HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Dying of Shame

An Interdisciplinary Study of The Emotion of Shame in The Islendingasögur

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

Alissa Kanaan

Febrúar 2016

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

Dying of Shame

An Interdisciplinary Study of The Emotion of Shame in The Islendingasögur

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

Alissa Kanaan

Kt.: 191087-4619

Leiðbeinandi: Sif Rikhardsdottir

Febrúar 2016

Abstract

Viking age and medieval Icelandic society has been sometimes referred to, among many other designations, as a “shame culture”. Shame and honour are consistently marked as opposites in the scholarship surrounding this topic, with no particular attempt at a justification; the idea seems to carry its own weight. The central role of honour has been amply demonstrated, but the place of shame within this culture remains relatively unstudied. With the flourishing of emotion studies over the course of the last few decades, and recent developments suggesting that much of our emotional make-up is universal, modern findings on shame can be applied to medieval Icelandic sources to determine the features of this emotion, its frequency and its place within a complex system of feud, violence and the pursuit of justice.

Specifically, the sources used in this thesis are the *Islendingasögur*, due to their focus on kinship relations and stories of feud, which provides fertile ground for the study of emotion in general and shame in particular. What we hope to show is the overwhelming, and oftentimes concealed presence of shame in the sagas – which reveals a lot about the real life society that produced them – and the ways in which shame interacted with other major contemporary values and concepts such as courage, revenge and loyalty.

Ágrip

Víkingaöldin og miðaldir íslensks samfélags hafa verið nefndar ýmsum nöfnum þ.á.m. „menning skammar". Skömm og heiður eru stöðugt sett upp sem andstæður í lærðum greinum án þess að nokkur tilraun sé gerð til réttlætingar á því; en sú hugmynd virðist því eiga að standa undir sínum eigin þunga. Lykilhlutverk heiðurs hefur verið fyllilega útlistað og rætt en skömmin innan menningarinnar er að mestu leyti órannsökuð. Tilfinningafræði hefur blómstrað undanfarna áratugi og hafa niðurstöður þeirra fræða sterklega gefið til kynna að stór partur af tilfinningalífi okkar sé alþjóðlegur, óháð tíma. Nútíma rannsóknir á skömm geta veitt nýju ljósi á þessar íslensku miðalda heimildir til að ákvarða helstu þætti þessarar tilfinningar, tíðni hennar og stöðu innan flókins samfélags deilna og átaka í leitinni að réttlæti.

Heimildirnar notaðar í þessari ritgerð eru Íslendingasögur, vegna þess hve þær einblína á frændsemi og sögur um deilur, sem skapar frjóan jarðveg fyrir rannsóknir á tilfinningum almennt og þá sérstaklega skömm. Það sem við vonumst til að sýna er yfirþyrmandi og oft á tíðum dulin nærvera skammar í íslendingasögunum - sem gefur margt til kynna varðandi samfélagið sem skapaði þær – og þær birtingarmyndir sem skömm tók í samskiptum við samtíma gildi og hugtök líkt og hugrekki, hefnd og tryggð.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Not all that much has been said about emotions in the Icelandic sagas and the interest in the topic is only a few decades young. This reluctance on the part of saga scholars to delve into emotion studies is easy to understand: The sagas, at least at first glance, do not offer very much in the way of psychological descriptions and as a result, the characters may at times seem almost two-dimensional. The writing consists primarily of actions and dialogue, some of which may cause the uninitiated reader to shiver at how devoid of compassion, of empathy and of love a saga hero could seem. This tends to create in him/her a mental gap between modern western society and saga culture, in turn unfairly projected on the real life society of medieval Iceland. But things are not always as they seem, and reasons have been suggested to explain the slightly odd – to the modern reader – writing style of the saga authors. Professor Torfi Tulinius compares Medieval Iceland to France at around the same period and posits that Medieval Icelandic literature had never found a precursor to the art of describing its characters' inner lives, like the French one did in the Troubadour tradition; and that instead, its literary ancestor was Skaldic poetry, which favored riddles and euphemisms over lyricism and metaphors.[1] This is one of the reasons. The other is cultural and stems from the society itself: a society with soaring ideals and, on the other side of them, what today might be understood as complexes, where certain behavioral models took up so much room that they now serve as the identifiers of this bygone community most often described as an "honour culture". This was a world of polar opposites – the glorification of peace and violence at the same time, for instance – with a yearning for balance and justice. Men were measured against other men, slander against death, and death against money[2]. So how did emotions, fickle as they are, fit into such a strict order?

Of course medieval Icelanders experienced emotions, this can hardly be put into question; if modern studies are finding animals to be capable of emotions as complex as empathy and grief, then there can be little doubt left that members of our own species a

---

1 Tulinius, Torfi H. "Grettir and Bjartur: Realism and the Supernatural in Medieval and Modern Icelandic Literature." *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 20 (2011): 16-17.

2 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

few centuries ago would share our own ability to feel.[3] But in the saga literature, emotions were repressed and their display viewed as a weakness, belonging to the domain of the feminine, which as we will see is plagued with many negative connotations. On that note, we must specify that the saga literature is highly restrictive in terms of which gender, age group and social class are represented; and what is primarily represented is men of a certain social standing. This is very limiting to the purposes of our research, but informative at the same time. And granted, using literature as a gateway to try and understand the real people behind it has been criticized by many, but scholars like William Ian Miller, Arnved Nedkvitne and Carol Clover have successfully drawn some very convincing conclusions from what they could gather from the sagas, in conjunction with other written sources such as legal documents. However, we will refrain from extending our analysis to the society as a whole, and consider the probability that the reality was a lot more complex than any understanding of the material we can claim to have reached.

Precisely, what concerns us is the emotion of "shame". Many social historians have marked "shame" and "honour" as opposites like it was matter of fact to do so and the opposition does seems to stand on its own without requiring further explanation. Few would argue that "honour" was not central to the saga universe, hence the importance of giving "shame" the attention it deserves in the saga context. Regarding the opposition with the concept of "honour", we will propose our own explanation, in hopes that it might shed some light on the issue at hand. Additionally, we have chosen to work strictly with the *Islendingasögur* corpus, again for practical reasons first, and because it is a genre where the family takes center-stage, along with the interpersonal relationships between members of the same household and between different kinship groups. Needless to elaborate, familial and social ties represent an ideal setting for the manifestation of emotions. Professor Ármann Jakobsson has used the term "family dramas" and expressed his concern that very few scholars have shown an interest in the psychological analysis of the *Islendingasögur* characters.[4] Other scholars who have

---

[3] The Economist team. "Animal Minds". *The Economist*, December, 2015. http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21676961-inner-lives-animals-are-hard-study-there-evidence-they-may-be-lot-richer-science-once-thought.

[4] Ármann Jakobsson. '"Egils saga" and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family.' *Scandinavian Studies* 80, No. 1, (2008): 1-18.

applied psychoanalysis in order to better understand the *Islendingasögur* include Torfi Tulinius, Russell Poole and Carolyne Larrington. William Ian Miller and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen have also offered invaluable insight into saga mentality.

Regarding our specific topic, shame in the *Islendingasögur*, a full account has yet to be written. But a number of scholars have broached the topic. For example, William Ian Miller has studied the place of "humiliation" in the sagas, and Bernard Williams has provided a parallel to the "shame culture" – which is sometimes merely another way of saying "honour culture" – of the *Islendingasögur* in the literature of Ancient Greece, where another "shame culture" is portrayed, in his book entitled "Shame and Necessity".

The study of "shame" as an emotion within our chosen corpus is challenging to say the least, as it is overwhelmingly present and at the same time nowhere to be found. To clarify, the risk of "shame" is omnipresent but the saga heroes refuse to give in to the emotional consequences of "shame" on the self. "Shame" was another medieval Icelandic weapon, and a dangerous one at that. As soon as "shame" was inflicted on a saga character with any regard for his/her honour, he/she would redirect their focus on returning the blow, thereby either delaying "shame" in its final form or avoiding it completely by winning the war, not only the battle, and oftentimes death came before a resolution and it was not exactly clear who had won.

