarded with tolerance by the Church, but time passed before canonical rulings in this matter were established. Not before the 1200's did the right to divorce entirely disappear. This occurred concurrently with the introduction of church marriages.

Moreover, in the area of inheritance and property rights, changes occurred during the early Christian period had consequences for women. In the pre-Christian era in Old Norse culture, women could not inherit if they had brothers. Daughters would take a dowry into marriage. The dowry was counterbalanced by a quantity of goods equivalent, normally, to the value of the dowry. This was contracted by the groom when the marriage was agreed upon. All this was the private property of the woman. She could not, however, make use of this without permission from her husband. But on his decease, or in the event of divorce, the woman was entitled to retrieve her private means from the estate.

As time went on under Christianity, this well established practice began to change, probably gradually, and at differing rates depending on the location in Scandinavia. Daughters now got rights of inheritance, but only half the entitlement of their brothers. Joint property in marriage replaced the system where husband and wife retained rights to each their separate property. Joint ownership usually meant that the wife owned half as much as did the husband. It seems as if the Church supported the new legislation in areas of inheritance and property rights, and if the Church was not the direct instigator of these changes it was certainly active in putting them into practice.

The new Christian codes – *kristinn réttur* – introduced concurrently with Christianity and for the period following Christianization, must have been the codes which the Church regarded to as the most important codes which were looked upon as distinguishing symbols for a Christian society. However, the first Christian laws were in many ways compromises between what the Church must have required, and what it was practically possible to enforce in the Old Norse culture. Lawcodes concerning marriage, the right to divorce and woman's rights in different areas demonstrate that when Christianity was confronted with the Old Norse culture the Church for a long period had to compromise.

2

New ideas and long term changes

Behind the various new laws and regulations which either arose from the Church, or were sanctioned by the Church, was to be found, at least in the majority of cases, an ideology and political stance which also included new ideas about women, how they were, or were supposed to be.

In some cases, one can detect the new ideas fairly clearly reflected in legal or religious texts. In other cases, however, the new ideas are not so easy to pinpoint either in legal or other kinds of text, although they may still be instrumental in effecting change, the significance of which is first understood in the context of the larger pattern of changes.

Whilst changes connected with heathen cult and the practice of its rituals were brought about overnight, new ideas would need more time – often considerably longer time – before becoming accepted in Old Norse culture. All the same, conversion to Christianity provided a channel for new ideas from the world outside, both for genuinely Christian ideas and for ideas which entered the Nordic countries more or less as an integral part of the Christian culture – such as Aristotle's views on biological inheritance².

In some cases it is hard to decide whether changes which occurred after the time of Christianization were a direct result of this, or whether they would have occurred in any case. Changes of this type are, for example, that women were granted rights of inheritance, and that individual property rights were replaced by shared property rights within marriage.

3

Difficulties in drawing definitive conclusions from the documentation

The manner and the extent of the influence of Christianity on Old Norse culture can only be evaluated with any degree of certainty when one has a clear picture of Old Norse culture in the pre-Christian era. It is difficult to assess how, and to what extent, the status and view of woman was changed as a result of Christianization, unless we know what her status was in pre-Christian society. We have to admit that we ought to have known more. We do know, for example, that polygamy was current practice in pre-Christian Old Norse society, but we know little about how widespread this was. The consequences of its prohibition are therefore not easy to assess. We know that women had dowries in Old Norse society, but we do not know how generous the daughters' dowries were, when compared to the amount sons inherited. Consequently, it is also difficult to assess whether the introduction of rights of inheritance was advantageous to women, or the opposite. The right to divorce in pre-Christian Old Norse society functioned as a form of security for women, protecting them from marital violence. However, the free right

2. A comprehensive treatment of Aristotle's theories of biological inheritance is found in Erna Lesky, 1950.

to divorce could also have a backlash effect if husbands made use of their rights to divorce to the same extent as did women.

