Helga Kress. *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga.* Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1993. 208 pages.

It is important to understand at the outset that *Máttugar meyjar* is not about "how it really was": "Ég er ekki að leita að sögulegum veruleika, hvað hafi í rauninni gerst, hvar og hvenær" [I am not seeking historical truth, what really happened, where and when] (9). What Helga Kress is seeking to uncover is rather the meaning of the feminine *within* the text — within a hermeneutic constituted by the texts themselves, with the assistance of various, more or less transhistorical, feminist theories. These are primarily the theories of the French theorists Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous, but Helga Kress also employs Edwin Ardener's theory of dominant and muted groups — a theory often found useful by scholars dealing with a body of texts of which few are actually composed by women. Within the parameters which Helga Kress sets herself, this book is surprisingly successful. The author is able to perform readings on a wide range of texts, from fornaldarsögur to eddic poetry, from family sagas to *Heimskringla* and Morkinskinna, without making many appeals to "real life," that is, to our notions of medieval Scandinavian society as constituted by historical texts, laws, family and contemporary sagas. However, when "real life" is invoked — the archaeological evidence cited on page 189 (13n3), for example — there is a suspicion of tendentiousness.

The book is aimed at the Icelandic general reader, and so the bibliography omits much written in languages other than Icelandic which would be relevant, works which Helga Kress has certainly read herself. The orientation towards a general audience means that hypothetical positions tend to be put forward as if they were proven fact; the supporting argumentation may follow some pages later. This is true of the surprising link made between the practice of *seiðr* and poetry on p. 23 for example; the connection is fully argued for only in the following chapter. Similarly on p. 13 we find pairs of cultural characteristics: the first element in the pair is displaced by the second after the conversion. The pairs are: pagan > Christian, oral > written, female > male. The reader suspects sleight-of-hand here — the displacement of pagan and oral culture by written and Christian culture is a truism, whereas the extinguishing of female by male culture is not. In fact the equivalence of pagan, oral, and female as characteristic of "early" eddic poetry — the heroic poems in particular — is argued for later. The introductory chapter in which these positions are stated is the weakest in the book. Useful ideas, for example that of the text as palimpsest — a notion which drives the book's slightly odd design — are thrown up in this chapter, but they are rarely carried forward into the close readings of texts which form the bulk of the book and which are more persuasive than the insufficiently evidenced theoretical observations. Notions of the feminine as signalled by linguistic disturbance, or by female speakers in particular genres such as the *spá* or *grátr,* or that Snorri's "skáldfíflshlut" is the space left in the poetic tradition for the marginalized and anonymous female poet, left out in the woods with the troll-women, are suggestive however and form a coherent theoretical framework for the later analysis.

The book advances then through close reading of texts: *Vǫluspá* may not entirely convince readers as a metatext about the end of women's culture, but the designation of this kind of oral poetry as multi-voiced, flexible, and fluid does work. The genres which, Helga Kress suggests, are "feminine" are those which are closest to the kinds of *écriture féminine* which the French theorists advocate, and which, as Cixous has suggested, need not be mapped precisely onto the biological sex of the putative composer. There are sharp analyses of the critical histories of both *Vǫluspá* and *Skírnismál,* but in general the readings of the mythological poetry seem overdetermined. Ringing assertions are made: "Undirstaða valdsins er þekkingin, og þekkingin felst í tungumáli" [The basis of power is knowledge, and knowledge is concealed in language] (62) — this in connection with *Hávamál,* but it is also clear that the knowledge of how to subjugate women is only a very small part of the wisdom pursued in that poem, and also that

Óðinn shows more respect for the wit of "Billings mær" than most other male protagonists would. This kind of reading "against the grain of the text," elsewhere so fruitful, is misleading here. In the further discussion of eddic poetry many shrewd points are made, though there is a tendency to recount plots without much analysis. The plot summaries can also be misleading — Oddrún seems very much more sisterly towards Borgný in Helga Kress's account than she does in *Oddrúnargrátr* itself — but the verdict on *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* — that Sigrún weeps Helgi back from the dead but he shows no gratitude since he would rather be spending eternity fighting in Valhǫll (94) — is nicely expressed.

From Chapter 4 on, attention is focussed on the fornaldarsögur and on family sagas. Here French theory is often pertinently deployed, for example in examining notions of the bodily. Parts of some later chapters — for example the analysis of Yngvildr in *Svarfdœla saga,* of troll-women in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and the related sagas of the Hrafnistumenn, or the writing on *Fóstbrœðra saga* are reworkings from earlier articles. These sections stand out as having been thoroughly considered and judiciously thought through, yielding genuinely productive interpretations.

The chapter on women poets — both real and fictionalized — is interestingly argued (Chapter 7, "Konur í karlahefð dróttkvæða," 161–74). Those female poets whose work has been preserved are "unfeminine," Helga Kress argues; that indeed is the condition of their preservation (163). By "unfeminine" she means that they fail to demonstrate the Kristevan female characteristics of metrical disruption, repetition, negativity, and so on, which the verses of the fictional dream-women of family and contemporary sagas display. Reference to Judith Jesch's more nuanced discussion of the female poets in *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 148–86, might have been helpful.

All in all, Helga Kress has achieved a coherent account of the feminine in Old Icelandic texts. Her close readings, though sometimes contentious, are acts of critical good faith: they are the articulation of "those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts" as Edward Said writes in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 53. Typical of the book is perhaps the final point. Discussing the famous account of Sturla Þórðarson's recitation of **Huldar saga* on board ship to the king and queen of Norway in *Sturlu þáttr,* the author points out that the anecdote about the men — the king and the Icelander — has survived, whereas the saga of the female has not. The rhetorical point offers a neat summation of the book's argument, but immediately the reader counters with "Yes, but . . . " What was *Huldar saga* anyway? Is the fornaldarsaga genre to be so easily equated with the feminine? Were older genres really in some sense "women's genres," and were men excluded from composition in them? A serious point is being made about the prospects for the survival of masculine and institutionalized history, patronized by kings, as against any female poetic composition, but the rhetoric has a journalistic flavour. The serious scholar will gain more from Helga Kress's earlier articles, but this book will still have to be taken into account by those who seek to discover how to deploy feminist critical practices in the reading of Old Icelandic texts.

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