Consequently, extensive accounts of people experiencing "shame" were quite rare, though not altogether absent, whence we can infer that this was not a case of collective denial, but rather an indication of a certain attitude toward "shame" which predominated in the *Islendingasaga* mentality, where it was implicitly prescribed that shame should be avoided at all costs.

Historians Peter and Carol Stearns invented a different approach to the study of emotions throughout history, called "emotionology" and defined thus:

> The attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct, e.g., courtship practices as expressing the valuation of affect in marriage, or personnel workshops as reflecting the valuation of anger in job relationships.[5]

[5] Stearns, Peter N. and Carol Z. "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards." *The American Historical Review* 90, No. 4, (1985): 813.

This is a useful tool for looking at emotions in the middle ages, considering that modern society is conditioned by its own emotionology which it cannot help but perceive as the norm[6]. Becoming aware of such constraints paves the way toward a more objective view of medieval emotional values and practices. Perhaps then we could isolate the emotion of "shame" while applying the same approach and study the "shameology" of the *Islendingasögur*. How was "shame" perceived within the saga context? What did it look like? What role did it play in relation to honour and violence and, since we are in the presence of an equilibrium-minded society where everything had its fair price – at least according to the saga ideal –, how much did "shame" cost?

[6] The Stearnses give the example of the centrality of romantic love in modern western society, and remind the reader that it is a constructed ideal. (Emotionology. P. 823).

1. Emotion and Shame

What is an emotion? For something which is experienced by everybody on a daily basis, the concept is more elusive than expected. The Stearnses define it as "a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated through neural and/or hormonal systems, which gives rise to feelings (affective experiences as of pleasure or displeasure) and also general cognitive processes toward appraising the experience; emotions in this sense lead to physiological adjustments to the conditions that aroused response, and often to expressive and adaptive behavior."[7] That is a lot of information to take in, and understandably so: emotions are intricate phenomena at least as old as humanity itself. They are mutually recognizable across different cultures[8] and cover a wide spectrum ranging from the simpler, more intuitive emotions such as joy or disgust, to the ones which are sometimes said to be a combination of two or more primary emotions[9], and which certainly require the use of one's cognitive skills, such as empathy or jealousy. An emotion does not exist under any pure, fixed form. It is acted upon by several factors: physiological, neurological, cultural or other. It is often a temporary state and it can be either expressed or not, depending on the circumstances.

As early as in the antiquity, there has been an attempt to interpret emotions from a medical standpoint. Hippocrates' theory of the humors posited that a person's health and emotional state hinged on the balance between a number of fluids inside the body, and when that balance was disrupted, emotions would swell within oneself and require to be released before the balance could be resorted again. This principle has survived for a long time – into the 20th century and beyond – in theories such as the "hydraulic" model, which compares emotions to liquids in need of an outlet, Darwin's "nerve-force" and Freud's "impulses".[10] The same principle can be found in the *Islendingasögur*. In *Fóstbræðra saga* for instance, when the more reckless of the two sworn brothers falls in battle, after having exhibited great courage and strength, the following is said of him:

> Svá segja sumir men, at þeir klyfði hann til hjarta og vildu sjá, hvílíkt væri, svá hugprúðr sem hann var, en menn segja, at hjartat væri harla lítit, ok hǫfðu sumir menn þat fyrir satt, at minni sé hugprúðra manna hjǫrtu en huglaussa, því at menn kalla minna blóð í litlu hjarta en miklu, en

---

7 Stearns, Peter N. and Carol Z. P. 813.
8 Ekman, Paul, "Are there Basic Emotions?" *Psychological Review* 99, No. 3, (1992): 550-553.
9 Lewis, Michael. *Shame: the Exposed Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), P. 39.
10 Rosenwein, Barbara H. "Worrying about Emotions in History." *American Historical Review* 107 No. 3, (2002): 834-835.

> kalla hjartablóði hrælzlu fylgja, ok segja menn því detta hjarta manna í brjóstinu, at þá hræðisk hjartablóðit ok hjartat í manninum.[11]
>
> (Some people say that he had shown such courage that they cut him open to see what kind of heart lay there, and that it had been very small. Some hold it true that a brave man's heart is smaller than that of a coward, for a small heart has less blood than a large one and is therefore less prone to fear. If a man's heart sinks in his breast and fails him, they say it is because his heart's blood and his heart have become afraid.)[12]

A later chapter tries to explain what, by today's standards, is quickly recognizable as the emotion of jealousy: a slave by the name of Lodin is troubled when the woman he is romantically involved with, Sigrid, starts paying less attention to him and more to other men.

"He felt that she did not twine her fingers around his neck as she used to and that made him angry. A man's anger resides in his gall, his life-blood in his heart, his memory in his brains, his ambition in his lungs, his laughter in his spleen and his desire in his liver."[13]

Thus, according to some medieval Icelanders, emotions were contained within the person to begin with. Blood carried one's fear and bile held one's anger, and outside factors were able to draw these emotions out of the person. This alludes to the presence of a certain level of interest in understanding emotions and an awareness of how strong a hold they could have over an individual.

1.1 Universalism vs. Social constructionism

Nowadays we have a better understanding of emotion, thanks to major developments in fields as diverse as psychology, neurology, history and anthropology. But at the same time things have become quite complicated as different schools of thought emerged, with diverging opinions on the nature of emotions and the way these occur.

Most notable is the disagreement between the universal approach and the school of social constructionism. Universalists believe that emotions are the product of our evolution and that they are the same at their core in all people. Paul Ekman, who has

---

[11] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VI. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 210-211.

[12] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales* (Reykjavik, Iceland: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997) Vol. II P. 368.

[13] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales* (Reykjavik, Iceland: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997) Vol. II, P. 374.

successfully proven the existence of a number of what he calls "basic emotions", common to all human beings and mutually recognizable through facial expressions and body language, defends the universal approach thus:

> Emotions are a product of our evolution, with some biological givens. This position does not deny the important role of culture and social learning processes in every aspect of emotion – the control of expressions, the symbolic representation of emotional experience, how one evaluates emotion-relevant situations, attitude about one's own emotions, how one copes with emotion, and so on – but it is not a totally malleable system. There are constraints as a result of our evolution.[14]

The opposing view, i.e. the social constructionist theory, is wary of the risk of oversimplifying emotional categories, and is especially concerned with how differently emotions might be experienced in different cultures. In "The Social Construction of Emotions", a collection of articles written by a number of colleagues who share his views on the subject, Rom Harré writes:

"We must be careful to suspend any assumptions we may have about the viability of cross-cultural translations of vocabularies and interpretations of practices, upon which any nativist theory of universal emotions must depend, to wait upon proper and careful empirical research."[15]

To the social constructionist, the fact that emotions are linked to very specific cultural elements such as language and the local moral values – especially since many emotions can only occur in relation and in reaction to other people – should prove it impossible to fully understand emotions outside of their immediate context.[16]

Historian Barbara H. Rosenwein, in her book entitled "Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages", warns against the way supporters of the universal view run the risk of attributing superiority to Western societies in portraying their own emotional categories as the standard. "Assumptions about the internal wellsprings of emotions," she writes, "were the products not of objective observation but of Western culture's bias in favor of the 'autonomous individual.'"[17]

All of the scholars who contributed to Barbara Rosenwein's book seem to agree that emotions in the Middle Ages differ from emotions in the modern western world, for

---

[14] Ekman, Paul, "are there basic emotions" P. 550.
[15] Harré, Rom. ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), P. 5.
[16] *Idem*, P. 6.
[17] Rosenwein, Barbara H., ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998), P. 236.

the simple reason that the social, political and religious order was different, and therefore the norms regulating the display of emotions were different too.[18] While this is certainly true, and no one can deny the fruitfulness of studying emotions in their rightful context, it is nevertheless a mistake to be so focused on the differences as to lose track of the similarities, especially in light of the modern findings in support of the universal approach.

