

3. In December, the first roundtable on Disability in the Humanities was held at the MLA. Organizers have petitioned for a permanent session for next year. In May, a conference entitled "This Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Disability and the Arts" was held in Ann Arbor, and organizers have begun an Internet bulletin board on Disability in the Humanities.

## FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN OLD NORSE STUDIES

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The problem in Old Norse scholarship has not been the rediscovery of women but the interpretation of their varied representations. In the last two hundred and fifty years the options have ranged widely. In 1755 the Swiss author Paul-Henri Mallet, writing in French, treated the prehistory common to the nordic countries and illuminated by translations of Old Norse poetry. The idea of the nordic independent woman appeared for the first time in his work. Embracing Montesquieu's vision of the Germanic North as the fountain of political freedom among men, Mallet extended this privilege to women and added gender equality as another characteristic. Like other intellectuals of the eighteenth century, Mallet conflated the Germans and the Celts. Claiming descent from both peoples, French intellectuals espoused Mallet's ideas with enthusiasm and continued to entertain notions of liberty and equality for women in the North throughout the nineteenth century.

Mallet's vision was largely drawn from his intuitive reading of mythological and poetic sources. Joining the fray but focusing on the prose narratives, German scholars easily corroborated Mallet's conclusions about strong northern womanhood, because such heroines are found more readily in the Icelandic family sagas than in poetry. German scholars no longer extended these conclusions to the Celts, but they were eager to read the Norse sources as representing the entire Germanic family. They also accommodated the fundamental problem inherent in most Old Norse texts—that centuries separate events from inscription—by arguing that oral transmission kept information about the pagan age alive during many generations until it was inscribed beginning in the twelfth century. Set in pagan times, the family sagas were therefore believed to transmit a true picture of the pagan Germanic/nordic woman, an image to which Nazi ideology attached special significance.

During the generation following the end of the Second World War, Old Norse studies largely retreated to Iceland. Faith in oral tradition declined and historians lost interest in the narratives and in saga heroines. When literary critics occasionally dealt with these figures, they saw them not as flesh-and-blood women but as transmitters of single literary motifs, for example that of inciting, inserted in the texts according to the needs of the narrative and then dropped immediately after.

It is not surprising that the current woman's movement has generated a revival of interest in the strong nordic woman. The spectrum of possible interpretations now extends further than during the previous history. On the one hand, nordic feminists, best exemplified by the Icelandic Helga Kress, have argued for a female culture conveyed orally from time immemorial to the dawn of nordic history. Although severely damaged

by the emerging patriarchy manifested in native Viking culture and the male Christian hierarchy, this female culture left sufficient vestiges to allow for the construction of an ancient female hegemony. Helga Kress's most recent book, a survey of Old Norse literature, is thus entitled *Mighty Maidens (Mattugar meyjar, Reykjavik 1993)*.

The same year Carol Clover published a brilliant article in *Speculum* in which she moves in the opposite direction by arguing that Old Norse literature exhibits a society with only one gender constructed around the norms for masculine behavior. Gaining entry into this category through position of family and wealth, individuals needed to display physical and mental strength and to demonstrate ability to defend their honor throughout life. Most able-bodied men belonged in this category but they could lose their status in old age or through accusations of effeminacy. Identified by adjectives that normally describe powerful men, a few women, mainly wealthy widows or women known for their aggressive disposition, likewise gained access to this privileged category.

Although Clover earlier had contributed to aspects of an alleged female culture, her recent article corroborates Kress's other conclusion, the absorption of female culture within the male hegemony. Clearly, it must be seen as the ultimate victory of patriarchy when a society does not acknowledge behavior specific to female roles but only notices a few women able to perform according to male standards and, conversely, scorns men who engage in female conduct. The attempt to demonstrate a historical stage of female hegemony in the Old Norse world is no more convincing there than elsewhere. Clover is correct in identifying power as the most admired and powerlessness as the most feared feature in old Norse society. Because male leaders continued to be concerned with the very existence of their society and since its survival was best assured by their own skills, they developed a human ideal personified by those they judged best among themselves. Ignoring the efforts of half of the human population in the necessary tasks of reproduction and production, men could afford to admire only those women who conformed to male standards.

The Norse ideal of a powerful female might be compared profitably with the simultaneous European ideal of a beautiful woman as captured in "the male gaze." Whereas Norse society felt compelled to construct an ideal female figure according to the needs of society, in France—where life perhaps was less precarious—male authors could afford to imagine an ideal woman according to a male vision of female beauty. Epitomized by the writing of Chrétien de Troyes, this ideal has remained with us, but just as only a few modern women comply with the standards of Madison Avenue, so too only few Norse women met the requirements inherent in the ideal of male power. The category "woman" may not be useful in apprehending the status of a few Norse women, but the few admired women designated by attributes normally associated with males, cannot avoid the reality that the majority of women belonged to the powerless.

Perhaps future studies will be able to strike a balance between Kress's glorification and Clover's dismissal of women.

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