Today, the prevailing view amongst scholars is that the position of women was rather good in pre-Christian Old Norse culture; in any case better, in some areas, than in the later Christian culture. But since there is a fair amount of uncertainty in connection with women's actual lives in heathen times and since it is possible to draw different conclusions from what it is we think we know about conditions in heathen as well as in Christian times, it then follows that the question about women's position and the understanding of women in the Old Norse period – both before and after Christianization – still is a topic of debate. The same can be said of the question whether or not women's conditions changed for the better or for the worse as a result of Christianization. Although most scholars agree that women enjoyed a position of strength in the pre-Christian Old Norse society, the understanding of the manner in which Christianity influenced the status of women and the view on women varies, covering a broad range of opinions, from those who believe that the position of women in heathen society was far better before than after Christianization, to those who are more likely to emphasize the advantages Christianization brought women

The truth often lies somewhere between the extremes, and there can be little doubt that the advent of Christianity brought disadvantages as well as advantages for women. Conditions as well as rights did in some areas improve as a result of Christianity, and would in other areas change for the worse. Moreover, some of the changes had both positive and negative aspects.

When I now engage with the discussion about the extent to which Christianity influenced the lives of women, and views on women, I will be concentrating on a few main areas. Church legislation on marriage and its consequences for women is one such parameter. Another area I will discuss is that of the new ideas about woman, and the nature of woman, and how these related to ideas in pre-Christian Old Norse society. Changes in the level of ideas are not always easy to concretize with certainty, but it is probably here we find the changes which in the long run had most significant effect on women's lives. My point of departure, however, will still be a consideration of possible changes within an area where the consequences of Christianization were perhaps not so great. This area is the position of women in the public sphere. Changes which took place here may possibly reveal something about the direction changes concerning women took, in part as a result of Christianization, and partly as a consequence of other developments in society of societal development. Changes in this area may also serve to place the changes

that took place as a direct result of Christianity in a larger historical and sociological context.

4

Women's status in the public sphere

During recent years, women's participation – or, rather, lack of participation – in public life in Old Norse times has been much debated. The Danish-American historian Jenny Jochens has been central to this debate. In several studies she has emphasized the weak position of women in Old Norse culture with regard to their public status, in both heathen and Christian times³. She sees this weak position as inconsistent with the picture of the strong and assertive woman of the Saga literature, and she therefore believes that the textual depiction of «the strong Saga woman» must be a narrative invention by male authors. The passive woman with a weak position – or no position – in public life gives, in her view, a more realistic and a truer picture, indicating that the position of women in Old Norse society was not as strong as we would like to believe. Jochens describes the position of women in public life from Old Norse times as follows: «They could not act as chieftains [*goðar*], judges, or even witnesses»⁴.

When Jochens describes the status of women in public life, as she does here, she builds on Icelandic sources. The use of Norwegian source material does not radically alter her conclusions, although there are important differences. Without doubt in Norway, women were able to bear witness. In the Norwegian legal system, witnesses could differ in type, but a common type was the sworn witness. This was a witness who would make an oath together with the accused that she/he was innocent. In Norway, the convention was that women would act as sworn witnesses for other women, and men, for men⁵.

Godar with political power of the type we know of from Icelandic sources are not found in the Norwegian source materials. Moreover, we have no grounds for believing that the type of political and religious power enjoyed by these *godar* in Icelandic society was enjoyed by women in Norway. Apart from the fact that women could bear witness, Norwegian legislation contains little of information about what kinds of public positions women could hold. In the oldest versions of the laws, however, there can be found a few but interesting pieces of legislation which show

3. Jochens, 1986; 1995, p. 163.

4. Jochens, 1995, p. 163.

5. Mundal, 1994a.

that women did, in some areas, have the chance, or were indeed obliged, to take part in public life.

According to Norwegian law, a widow could travel to the Thing in place of her deceased husband. One may assume that she enjoyed the same rights and duties as her husband. The widow had no obligation to travel to the Thing. She had the same right as older men to decide whether to go or to stay at home⁶. Nonetheless, there are cases where the law emphasises that a woman who runs a farm has, in principle, the same duty to travel to the Thing – in this case the *mannfallstþing*, the thing which they took *census* – as did men. A woman had to provide a good reason to send a man in her place⁷.