1.2 An Alternative Model

There are, however, alternative models to the study of emotions and especially their study across different cultures. One must simply shift the focus from the search for the origin and nature of an emotion, to the analysis of its place and its role within a system. Emotions are interactive things after all, and most of them rely on the presence of the other; from an evolutionary perspective this was their main purpose: communication. And regarding emotion categories, Michael Lewis, for instance, suggests that instead of distinguishing between basic and secondary emotions, one should instead differentiate between simpler emotions and emotions that require a more complex cognitive process.[19]

1.3 What is Shame?

"Shame" is an example of one such complex emotion. A considerable portion of recent studies on "shame" places it at the center of human existence, emphasizing its importance in maintaining social hierarchies and social order, and in preventing behavior detrimental to the social bond. This position fits very well into the world of the *Islendingasögur*.

Whether "shame" then and in today's western society are exactly the same is a debate we do not wish to engage in. By all measurable accounts, "shame" *does* vary across cultures and across different social groups or age groups; indeed it varies within the same individual depending on the situation that triggered it. Boris Cyrulnik, for instance, differentiates between what he calls "big shame" and "small shame", the

---

[18] *Idem*, P. 242-243.

[19] Lewis, Michael; Haviland-Jones, Jeannette M.; Barrett, Lisa Feldman, eds., *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), P. 744.

former type being considerably harder to cope with.[20] This is to be expected from an emotion that depends on an audience – be it real or imagined or a combination of the two – to let us know when we have failed to meet a certain standard. Therefore "shame" is dependent on many external factors, as well as on one's personal level of resilience. However, the mechanism by which "shame" appears, gradually, in the mind's eye, by triggering a thought process which results in the alteration of one's view of oneself, remains the same. It is something that all of the shamed across time and history share in common.

"Shame" is not typically included among the "basic emotions" of the universalists. It is a younger emotion within the scope of a person's lifetime, emerging later in childhood, when the toddler is able to differentiate between him/herself and the outside world and experiences a "new understanding of self"[21]. What this new understanding entails is the realization that from then on the self will be vulnerable to the judgement of others, and to the feelings of inadequacy that might ensue, on the other extreme of which we find the very pleasant state of general self-appreciation, otherwise known as pride.

This shame/pride pair belongs to a larger category of self-evaluative emotions. Other emotions belonging to the same group include guilt – shame's sister emotion –, embarrassment and hubris. They stem from the individual's evaluation of his actions and behavior against a set of standards, rules and goals (SRGs), acquired early-on in life due to the influence of authority figures – such as one's parents – and incorporated into the self until they are perceived as the self's own personal values. This category of emotions does not respond to any single trigger like the so-called basic emotions tend to do; before a self-evaluative emotion can be fully experienced, the subject must first undergo a cognitive process through which he then decides how his behavior compares to his SRGs. They cannot be chemically induced either, the way a basic emotion like joy or anger can. Moreover, unlike basic emotions, self-evaluative emotions are not easily recognizable through facial expressions, although posture and general body

---

[20] Espace des sciences. "Le théâtre intime de la honte." YouTube video, 1:50:18. October 14, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j0dz9aHGRg

[21] Sroufe, Alan L. *Emotional Development: the Organization of Emotional Life in the Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), P. 199.

language may hold some clues to their occurrence.[22] Specifically in the manifestation of the emotion of "shame", Michael Lewis notes "a lowering of the head and/or eyes, "collapsing bodies," tense posture with a stilling of one's behavior, and disingenuous smiles."[23]

1.4 The Shaming Gaze

Because of "shame's" function as a self-evaluative emotion, its stakes are high: "shame" and guilt are what happens when the self, post introspection, finds itself to be incompatible with its incorporated SRGs. But there is one major difference between the two emotions: while guilt targets an isolated transgression committed by the self, and typically results in a desire to make amends, "shame" targets the self as a whole and results in feelings of extreme inadequacy and a desire "to hide, to disappear, or even to die".[24] This particularity of "shame" has been explained from an evolutionary perspective by Charles Darwin, who posited that "shame" is primarily visual; that it has to do with being seen as much as with being judged. His position is as follows:

> It is, however, probable that primeval man before he had acquired much moral sensitiveness would have been highly sensitive about his personal appearance, at least in reference to the other sex, and he would consequently have felt distress at any depreciatory remarks about his appearance; and this is one form of shame. And as the face is the part of the body which is most regarded, it is intelligible that any one ashamed of his personal appearance would desire to conceal this part of his body. The habit having been thus acquired, would naturally be carried on when shame from strictly moral causes was felt; and it is not easy otherwise to see why under these circumstances there should be a desire to hide the face more than any other part of the body.[25]

Darwin's theory has been taken up by many, including the psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, who writes:

> Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at: in one word, self-conscious. One is visible and not ready to be visible; which is why we dream of shame as a situation in which we are stared at in a condition of incomplete dress, in night attire, 'with one's pants down'. Shame is early expressed in an impulse to bury one's face, or to sink, right then and there, into the ground. But this, I think, is essentially rage turned against the self. He who is ashamed would like to force the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure. He would like to destroy the eyes of the world. Instead he must wish for his own invisibility.[26]

---

22 Lewis, Michael; Haviland-Jones, Jeannette M.; Barrett, Lisa Feldman, eds., *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), P. 742-743.

23 Sroufe, Alan L. *Emotional Development*, P. 200.

24 Lewis, Michael. *Shame: the Exposed Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), P. 15.

25 Darwin, Charles; Mead, Margaret (preface). *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), P. 377.

26 Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society* (London: Paladin Books, 1977), P. 227.

Still on the subject of the shaming gaze, Bernard Williams, who has much to say about the shame-culture of ancient Greece, observes that "The basic experience connected with "shame" is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. It is straightforwardly connected with nakedness, particularly in sexual connections. The word *aidoia*, a derivative of *aidos*, "shame", is a standard Greek word for the genitals, and similar terms are found in other languages. The reaction is to cover oneself or to hide, and people naturally take steps to avoid the situations that call for it."[27]

But this hiding of the self might have served an evolutionary function as well: it is a type of behavior reminiscent of "cringing" in animal species as varied as the chimpanzee, the rat, the elephant, the wolf and the salamander, and is classified as submissive. Submissive behavior can facilitate conflict resolution by appeasing the aggressor or potential aggressor, thereby maintaining social harmony and prosperity.[28]

1.5 The Compass of Shame

Having demonstrated the process by which "shame" comes to exist, its potential sources and what it might look like, let us now consider its consequences on the shamed individual's behavior. Ultimately, let us see whether it is possible to rid oneself of "shame".

Michael Lewis has conducted a number of case studies with the purpose of identifying the different situations in which "shame" might arise. He has noted what he calls a "humiliated fury" – or, in more direct terms, anger – antisocial behavior and narcissism to be common reactions to the experience of "shame".[29]

Dr. Donald Nathanson, in an interview recorded in Washington D.C. in 2003, spoke about a "compass of shame", or the four possible ways in which the self may choose to react to "the information that "shame" wants us to consider", when that information is too much to handle with objectivity. The compass looks like this:

---

[27] Williams, Bernard. *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), P. 78.

[28] Tracy, Jessica L. and Matsumoto, David. "The Spontaneous Expression of Pride and Shame: Evidence for Biologically Innate Nonverbal Displays." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105, No. 33 (2008): 11655.

[29] Lewis, Michael, *Shame: the Exposed Self*, P. 15-20.

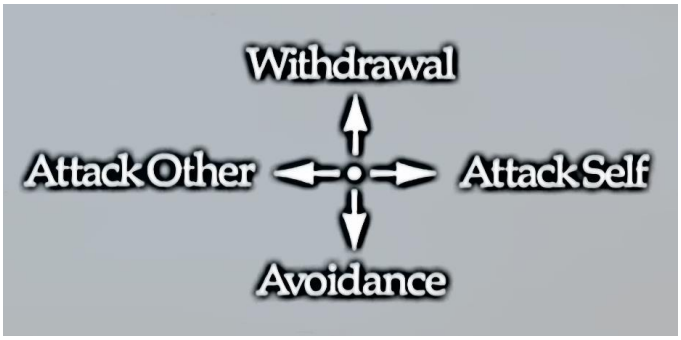

Fig. 1

On one side, the two self-explanatory poles he calls "withdrawal" and "attack self" are conducive to "living a diminished life", in which the individual surrenders to the destructive potential of "shame" and makes him/herself small and unimportant. On the other extreme we find "avoidance" and "attack other". When choosing "avoidance", the target sees "shame" coming but utterly refuses to acknowledge it. Instead he/she may turn to an excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs or to any distraction deemed effective enough. As a last resort, and when all other coping mechanisms fail, the "shame" target begins to attack other people in an attempt to make them feel just as dreadful.[30]

Psychiatrist James Gilligan can shed some light on that last point, having studied the relationship between "shame" and violence. What he has found is that individuals who experience great "shame" are capable of great violence. He spoke in particular of a type of jaded criminal who will systematically use the phrase "they disrespected me" when asked why he/she had assaulted somebody. The phrase was so commonly spoken that eventually "disrespected" was abbreviated to "dissed"; this, according to Gilligan, is very telling of the centrality of the concept of respect – and hence of the preservation of a certain level of self-worth – in the life of this type of individual.[31] The justification for violence produced above will strike a surprisingly familiar tone among the readers of the *Islendingasögur*, where insults and not only physical harm were considered to be a serious offence, sometimes punishable by law. Such attitudes are indicative of an extreme aversion to "shame". Comparing Nathanson's view with Lewis', we can fairly

[30] Learning Stewards. "The Compass of Shame." YouTube video, 2:59. April 7, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ1fSW7zevE

[31] Lauren Hatvany. "James Gilligan, Shame / Pride." YouTube video, 2:17. June 30, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw5STwOYouM&list=PL8E24030243314982

painlessly match anger with the "attack other" pole, antisocial behavior with "withdrawal" and narcissism with "avoidance". Incidentally, regarding narcissism Lewis writes that it is "the ultimate attempt to avoid shame."[32]

We may conclude from all of the above that "shame" is an emotion that consumes its host entirely. Try as one might, there is no escape from "shame". This is not to say that there is no such thing as bearable "shame", but attempts to be completely "shame"-free are really only ways to delay the blow, and often coincide with ways to worsen it. Indeed, "shame" is so powerful, and so entrenched in the social aspects of our lives, that it can be felt by association. A parent, for instance, may feel "shame" on behalf of their offspring. Associative "shame" is particularly manifest in cultures where honour plays a central role, similar to the one depicted in the *Islendingasögur*.

We will end this chapter on "shame" with the words of Michael Lewis, who has among other things studied "shame" comparatively, both in different cultures and at different times. "My conclusion", he says, "is both reassuring and alarming. Shame is universal. To feel shame is normal. There is comfort here. But too little or too much shame may produce unique difficulties. Some cultures and some times seem to produce more shame than others—and concomitantly more narcissistic disorders and violent behavior."[33]

[32] Lewis, Michael, *Shame: the Exposed Self*, P. 15.
[33] *Idem*, P. 30.

2. Honour-based Societies

Let us now turn our attention to the social environment that produced the material which is the grounds for our research i.e. the *Islendingasögur*. Most of the sagas of Icelanders are believed to have been written in the 13th century, but the time they reflect is the hundred years that followed A.D. 930, year when Iceland knew its first settlements.[34] It can therefore be argued that the reality on the ground during the period when the sagas were written and the reality portrayed within the sagas are two distinct features. While that is a reasonable assumption, the world depicted within those stories provided historical roots and a moral foundation to those who committed it to writing, as well as their intended public – which we presume to be quite large, considering the well-established popularity of the sagas. Aside from their undeniable value as entertainment pieces, sagas were used to educate and moralize, as shown through comparative analysis by philosopher and historian Alasdair Macintyre. "In all those cultures," he observes, "Greek, medieval or Renaissance, where moral thinking and action is structured according to some version of the scheme that I have called classical, the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories."[35] This "classical scheme" he speaks of adopts a teleological model of thinking, applicable to medieval Iceland, and in which it is strongly believed that everything has a final cause – within the Icelandic sagas, we can sense that through the way the concept of fate plays a major role. Therefore any classical-minded society suffered a discrepancy "between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature."[36] There is already the potential for "shame" in that statement.

The point we would like to stress is that the morality on the ground in medieval Iceland and the morality of the *Islendingasögur* could not have been all that different, and it is impossible to study one independently from the other. Still, as we mention it in our introduction, due to the sagas' bias in favor of men of a certain social class, we will refrain from generalizing.

---

34 Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), P. 121.
35 Ibid.
36 Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, P. 52.

2.1 Morality and Social Order

What do we know (or claim to know) about the social reality of Iceland in the Middle Ages? The terms "honour-based", "heroic" and "shame society" are all frequently employed to describe it, so do they all emphasize the same thing? What does it say about the relationship between "shame" and honour? How does revenge fit into the equation and why the constant need for it? More toward the purpose of this thesis; what were the moral standards of medieval Icelanders?

According to Macintyre, the heroic society is characterized by a somewhat precarious balance which depended on the unanimous agreement that everyone had their place within the social system. One's social status was predetermined namely by kinship and household affiliation, including one's position within the household. This knowledge instructed each individual as to "what he owes and what he is owed" in relation to people of a similar as well as of a different social status. He does not use the word "knowledge" lightly; morality, in his view and within this specific context, is equated with "social fact". This means that members of this type of society drew information regarding their identity and the proper conduct that went along with it from their prescribed "place in the social order".[37] They simply knew how to act and how not to act and that knowledge could be extended onto others. This is not to say that the instructions were always followed to the letter, but the sentiment was there, and if anyone failed to meet their social standard the consequences for such a failure, too, were well known.

Macintyre uses language to point out how pervasive these societal conditions were. "In Greek (*dein*) and in Anglo-Saxon (*abte*) alike," he notes, "there is originally no clear distinction between 'ought' and 'owe'; in Icelandic the word 'skyldr' ties together 'ought' and 'is kin to'."[38] And most of the time what the individual owed was actions. "A man in heroic society", following Macintyre's observations, "is what he does."[39]

But most of all, a heroic society is defined by a particular set of "virtues", such as courage and all that is related to it, friendship and loyalty. The fragility of life – and

[37] Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, P. 123.
[38] Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, P. 122.
[39] *Ibid*.

one must have truly felt that fragility in medieval Iceland, with its harsh climate and limited resources – made it into a precious commodity, and heroic societies teemed with high rollers ready to risk their own lives and gamble away the lives of others too. Thus the duty of the virtuous man, as well as the ultimate proof of his worth, was his ability to make sure that the death of a kinsman would never be left unavenged.[40] Frequently, – or almost continuously in the case of the sagas – such an event would trigger a cycle of killings spanning several generations and ending only once an alternative solution was successfully employed, as provided for instance by the legal option of paying the *weregild*, a monetary compensation for lives lost. These are some of the inner workings of the characteristic medieval Icelandic feud.

One irony of this system of values was that the most virtuous men i.e. the ones with the most friends and kinsmen, were also the most likely to lose their lives in order to validate any potential losses among the lives of their social allies. But as Macintyre puts it, coming to terms with this was "itself a virtue", as well as a sign of great courage.[41]

2.2 The Elements of a "Shame Culture"

We shall rather use the term "shame culture" in reference to medieval Icelandic society, to match the topic of this thesis, but many other denominations have been employed, such as "feud culture", "honour-based", and "heroic". These are all ways to describe, essentially, the same thing, only a different cultural aspect is emphasized each time. In case this gives rise to an impression of discontinuity within the general field of research on the subject, one might find solace in knowing that all of these different accounts, having looked at the same material from different lenses, are more often than not very much in tune with each other when it comes to the findings.