There is also mentioning of instances where it is the woman who shall *skilja víg*⁸. That is to say that she shall account for the legal implications of the felony she has witnessed. Also in these cases the woman need not travel to the Thing herself. She could send a man who would speak her words at the Thing⁹.

In the Norwegian laws there is also a law which states that in the case of a man who has been murdered, it is his widow's duty to convene a Thing at the site of the killing, and it is up to her to decide whether or not a sentence should be passed then and there¹⁰.

These interesting distinctions between Icelandic and Norwegian laws may in part be a consequence of the fact that Norwegian laws were written down before the Icelandic laws, and may therefore have retained some of the archaic traits not found in the Icelandic laws. When it appears that women enjoy a stronger position in Norwegian laws than in the Icelandic laws, the most important reason for this is most likely that Icelandic society had just lived through a highly abnormal period, the time of colonisation. There must have been a considerable shortage of women in Icelandic society during this entire period. In areas where women already held weak positions – as in public life – this period, when women constituted a small minority, has probably represented a critical phase which certainly did not strengthen their status.¹¹ There is also another, important factor which may explain the differences between Icelandic and Norwegian laws. The Icelanders had to compose new laws for a new society. Even though they built on Norwegian legislation, they had to, in a way, begin with a clean slate. They may, consequently, have been

6. *Eldre Gulatingslov*, chapter 131, in *Norges Gamle Lov* 1, p. 55.

7. *Eldre Frostatingslov* VII, chapter 8, *ibid.*, pp. 199 f.

8. *Norges Gamle Lov* IV, p. 7.

9. More on this in Mundal, 1994a, pp. 596 f.

10. *Eldre Gulagtingslov*, chapter 151, in *Norges Gamle Lov* 1, p. 60.

11. Carol Clover evaluates this differently in Clover, 1988.

more open to new ideas – also new ideas about the role of women in society – than were the Norwegians in the old country, who continued to live in an unbroken tradition.

When we want to present a picture of women's position in public life in Old Norse society it is very important to look at not only the Icelandic but also the Norwegian sources. Also according to Norwegian source material, a woman's position in the public realm was quite moderate. But we must all the same note that women were regarded as reliable witnesses. One presupposed that they had knowledge of the laws and judicial procedure, and one assumed that they were able to take the place of the deceased husband at the Thing. It is also worthy of note that in at least one of the laws mentioned above¹², it is stressed that the woman, the wife, is the person with second highest rank in the family – also in public life. It is the widow, and not, as one might expect, the husband's surviving male relatives, who has the responsibility of setting in motion the necessary legal procedures after the murder of the husband. In some of the laws mentioned above, it is clear that it is up to the woman herself to decide whether or not she wants to make the journey to the Thing. This is very important, for it shows that a woman's participation in public life was seen as a matter of practicality rather than as a matter of principle in the Old Norse culture as this culture is reflected in the oldest parts of the Norwegian Laws.

When discussing the position of women in public life in Old Norse times, their role with respect to cultic activities should also be mentioned. There were priestesses, *gydjer*, in Old Norse heathen times, although we do not know how common this was. Neither do we know exactly the kind of duties they had, as compared to the duties of the *godar*, male priests. It is commonly believed that the *gydjene* were only active in the private cult. It is not unproblematic to distinguish between private and public cult, since these two spheres often overlap. With the introduction of Christianity, the role of the *gydje*, the priestess, disappeared, a role which had been given women prestige. The question of whether this role was practiced in private, semi-private or in public sphere is open to debate. But the role of the priest, not open to women, was practised in public, and the training and knowledge attainable to men who had access to this role was to a large extent the admission ticket to public life in Christian culture¹³. There were also other women's roles, previously carried out in public or semi-public, which were lost to women after Christianization, partially as a result of the fact that they were attached to

12. *Eldre Gulatingslov*, chapter 51.

13. More on this in Mundal, 1983.

the practice of the old religion. These included the roles of the *volva*, the soothsayer, and to a certain extent, that of doctor, or healer, probably because medical arts and magic were associated with each other¹⁴. These women's roles which were associated with heathen cult or heathen traditions were not only forbidden to women. In Christian times, women who practised these roles were criminalized. The criminalization of traditional women's roles may also have strengthened the new ideas that women were, by nature, more sinful than men¹⁵.