Miller, for instance, joins a number of medievalist and early modern historians in opting not to try and define the term "feud", listing instead its main characteristics – as it is nevertheless important to be able to distinguish feud from other violent activities such as war or duels.[42] Macintyre does the same thing when he introduces the concept

---

[40] Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, P. 124.
[41] *Ibid*.
[42] Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 180.

of a heroic society in "After Virtue". Historian Arnved Nedkvitne talks about a "warrior culture" but maintains the same analytical approach and looks at its composing elements first and foremost.[43] Bernard Williams, when using the denomination of "shame culture", never implies that "shame" was the most important cultural feature in this type of society, but rather looks into the ways in which "shame" interacted with other cultural elements.[44] What ensues is a satisfyingly consistent classification of what makes up a society such as the one depicted in the Icelandic sagas.

So far we have briefly considered some of the components of a shame-culture as discussed above, namely courage and loyalty. Without a doubt, a member of this society was in critical need of courage, especially a man of respectable status and especially if he was to perform the costly duties that went along with that status. Courage was closely associated with masculinity. Any *Islendingasaga* is guaranteed to bring up the concept of courage, either in praise or in affront, especially in relation to its major characters. Cowards were the object of contempt, verbal abuse or even physical punishment in the saga context. Conversely, courage was so greatly emphasized that at times it seemed almost comical.

For instance, *Fóstbræðra saga* features an anecdote about the two main characters, Þormóður and Þorgeirr. The episode can be found in the *Flateyjarbók* version of the saga and recalls an incident which occurred while the two foster brothers were gathering angelica plants over on some cliffs. While his foster brother was gone, Þorgeirr suddenly lost his footing and fell, grabbing on to one of the plants as he did so, and hanging there quietly and calmly, for he "feared absolutely nothing"[45], not even his own death. Once Þormóður noticed his foster brother's absence, he headed back to where he left him. What ensues is a witty back-and-forth of cryptic remarks drastically understating the gravity of the situation:

> [E]n er honum þótti Þorgeirr dveljastk svá miklu lengr en ván var at, þá gengr hann ofan í skriðuhjallana. Hann kallar þá ok spyrr, hví hann komisk aldri eða hvárt hann hefir enn eigi nógar hvannirnar.

---

[43] Nedkvitne, Arnved. "Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities." *SJH* 25, No 1-2, (2000): 27-51.

[44] Williams, Bernard. *Shame and Necessity.*

[45] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders,* Vol. II, P. 361.

> Þorgeirr svarar þá með óskelfri rǫddu og óttalausu brjósti: “Ek ætla,” segir hann, “at ek hafa þá nógar, at þessi er uppi er ek held um.” Þormóðr grunar þá, at honum muni eigi sjálfrátt um; ferr þá ofan í tóna ok sér vegs ummerki, at Þorgeirr er kominn at ofanfalli. Tekr hann þá til hans ok kippir honum upp, enda var þá hvǫnnin nær ǫll upp tognuð. Fara þeir þá til fanga sinna. En þat má skilja í þessum hlut, at Þorgeirr var óskelfr ok ólífhræddr, ok flestir hlutir hafa honum verit karlmannliga gefnir sakar afls ok hreysti ok allrar atgørvi.[46]

> (When he saw Thorgeir hanging there much longer than he expected he went down onto the ledge and called out to him, asking him if he had enough angelica now and when, if ever, he was coming back up.
> Thorgeir replied, his voice unwavering and no trace of fear in his heart. “I reckon,” he said, “I’ll have enough once I’ve uprooted this piece I’m holding.” It then occurred to Thormod that Thorgeir could not make it up alone and he stepped down onto the ledge and saw that Thorgeir was in grave peril of falling. So he grabbed hold of him and pulled him up sharply, by which time the angelica plant was almost completely uprooted. After that they returned to their hoard. One may conclude from this incident that Thorgeir was unafraid as far as his own life was concerned, and that he proved his courage in whatever dangers he encountered, either to his body or his mind.)

This characterization of Þorgeirr reads more like a caricature than a model of ideal courage to emulate, but perhaps our perception is skewed by our own moral conditioning. Or perhaps it is an indication that there existed, around the time this text was written, the knowledge that perfect courage was unattainable, that the consequences would be dire on its holder (Þorgeirr’s action-packed life is soon cut short in *Fóstbræðra saga*), and that it would have to remain, in the thoughts of the contemporary public, a distant memory of a romanticized heroic past. However, in no way do these assumptions undermine the importance of courage as a social value in medieval Icelandic society.

2.3 Courage and Gender and Words that Can Wound

We have mentioned that masculinity and courage were related. To produce only one clue to this fact among many, the word used to denote the idea of “courage” in the previous example is the adverb “*karmannliga*”, meaning “in a manly way” in the literal sense. The logistics of this relationship are hard to pinpoint, but what we know for certain is that both concepts were equally the subject of great praise and would consistently be found within the same saga character. Conversely, their opposites i.e. femininity and cowardice, coexisted in characters deemed utterly reprehensible by other members of their social sphere.

---

[46] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VI. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 190-191.

We chose the term "masculine" as opposed to "manly" because of its antonym, "feminine", and the importance of the latter as the most insulting epithet to be found in the Icelandic saga culture. Once more, explaining what "being feminine" entailed is a big undertaking and not something that can be covered within the scope of this thesis. We will simply specify that being "feminine" and being a woman were two different things and that the negative status of femininity did not necessarily undermine the status of women generally speaking.[47]

The insulting powers of words related to femininity appear to stem from its association with physical weakness, as well as with sexual passivity. The latter was a classic medieval belief about female sexuality which dates back to Aristotle and his theory on the reproductive roles of the genders: he dubbed the woman "matter" which man, the "agent", acted upon to produce the offspring, and believed that the man's seed alone was responsible for its conception. Sexual passivity is particularly emphasized in the insult *árgr*, which puts the man on the receiving end of a sexual encounter and was punishable by outlawry according to the *Grágas*; furthermore, it was legally permitted to kill in a number of such cases.[48] Folke Ström showed that this type of insult did not concern itself with the idea of sexual perversion, but only with the adoption of a feminine role. Other ways of expressing the same sentiment would have been to compare the man to a female animal, – the mare was a popular choice – and the peculiar accusation, at least as old as the poetic Edda[49], of the man being a woman every ninth night and engaging in sexual intercourse with other men, sometimes adding the outcome of a pregnancy to the story. Ström notes that the fact that these insults were found in law texts was a sign of how commonly they were used.[50]

Going back to the link between masculinity and courage, we find no shortage of examples in the *Islendingasögur* to support this idea. In *Njáls saga* for instance, following the slaying of Hildigunnr's husband Höskuldr Þráinsson, Hildigunnr

---

47 On this subject, see Carole Clover's article, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe."

48 Ström, Folke. "Níð, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes." The Dorothea Coke Memorial Studies Lecture, University College London, 10 May 1973.

49 This type of insult can be found in the *Lokasenna*, where the Gods engage in a flyting with Loki during a feast, following the death of Baldr and as part of the events leading up to Ragnarök.

50 Ström, Folke. "Níð, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes."

undertakes what looks like a complex and meticulously planned goading ritual aimed at convincing her uncle Flosi to avenge his kinsman.

> Hildigunnr gekk þá fram í skála ok lauk upp kistu sinni; tók hon þá upp skikkjuna, er Flosi hafði gefit Hǫskuldi, ok í þeiri hafði Hǫskuldr veginn verit, ok hafði hon þar varðveitt í blóðit allt. Hon gekk þá innar í stofuna með skikkjuna. Hon gekk þegjandi at Flosa. Þá var Flosi mettr ok fram borit af borðinu. Hildigunnr lagði þá yfir Flosa skikkjuna; dunði þá blóðit um hann allan. Hon mælti þá: „Þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi, Hǫskuldi, ok gef ek þér nú aptr. Var hann ok í þessi veginn. Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek sœri þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella.“[51]
>
> (Hildigunn then went to the hall and opened up her chest and took from it the cloak which Flosi had given Hoskuld, and in which Hoskuld was slain, and which she had kept there with all its blood. She then went back into the main room with the cloak. She walked silently up to Flosi. Flosi had finished eating and the table had been cleared. Hildigunn placed the cloak on Flosi´s shoulders; the dried blood poured down all over him.
>
> Then she spoke: "This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Hoskuld, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all the good men I charge you, by all the wonders of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying – or else suffer the contempt of all men.")[52]

This passage both illustrates the existing link between courage and masculinity, – and it is rather the frequency of statements like this one in the sagas that suggests it – and brings us to our next major moral value: loyalty.

2.4 The Bonds of Kinship

Miller is one of the scholars who demonstrated the great importance of kinship bonds in medieval Iceland. The fact that they fought so often in the sagas, in his opinion, is greater proof still of the centrality of family and household relations within the society, for "[m]ost actively functioning groups, in fact, provide the raw material for strife as well as for concord among their memberships. Only people who do not deal with each other do not fight."[53] We had already mentioned Alasdair Macintyre and his analysis of heroic societies, wherein a person's entire identity depended on their place in an intricate system of interpersonal relations, and where morality and "social fact" were one and the same. Miller reiterates the same idea as he states that "[a]sking favors and granting favors on the ground of kinship and affinity was not small change; it was what

---

[51] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Brennu-Njáls saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. XII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 291.
[52] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. III, P. 137.
[53] Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 140.

made the Icelandic social world go round."[54] Moreover, he speaks of a moral component of kinship and underlines the moral responsibility commanded by such concepts as *frændi* and *mágr*.[55]

He also differentiates between what he calls "theoretical or formal kinship", which refers to the way the concept of kinship was perceived, and "practical kinship", or the reality of it.[56] Both theory and practice, Miller claims, affected and altered one another but never diminished the centrality of interpersonal relationships within the medieval Icelandic social structure.

When Miller speaks of favors being asked for and granted and how this was at the very heart of social existence, he isn't talking about something mundane like borrowing someone's horse, – even though that too could be highly problematic and certain saga men have died as a consequence – but rather about the request and offer of one's support within the framework of a feud or a potential feud, and this could signify monetary aid as much as taking part in a physical altercation, where one ran the risk of losing one's life. Vengeance was regulated by law and a specific order of precedence was set up in order to designate the first family or household member responsible for enacting revenge upon the killer(s) of their kin.

On the subject of the "duty of vengeance", Kristján Kristjánsson does not entirely agree with Macintyre on the role of morality in establishing the local social system along with its feud regulations and emphasizes the primary importance of the unique social condition of there being no state and no executive power to protect people's rights, in forcing the people to take matters into their own hands. [57] Both arguments stand and do not contradict each other in this sense. In fact, only the Althing, with its legislative and judicial powers, held once a year, would provide a real legal platform for the pursuit of justice. And even when the path of revenge was chosen, the sagas usually still depicted an effort to settle the matter legally through lawsuits and arbitration. Typically the way these episodes in the sagas would unfold is that each of the two parties involved in the feud would set out to gather support for their cause,

---

54 *Idem*, P. 141
55 *Idem*, P. 158
56 *Idem*, P. 141
57 Kristján Kristjánsson. 'Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's "Megalopsychia".' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1, No. 4 (1998): 405.

putting much planning and strategy into their quest for obtaining the backing of men of great reputation, and as many of them as they could get to; this would greatly improve the chances of a ruling in their favor. It is usually emphasized how carefully the saga characters went about these things, often seeking counsel on how to approach a potential ally before meeting with them. In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, and since we are dealing with the study of emotions, the episode commonly referred to as the "toe-pulling scene" appeals to a kinsman's empathy through a staged accident following the counsel of his brother, a man deemed wise by other members of his community. The counsel in question was for Þorbjörn, the injured party within the legal context of this case, to stumble onto his kinsman Þorgeirr's foot-board, jerking his badly inflamed toe in the process. The intended effect is to have Þorgeirr relate to Þorbjörn's mental anguish of losing his son and being unable to receive compensation for this loss, through his own physical pain, which no one was able to fully comprehend but him. At first Þorbjörn seems puzzled by the advice, but the strategy proves to be effective in the end.[58]

Ultimately, the goal was to gather "numbers". As observed by Miller, "[i]n fact, one of the chief inducements eliciting agreement to arbitrate was seeing the size of the adversary's assembled support group."[59] But those were not the only numbers that mattered; it was crucial to the parties involved in the legal suit to obtain the approval of the audience. "The uninvolved", as Miller calls them, "were a force to be reckoned with", for it was "their judgement that determined the key issue of who gained and who lost honour."[60] The audience within the context of the Althing symbolizes the wider audience of medieval Icelandic society, which also determined the share of honour that each person deserved, and made its opinion public either through praise or insult. This, for instance, is why slander was so severely punishable by law: reputation meant everything to the members of an honour/shame society.

Over the course of the preceding chapters we have begun to map out an outline of the relationship between the two concepts of "honour" and "shame" in the medieval Icelandic context. Now let us look at this relationship more closely.

---

58 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II, P. 169-170.
59 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 188.
60 *Ibid*.

2.5 The Stuff that Honour is Made of

"You get what anybody gets – You get a lifetime"[61], says Death of Neil Gaiman's comic book series entitled "The Sandman". The resigned fatalism expressed in that statement resonates very well with the world of the sagas of Icelanders. Both reputable and ill-reputable members of society would meet the same fate in the end, therefore it was very important to make one's lifetime count, but how?

So far we have portrayed a society where actions mattered a great deal and were owed to one another, but individuality of action was not privileged the way it so often is in today's western culture. Instead, one's actions had to abide by strict rules and guidelines and this was, as Macintyre argued, their version of morality. The question of the outlaw is often raised in the sagas and it is a kind of tragedy – although it is hard to tell the tone of the saga from the emotionally economical writing style of the authors – where the outlaw is depicted as having great moral potential, if we consider Macintyre's definition of the concept of morality, but little luck. Typically this type of character is referred to as *ógæfumaðr*, a word traditionally interpreted as "luckless man", and related to the notion of fate. Another word seems to follow saga outlaws as well as other severely antisocial characters wherever they go, and that is *ójafnaðarmaðr*, defined by Miller as "a man of no measure", and someone who refuses to compromise and denies others their due.[62] Indeed, a man who would not adhere to the notion that "everybody deserves something", and isn't fazed by the idea that "as much as you take away from others they will want to take back from you", a man who simply did as he pleased with little regard to the consequences, couldn't possibly coexist with other members of his "shame society" and their attachment to standards, and had to be banished for disturbing the peace. Thus the man who did not wish to end up on the fringes of society simply *had* to play by the rules.

"Honour", within the shame-culture scheme, would perhaps be best explained as obtaining a perfect score on a test combining all matters of virtue i.e. being donned with courage and masculinity and loyalty and popularity, among other concepts we could not develop here for lack of necessary scope, all at the same time. Isolated actions could be

---

[61] Gaiman, Neil. *Sandman*. Comic series. Vol 1: "Preludes and Nocturnes." New York: DC comics, 1991.

[62] Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 67.

"honourable" or "dishonourable", of course, but having failed to meet one of the main social standards such as say, loyalty, it would have been very hard to recover much of one's "honour" at all in the aftermath. This ensuing type of "dishonour" was the social equivalent of a death sentence.