Women's steadily reduced status in public life in the Old Norse period is a good example of the way in which two dissimilar trends in society worked together, in the undermining of the position of women. One of these trends is the erosion of the extended, clan family structure in society. In the course of this process, power and authority were transferred from the family in two different directions: 1) to the public sphere in the larger geographical area which made up a political unit, and 2) to the husband in the nuclear family. The other trend is represented by the new ideas and norms which accompanied Christian culture. In some cases, moreover, the new Christian norms and ideas probably had the side-effect of accelerating the first trend: that of the breakdown of the clan society. The prohibition of marriage between members of the same family closer than seven degrees – although reduced – probably had the side-effect of causing the disintegration of the clan system. This prohibition would in fact have that effect if the institution of marriage in the pre-Christian Old Norse period had been used, among other purposes, to strengthen bonds between various branches of a family. The prohibition against divorce also had the effect of breaking down the society of the extended family in that the married women's relation to their own families became weaker than it had been previously. On the other hand, the prohibition against divorce strengthened the nuclear family and the position of the husband in relation to the woman. The introduction of joint property between marriage partners had the same effect. When the woman no longer had the possibility to divorce, and no longer had rights over her own property, one can safely deduce that her husband had tightened his grip on her.

The role of women in public life in Old Norse society was fairly weak both before and after Christianization. I am not convinced, however, that their position was as weak as Jochens presents it. Neither am I convinced that the position of women in these matters did not change at all as a result of Christianization. Even though the changes may appear

14. See Mundal, Steinsland, 1989.

15. More on this in Mundal, 1996.

rather unassuming on the surface, they may be significant if they are the results of fundamental changes in how women came to be regarded. If practical reasoning for women's modest participation in public life was replaced by ideological reasoning, is this a considerable change although it is barely visible.

It is another matter that women's participation in public life may perhaps not be too reliable an indicator of their position in Old Norse society. The domain of women in Old Norse culture was the home, and the running of the household. What sort of position it gives in relation to society as a whole, to have a high position in the household, will depend on the importance of the household unit in the actual type of society. It is likely that in the period prior to the development of the larger political units with central Things – kingdoms, states, or whatever the term – the household unit was more important than it became later. It was the family that alone, in pre-Christian times, took upon itself the important task of making sure revenge was carried out in the aftermath of violent attacks against the family. Here, the women had a vital role as the instigators of revenge. In this role they acted from a real position of power¹⁶. Acts of revenge were discouraged both by the Church and by the king, and when such incidents increasingly became dealt with by judgements at the Thing and a fine replaced revenge, women lost their opportunity to influence the course of action. It seems, in the earliest Old Norse times and the period preceding these, that developments and changes in society caused public life to be more important than it had been in the earlier society which to a large extent was founded on the family. This development, which began before Christianization, did not work to women's advantage.

5

Church marriage legislation and its consequences for women

One would expect that the prohibition against polygamy, which the Church, according to all evidence, tried to enforce right from the start, would benefit women, and that this contributed to the raising of their status in society. On the whole there is no doubt that the prohibition against polygamy worked to the advantage of women, but the matter has several sides. It is a fact that the prohibition against polygamy did not put an end to its practice. Polygamy became illegal, true enough, but Medieval sources, particularly those from Iceland, show that many men, in addition to having a legal spouse, could also have one or several concu-

16. More detail on this in Mundal, 1994b.

bines. Conditions for concubines in society were no better under Christianity than they had been in heathen times. The Church sanctioned against extramarital cohabitation both for women and for men, but particularly in cases where the man also had a legally married wife. But the condemnation of the women was in many ways more severe and, above all, more visible. This becomes quite clear, for example, in the ceremony churching, which women who had just given birth had to undergo when she returned to the parish after the birth. Married women would be led into the church with all honours, whereas concubines were humiliated¹⁷.