In one episode of *Grettis saga*, the two brothers Grettir and Illugi, as well as a slave by the name of Glaumr that they had befriended, were residing on the island of Drangey, where they were unwelcome because of Grettir's well-established status as an outlaw and a troublemaker. Grettir, knowing that his life was in jeopardy and that a certain Þorbjörn Öngull wished to take it, had instructed Glaumr to pull the ladder that they used to climb onto the island up to the top, every night, so that no one could get to them. On one occasion, after Glaumr had neglected to obey Grettir's orders, Þorbjörn and a number of his men surprised the island dwellers at night. At first Glaumr did not fully comprehend the gravity of what was happening, and later displayed a lack of loyalty toward his master Grettir by revealing his weakness to the enemy, adding to the initial betrayal of failing to protect his life:

> Þá hló Qngull ok mælti: „Satt er it fornkveðna, at langvinirnir rjúfask sízt, ok hitt annat, at illt er at eiga þræl at einkavin, þar sem þú ert, Glaumr, ok hefir þú skemmiliga svikit þinn lánardrottin, þó at hann væri eigi góðr." Margir lǫgðu illt til hans fyrir sína ódyggð ok lǫmðu hann náliga til bótleysis ok létu hann þar liggja; en þeir gengu heim til skálans ok kómu við hurðina stundar fast.[63]
>
> (Then Hook said with a laugh, "This proves the old saying, that old friendships are the last to break, and also, in your case, that a slave makes a poor friend, Glaum. Bad as he may be, you have betrayed your master shamefully."
> Many of the men abused him for his disloyalty, then beat him so hard he was almost crippled by it, and left him lying there. Then they went over to the hut and hammered on the door.) [64]

The reaction displayed by Þorbjörn and his men is a testimony of how contemptible disloyalty was perceived to be in this given context. Glaumr, who was already rather lacking in the way of social requirements for honour, manifested the ultimate social failure in betraying Grettir. Even though the betrayal served the purposes of Þorbjörn's men, they were still outraged by it and took the time to subject Glaumr to the cruel punishment they believed he deserved. Glaumr's disloyalty signified that he no longer

---

[63] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis Saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 259

[64] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II, P. 175.

stood the chance of being integrated in his society, and ultimately would prove to be the end of his life as well.

2.6 The Price of Honour

We believe that Miller's analysis of people's relationship with honour in the medieval Icelandic context is both accurate and fruitful. Among his main ideas on this topic is that honour was in very high demand but very difficult to obtain, which meant that it was the object of active social competition.[65] It also implied that honour could be gained at someone else's expense, – To draw an analogy the modern reader can relate to, the expression "one man's loss is another man's gain" still exists today – and the sagas abound with situations seeking out this kind of callous exchange, such as when one of the characters provokes another to a one-on-one physical confrontation, at the end of which there was only one possible winner – and in this sense, honour could be provided by an enemy as much as by a friend[66] –. This was a fast track to honour, and the strategy was somewhat frowned upon in a society where patience was also a virtue. Grettir is very impulsive for the most part of his eponymous saga, but even he starts to exhibit some signs of self-control when the consequences of his actions become too much to ignore. During his stay with Þorsteinn Kuggason, for instance, it was said of Grettir that he was "atgangsmikill at drepa járnit, en nennti misjafnt, en þó var hann spakr um vetrinn svá at ekki bar til frásagnar."[67] ([E]nergetic at hammering the iron, although he could not always be bothered to do it, but he kept himself under control through the winter and no incidents happened.) [68] It was therefore deemed unwise to instigate quarrels whenever one pleased.

Other occasions to fight for one's honour were feasts, where the seating arrangements were indicative of perceived social status, and legal suits where whichever party managed to reach a peaceful solution would be deemed the most honourable.[69] Miller describes honour as "a zero-sum game"[70], adding the thought, borrowed from

---

65 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 30.
66 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 30.
67 Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis Saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. P. 173-174
68 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II, P. 133.
69 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 30.
70 *Idem*, P. 31.

Thomas Hobbes, that nobody would want it if everyone had it.[71] A man's honour sometimes outlived the man as well, specifically in cases of a violent death in need of avenging.[72] How many people were involved in seeking justice for the corpse, and how the ensuing process of legal suits, revenge and compensation unfolded would quantify, once and for all, the amount of honour that this person deserved.

Social standing and heritage were another easy gateway to honour, one that provided an unfair advantage to those who fit the bill and was often used as a valid reason to overlook some of their shortcomings. However, a good name could not make up for honour lost. Thus if honour, as Miller puts it, "was a precious commodity in very short supply"[73], then "shame" as its supposed opposite, was there for the taking.

---

71 *Ibid.*
72 *Ibid.*
73 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking,* P. 30.

3. Shame in the *Islendingasögur*

Now we have presented the background against which the concept of "shame" in the *Islendingasögur* can begin to unfold, we may consider the place of "shame" within this saga corpus, and answer some of the questions we had set out for ourselves in the introduction. First, let us look at the frequency of "shame"-related terms and episodes.

3.1 Shame: A Brief Linguistic Analysis

The "shame"-related terms employed by the saga writers are primarily *skömm*, simply translated as "shame" in Geir T. Zoëga's "A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic", but also *svívirða*, rendered as "disgrace", and *háðung*, meaning "shame" or "disgrace", from the root *háð*, which translates as "scoffing, mocking".[74] Out of these three variants, only the word *skömm* explicitly carried the meaning of "shame" as an emotion; the verb *að skamma* could be used in the reflexive to express the meaning of being ashamed. The other two words rather represented "shame" as a force that acted upon a person. This is apparent, for instance, in the adverb *svívirðingarlaust* which meant "without shame". In Old Norse, and we can find multiple examples of this occurrence in the *Islendingasögur*, being "shameless" did not mean what we might take it to mean today i.e. the condition of being prone to outrageous conduct; it simply referred to the fact that the subject had nothing to be ashamed for. Similarly, the adjective *háðuligr* meant both "scornful, abusive" when used to characterize words and "disgraceful" when referring to actions. In this instance as well, "shame" signified something that a person was subjected to, and had an additional correlation with the theme of insult.

All three variants can be found in the *Islendingasögur*, although *háðung* seems to appear at a much lesser frequency. But looking for the semantic field of "shame" is not enough to locate all instances of its appearance in the texts, especially when our goal is to analyze "shame" as an emotional experience; as we have mentioned in our introduction, and as it is repeatedly observed in the saga scholarship, most of the time the emotional states of the saga characters were hidden, and had to be inferred from the context. Therefore it is mainly the context i.e. the character's actions and words that informs the reader whether the former might be experiencing "shame", while "shame"-

[74] Zoëga, Geir T. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

related terms were rather reserved for situations that aimed, as our linguistic analysis supports, at reprimanding, taunting or pointing out someone's moral shortcomings.

Thus a preliminary conclusion can be drawn from the above, and that is that there were two distinct understandings of "shame": the first one, shame-the-emotion, was repressed in the saga context, while the second, shame-as-a-destructive-force – and which went hand in hand with mockery and insults – reigned supreme. Over the course of this chapter we shall test the relevance of this statement.

3.2 Shame vs. Honour

Before we provide examples from the sagas in support of our theory, we must expand on the notion, alluded to in the previous chapter, of an existing state of opposition between "shame" and "honour".

We have seen that, as a self-evaluative emotion, "shame" required a well-defined and internalized set of standards, rules and goals in order to manifest itself. Failure to meet the SRGs would trigger a questioning of the self as a whole, therefore the consequences were very negative on the subject's emotional well-being. Moreover, this self-evaluative process depended on an audience and its reactions, whether real or imagined based on one's acquired knowledge of the inner workings of their social sphere. Incidentally, the saga context provided all of those things in the form of honour and its judges, as defined in the previous chapter. To recapitulate, we have posited that honour was the perfect melding of several major moral values as privileged by the medieval Icelandic society; these would be the SRGs in our given context. Failure to live up to the ideals of courage, masculinity and loyalty – among probable others – provoked the judgement of a wide range of observers, from a variety of social classes; this was the audience, whose voice in the saga context was particularly resonant, so much that there was almost no need for internalization. Shameful deeds would never fail to excite a negative reaction, oftentimes accompanied by verbal abuse. Additionally, the greatest "shame" came as the result of the greatest lack of "honour"; both notions were, indeed, quantifiable as in the following excerpt from *Grettis saga,* regarding the reasons given by the sons of Ondott crow on why they chose to take compensation from Earl Auðunn and give him the insulting nickname of "Auðunn chicken" rather than simply

take his life: "Þeir kváðu jarli þetta meiri smán"[75] (They said that this was a greater disgrace for the earl)[76]. The fact that the Earl deserved a greater level of "shame" thus illustrated the depths of his "dishonour". This is only one example among many of "shame" and "honour" coexisting as two sides of the same coin, in accordance with the SRGs principle as applied to the saga context.