In the pre-Christian Old Norse period, it was not a problem for both men and women to get divorced. We do not know for sure whether the Church began to activate against the right to divorce from the very beginning, or whether this took some time. The oldest Scandinavian source to document that the Church attempted to remove the rights to divorce is found in the so called *Canones Nidrosiensis*.¹⁸ In the tenth canon is written: «Those marriages which clergy and laymen enter into such a way that the children become legitimate and receive father's and mother's inheritance, but where it still permitted for the men, when they so wish, to divorce their wives are entirely forbidden and prohibited».

Whether this prohibition against divorce is one of the first serious indictment from the Church, or whether this fight against divorce has gone on for a while, the result is, in any case, that the right to divorce was gradually reduced in the subsequent period, and by the 1200s, it is as good as gone.

The wording of the tenth canon may be understood to the effect that it was men in particular who took advantage of the right to divorce, and who could unceremoniously send off their wives on a whim. If this was in fact the case, the dissolution of the right to divorce could represent a protection for women. The problem with this is that other source material, Old Norse saga literature and the laws, rather give the impression that it was the women in particular who made use of the right to divorce. Where the laws do document grounds for divorce, it is the women's grounds in particular which are mentioned. Violence from their husbands is adequate grounds for divorce. If a husband struck his wife more than three times in public, she could divorce him under Norwegian law¹⁹. Violence is also mentioned, under Icelandic law, as grounds for di-

17. More on this in Mundal, 1996, p. 98; Bagge, 1998, pp. 123 ff.

18. The document entitled *Canonis Nidrosiensis* is not reliably dated, but it is assumed to have been written between 1152 and 1188. See Gunnes, 1989, p. 82 (note). The Latin text with Norwegian translation is printed in Storm, 1880.

19. *Eldre Gulatingslov*, chapter 54, *Norges Gamle Lov I*; *Eldre Borgartings kristenrett II*, chapter 8, *Norges Gamle Lov I*.

voice. Moreover, if a husband forces his wife to leave the country, or causes her property to be sent abroad, against her will. Also other conditions would constitute grounds for divorce or separation²⁰.

When a woman's marriage rights were protected by the law, this was not only in the interest of the woman. Also the woman's family had an interest here. An injustice against a married woman would normally be treated as an injustice against her husband. But in the cases where the perpetrator of the attack was her husband, it was seen as an attack against the woman herself, and thus, against her family. An infringement against a woman's property was also seen as a violation against heirs. If there were no direct descendants, her own family would succeed to her property.

Blows and corporal punishment were seen as a most injurious violation of a free individual in Old Norse culture. It was only permissible to corporally punish slaves – and to some extent children – in Old Norse society. It was considered a grave defamation if a free individual was struck. If a man beat his wife – and she had a witness – she could claim just as large a fine as if it had been him who had been similarly abused²¹. The fact that the fourth blow gave the woman rights to divorce, strongly stresses the fact that, in Old Norse society, a woman had the right to be treated with respect by her husband. It has been argued that woman in Old Norse culture scarcely had her own honour, and that her honour depended on man's, and in the case of the married woman this meant her husbands' honour. The two of them shared their honour in solidarity²². This was, in all probability, the norm. But that the two in solidarity shared honour between them, functioned only as long as they treated each other with respect. The fact that an act of dishonour was adequate grounds for divorce indicates that women had their own honour to defend. The eradication of the right to divorce made it more difficult for the married woman to defend her own honour vis à vis her husband. In a society where people were ranked in accordance with degrees of honour or shame, this had great consequence.

The opportunity to divorce disappeared during the same period as the Church's view of marriage as a sacrament became established. The result of this new view of the Christian marriage was that the validity of the marriage bond was conditional upon the woman's consent to marriage. This gave women – at least in theory – a right which they had not had earlier, the right to refuse an undesirable marriage. From pre-Chris-

20. *Grágás* IB, pp. 39-44; *Grágás* II, pp. 168-74, 203-4.

21. *Eldre Gulatingslov*, chapter 54.

22. Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993, pp. 21 ff.

tian times in Old Norse culture, and up to the 1200s when new view of the Christian marriage became the norm, women in Old Norse society could be married against their will. The new understanding of marriage which required the woman's consent must have resulted in beneficial consequences for women. But the question remains as to the extent to which these benefits outweighed the disadvantages resulting from the eradication of the right to divorce. Even though the Church, in principle, wished to prevent forced marriages, there is the chance that when it came to practical actions, there was little the Church could do to help a woman who did not wish to marry the man to whom her father, or other male relatives, had promised her. It is even conceivable that the right to divorce had protected women from pressure from their relatives, and that more women were possibly pressured to marry against their will after they had attained the formal right to refuse, than had been the case earlier when they did not have that right.

6

New ideas about the nature of women, and the contrast to Old Norse thinking

Men and women were not regarded as equal in Old Norse culture. Very clear distinctions between gender roles existed in this culture. Women had their duties, and men theirs. Gender transgressions were taboo, but in reality only for men. If the situation demanded that a woman had to take over the man's tasks, she could gain honour if she managed to fill the male role. On the other hand, if a man performed a female role, however, this was regarded as a dishonour. In Old Norse culture, as we know it from written sources, there can be little doubt that the man's role was superior to that of woman's in power and prestige. The question remains to what degree this clearly demarcated superiority of the man's role could be the result of changes in societal structure, dating from early Norse time and the period preceding this. The home and the household were, in Old Norse times, the domain of the women. They were in charge *innan stokks*, within the four walls. The men represented the household in public, outside the home. If it is true to say that developments in the structure of society made this role more important than earlier, the male role would, in consequence, have acquired increased power and prestige whilst the opposite would have applied to the role of women in the period leading up to Old Norse times and in early Old Norse times. When we characterize the relationship between the sexes in Old Norse times, we have in part superiority/inferiority, where the man occupies the superior gender role. But the relationship between the male and the female

roles may also be seen as complementary. Both sexes had their tasks to carry out if society was to function satisfactorily.

The big question is whether the sharp delineation between women's and men's gender roles in Old Norse culture, and the superiority of the male role, were explained by the view that men and women had different characters and different abilities as a result of the biological differences between the sexes, or whether gender role demarcations mainly were motivated by practical considerations.

In Christian culture, supposed differences in character, abilities and intellectual competence between women and men were unequivocally tied to biological difference. The male represented the perfect human, the female was inferior to the male, having been formed from his rib. In patriarchal Christianity, she was less "Godlike" than the man, and the role of priesthood was closed to women because they were women. Like the first Eve, the woman had a weaker character than the man, she was more sinful. Moreover, the conception that menstruating or pregnant women were unclean, was introduced as a new idea together with the Christian culture. The notion of the unclean woman could, in fact, have extensive and negative consequences for women in their encounter with the Church. The most drastic outcome of this was that a woman who died whilst pregnant could be denied a Christian burial, with the attendant consequences this would have in terms of that time's way of thinking²³. The idea of women as naturally deficient as compared to men was systematised, and achieved a kind of "scientific" foundation when the biological theories of Aristotle became integrated into scholastic thought in the 1200s. According to these theories, woman was a deficient man, and woman's weak character and intellectual capacity became tied to the biological sex.

If we reconsider the Old Norse culture and take a look at the differences between the male and female gender roles there, interesting differences appear. Sure enough the male role appears in the Old Norse culture, also clearly superior in power and prestige to the female role, but in principle, the male role is not foreclosed to women. Women with no close male relatives could find themselves in situation where they would take over the role as head of the family, received inheritance and fines, and paid fines as if they were men. Such a woman was called *baugrýgr*, "a woman who has the right to/ is obliged to pay fines"²⁴. As we already have seen, there also were cases where a widow was expected to take over her deceased husband's role in society. In this culture they must have

23. More on this in Mundal, 1996, pp. 98 f.

24. More on this in Clover, 1986 and 1993.

considered women, when need be, capable of taking over men's roles, and at least fill most male roles so well that they took care of their own as well as the interest of the family in a proper way. This is a fairly strong indication that gender roles in Old Norse society were practically, rather than ideologically, motivated. Gender roles differed widely, and girls and boys were socialized into dissimilar roles which led to training in different areas. But a system which consistently regards women as "male-spare", who could, on short notice, be required to step into the man's place, has the conception that women, with regard to character and intellectual ability, was not radically different from the men. When one contrasts the Old Norse Creation myth with the Christian, moreover, it is possible to find support for this view in Old Norse mythology. In contrast to Eve, Embla is not created secondarily from Ask's rib for his pleasure and comfort. According to the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*, Ask and Embla are created simultaneously, and they receive exactly the same characteristics from the gods.

It may be open to debate whether the conception in pre-Christian Old Norse culture was that men and women were born with the same characters, abilities and qualities, or whether there were certain typically female characteristics. It is possible that the sources may support differing views.

We do have the well known stanzas of the Eddaic poem *Hávamál* (stt. 81-90) which describe women as being more capricious and unreliable than men. The wording of stanza 84 in particular can be taken to mean that women were created with the mentioned moral defects. As I have tried to show in an earlier work²⁵, it is quite easily explained against the background of the unclear family affiliation which befell women in the Old Norse society compared to men, that women could acquire such a reputation. In cases where the man's family was in conflict with the woman's, nobody would blame a man for siding with his own family. But the woman was a second-rate member of her own as well as of her husband's family. Her siding would be determined more by her feelings than by setting norms in society. Thus it was not easy to predict the actions a woman would take, but whomever she chose, the other side would blame her for betraying them. We should not underestimate Old Norse society by assuming that they did not realize this. If we read a little further in *Hávamál*, we see, moreover, that the *skald* admits that men can be as treacherous as women.

While women were able to assume men's roles and gain honour thereby, the same was not permissible for a man without incurring dis-

25. Mundal, 1978.

honour. If one wanted to create the impression in Old Norse society that a man was not behaving in accordance with the requirements of the male gender role, one could accuse him of behaving like a woman, or describe him in a typically women's role. When a man was accused of being a woman, it was in fact a symbolic accusation which implied that he was not fulfilling his male role, that he was devoid of the requisite qualities, that he was cowardly, afraid, lacking in vigour, etc. This could perhaps be understood to mean that these characteristics were seen as symbolic of typically womanly attributes in Old Norse culture. This conclusion may, however, be a little hasty. What these "womanly" characteristics, stand for in such symbolic accusations used against men who lack the prerequisite male attributes in Old Norse culture, are in reality not the "womanly", but the opposite of «the manly», which is to say, «the unmanly». It is less than certain whether one can equate "womanly" when applicable to women, with "unmanly". This means that when a man had been symbolically accused of womanliness, with the implication of cowardice, it is not at all certain that this cowardice was regarded as a typically female character trait. But the female gender role did allow for – or require – a far more passive pattern of activity than did the male role. Passivity and lack of vigour were tolerated and seen as neutral aspects of the female role, but not in the male. In just such a way could a womanly pattern of activity come to symbolize unmanly characteristics.

It is nonetheless a fact that in Old Norse character portraits, one encounters the representation of the typically "female" in descriptions of unmanly men, and not in descriptions of women. When women appear in Old Norse literature, and if the author wishes to portray them in positivistic terms, they are described with the same positive character traits and qualities as men. So there are two set of behaviour patterns, one male and one female. But there does not exist two set of positive qualities and character traits that correspond with each their own genderpattern. There is only the one set of positive qualities and character traits, corresponding to the male gender pattern, according to which the women also are measured. This does not, of course, imply that as many women as men in Old Norse society were in possession of such typically male characteristics, required for the role of the hero: courage, strength of purpose, wisdom, etc. But when women are measured according to male norms, this does serve as a strong indication that men's and women's qualities were not regarded as fundamentally different from one another²⁶.

When Christian ideology introduced an understanding of women by

26. More on this in Mundal, 1998.

attributing to women other and more negative qualities and character traits than to men, and which taught that men and women possessed different characters and that differences in character and mental capacities were tied to the biological sex, than this ideology represented a marked break with Old Norse way of thinking. The new ideology was so different from the Old Norse ideology, that it was probably very difficult to accept. Consequently, it took a long time before it became fully effective. Nevertheless, the new ideology was present after Christianization as a steadily increasing pressure against the old ideas. In Old Norse literature, particularly in literature from the Late Middle Ages, one most likely finds authorial and narrative voices which quite openly oppose the official view of women in the Church. Point by point, the texts show how women may possess the same characteristics as do men²⁷.

The new ideas about women, integral to Christian ideology, came, in the long run, to undermine the Old Norse view of women. The fact that the new view of women was firmly anchored in society's religion, and that it assumed, with time, "scientific" proof through Aristotle's biological theories, gave it weight and authority. However, also the Old Norse view of woman was in all likelihood built on biological understanding, that is, on a view of biological inheritance which contrasted greatly with Aristotle's. While Aristotle maintained that the biological inheritance derived from the father, viewing the mother as a mere incubator supplying the embryo with nutrition from her menstrual blood, the Old Norse culture had apparently arrived at an understanding of a biological inheritance that completely equalized the inheritance from the mother and the father. It is not easy to determine from the sources whether their understanding was that women more often than men were passive carriers of the strong "masculine" characteristics, but in many cases women are portrayed as having the same character strength and ability to act as the male heir ought to display, and these women were the ideal. In Old Norse society one took note of the fact that sons as well as daughters, both with regard to appearance and character traits, could just as well resemble the mother and her familial line, as the father and they have drawn their conclusions accordingly. Following this logic, it was important that sons could inherit from the mother the strong "masculine" characteristics, needed by men in order to defend their position in Old Norse society. This necessity shaped the female ideal²⁸.

The Old Norse view on biological inheritance constitute the basis for a view of woman where woman with the same characteristics and intel-

27. Extensively discussed in Mundal, 1982.

28. Mundal, 1998.

lectual ability as the male heroes are the ideal in society. The new ideas about woman's nature would therefore with time, as they took hold, result in the undermining of the foundation itself for the Old Norse view of woman. Even though it took time before the new ideas became fully effective, the consequences have proved long-lasting. Indeed, we have struggled against these consequences almost up to our own time.

(Translation: Ann Torday Gulden)

Bibliography

- BAGGE S. (1998), *Mennesket i middelalderens Norge. Tanker, tro og holdninger 1000-1300*, Oslo.
- CLOVER C. J. (1986), *Maiden Warriors and Other Sons*, in "Journal of English and Germanic Philology", 85.
- EAD. (1988), *The Politics of Scarcity. Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia*, in "Scandinavian Studies", 60/2.
- Grágás* I-III (1974), 1852-83, Odense.
- GUNNES E. (1989), (note) in *Regesta Norvegica* 1, Oslo.
- JOCHENS J. (1986), *The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?*, in "Viator", vol. 17.
- EAD. (1995), *Women in Old Norse Society*, Ithaca-London.
- LESKY E. (1950), *Die Zeugungs- und Vererbungslehren der Antike und ihr Nachwirken*, Mainz.
- MEULENGRACHT SØRENSEN P. (1993), *Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne*, Aarhus.
- MUNDAL E. (1982), *Kvinnebilete i nokre mellomaldergenrar: Eit opposisjonelt kvinnesyn?*, in *The Eddaic Poems*.
- EAD. (1983), *Kvinner og diktning: Overgangen frå munnleg til skrifteleg kultur – ei ulukke for kvinnene?*, in S. Aðalsdóttir, H. Thorlákson (eds.), *Förändringar i kvinnors villkor under medeltiden* (Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 9), Reykjavík.
- EAD. (1994a), *Kvinner som vitne i norske og islandske lover i mellomalderen*, in G. Sigurdsson (ed.), *Sagnaping belgða Jónasi*.
- EAD. (1994b), *The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power*, in "Nora. Nordic Journal of Woman's Studies".
- EAD. (1996), *Korleis påverka kristninga og kyrkja kjønnsrollemønstra?*, in "Religion och Bibel LV. Nathan Söderblom-sällskapetets årsbok", Uppsala.
- MUNDAL E., STEINSLAND G. (1989), *Kvinner og medisinsk magi*, in Guneng G. (ed.), *Kvinnors Rosengård*, Stockholm.