Moreover, in this example there is an element to "shame" which might register as somewhat sadistic with the modern readership – the two boys seem to take a substantial amount of pleasure in making the Earl as miserable as possible – but which fits well with Miller's thoughts on the centrality of the saga concept of *mannjafnaðr* (approximately rendered as "man-evening" in English). The specific term is applicable to "the pairing of corpses in a settlement […] as well as to a formal competitive verbal duel in which two men compare themselves or their patrons with respect to valor and prestige."[77] But the wider concept of balance in all things can be effectively applied to the domains of feud, gift-giving and most all other social interactions. For instance, gift-exchange was highly regulated, the simplest of those regulations being that "[s]hows of generosity were to be met with shows of gratitude"[78] In this broad sense of social equity, "shame" could be compared to a gift that warranted an equal reaction[79], and in the *Islendingasögur*, the appropriate reaction deemed equal to being shamed was, as a general rule, revenge.

3.3 Because they Dissed me

To reiterate James Gilligan's findings in his research on the existing connections between "shame" and violence, the main explanation provided by the criminals who were the subjects of his case study for why they had killed was that they had been "disrespected", or "dissed", for short. Within their moral system, similar to the one found in Icelandic sagas in the sense that it focused on "shame" and "honour", this was a perfectly valid reason for murder; disrespect was an offence grave enough that it could only be completely redressed through blood-vengeance. The same attitude can be found

---

75 Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis Saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. P. 19.
76 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* Vol II, P. 56.
77 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 277.
78 Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 80.
79 This idea has already been advanced in William Ian Miller's "Humiliation". We are simply borrowing the metaphor in order to develop our own thoughts on the concept of shame.

in the *Isendingasögur*. Therefore vengeance *must* have had emotional motivations; this is an element that can be easy to miss as a result of the emotionally disengaged writing style of the sagas, the powerful social stigma against male display of emotion and the fact that this was a society where killing was so often a necessity and matter of survival, but the sagas do leave clues as to this entire process being slightly more than just second nature to its characters. For instance, Gunnar in *Njáls saga* says: "Hvat ek veit […] hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en ǫðrum mǫnnum at vega menn."[80] (What I don't know […] is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them.)[81], in a rare display of modern day moral concerns.

Additionally, when the woman or the servant or the old relative perform a goading ritual aimed at provoking a reaction from the designated avenger, they do not appeal to his reason, but to his emotions. As we can see in the earlier produced *Njáls saga* example of goading, the man's guilt, shame and empathy are all triggered when he is reminded of the value of the slain and of their relationship (guilt), when his entire self is under attack for not being up to par with certain social standards (shame) and when he is placed face to face with an object symbolizing the slain and making their unjust fate an emotionally-charged reality (empathy).[82]The egger on thus takes their conquered target from the pole of "avoidance" to the pole of "attack other". Typically "attack other" will begin during the goading ritual, only proving how effective it had been, by verbally attacking the goader her/himself. They may call her/him "evil" or "wretched" or overly emotional, but most of the time the advice is heeded notwithstanding. Following a successful egging on, the man goes for the creator of the "shame"-situation and kills him, which is – modern moral concerns aside – arguably the most effective way of ending one´s "shame", for it eliminates its main element: the audience.[83]

On a related note, we have discussed the great power of insult that certain Old Norse words possessed, specifically ones denoting femininity or a passive sexual role such as *árgr*, or comparing a man to a female animal or accusing him of transforming into a woman every ninth night with the intention of laying with men. This type of

[80] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Brennu-Njáls saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. XII. P. 138-139.
[81] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* Vol III, P. 66.
[82] We will expand on that in the next section.
[83] This thesis does not endorse blood-vengeance unless absolutely necessary.

insult was exceedingly common in the *Islendingasögur*, and we shall provide a few examples of this. The First example is from *Njáls saga* and occurs within the context of the Althing: after the two feuding parties reach a settlement over the slaying of Höskuldr, Flosi, his kinsman, makes an injurious statement in reaction to some gifts that Njál had placed on top of the compensation money pile, calling Njál "karl inn skegglausi" (Old Beardless). The following exchange ensues:

> Skarpheðinn mælti: „Illa er slíkt gǫrt at sneiða honum afgǫmlum, er engi hefir áðr til orðit dugandi maðr. Meguð þér þat vita, at hann er karlmaðr, því at hann hefir sonu getit við konu sinni. Hafa fáir várir frændr legit óbœttir hjá garði, svá at vér hafim eigi hefnt." Síðan tók Skarpheðinn til sín slœðurnar, en kastaði brókum blám til Flosa ok kvað hann þeirra meir þurfa." Flosi mælti: „Hví mun ek þeira meir þurfa?" Skarpheðinn mælti: „Því þá – ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níundu nótt ok geri hann þik at konu."
> Flosi hratt þá fénu ok kvazt þá engan penning skyldu af hafa ok sagði, at vera skyldi annat hvárt: at Hǫskuldr skyldi vera ógildr, ella skildi þeir hefna hans.[84]

> (Skarphedin spoke: 'That's a wicked thing to do, making slurs about him in his
> old age, and no man worthy of the name has ever done this before. You can tell
> he's a man because he has had sons with his wife. And few of our kinsmen have
> been buried uncompensated by our wall, without our taking vengeance for them.'
> Then Skarphedin picked up the cloak and threw a pair of *black* trousers at Flosi,
> and said that he had more need of these.
> Flosi said, "Why do I need them more?"
> Skarphedin spoke: "Because if you are the sweetheart of the troll at Svinafell, as
> is said, he uses you as a woman every ninth night."
> Flosi pushed the money away and said he would not take a penny of it, and that
> it would now be one of two things: either there would be no redress at all for
> Hoskuld, or they would take blood-vengeance for him.)[85]

All of the insults exchanged in this episode have to do with the concept of masculinity, or rather lack thereof, and the gravity of which we have formerly observed. Masculinity and courage were correlated, meaning that femininity was a sign of cowardice. In a society which greatly emphasized the importance of a man's physical and moral

[84] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Brennu-Njáls saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. XII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 314.
[85] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.III, P. 148

reliability, this type of accusation could not go unpunished, let alone when the accusation was false.

Indeed, slander was another major "shame"-bestowing affair. For instance, there is an episode in *Njáls saga* where Gunnar Lambason falsely accuses Skarphéðinn of weeping at the burning of his household. Due to the fact that such an emotional display would have been perceived as feminine and therefore shameful, and without any hesitation, Kári reacts by slaying the slanderer, slicing his head off in a gory display and with little consideration for the consequences to his own life.[86]

For our last example on the shaming power of insults, we have chosen an episode occurring near the end of *Fóstbræðra saga*, when Þormóður comes back from his adventure-packed travels through Greenland and meets with King Ólafr, who asks him why he had slain five men, implying that the number exceeded what was socially accepted:

> Ólafr konungr mælti: „Framar hefir þú þá gǫrt um vígin á Grœnlandi en fiskimaðrinn kallar aflausn vera fiskinnar, því at hann kallask leysa sik, ef hann dregr fisk fyrir sik, en annan fyrir skip sitt, þriðja fyrir ǫngul, fjórða fyrir vað. Nú hefir þú framar gǫrt, eða hví draptu svá marga menn?" Þormóðr svaraði: „Illr þótti mér jafnaðr þeira vera við mik, því at þeir jǫfnuðu mér til merar, tǫldu mik svá vera með mǫnnum sem meri með hestum."
> Konungr mælti: „Várkunn var þat, at þér mislíkaði þeira umrœða; hefir þú ok stórt at gǫrt."[87]
>
> (King Olaf said, "In terms of numbers slain, you have done more in Greenland than the fisherman does as penance for his catch. He regards himself absolved if he pulls in one fish for himself, a second for his ship, a third for his hook and a fourth for his tackle. You have gone further than that. Why did you slay so many?"
> Thormod answered, "I did not take kindly to their likening me to a mare. They said I was among men like a mare among stallions."
> The King said, "It's understandable that you took displeasure at what they said. Your great deeds have spoken for you.)[88]

The fact that the saga portrays King Ólafr himself as a defender of the principle that feminizing epithets were the most harmful attack on a man's reputation, showcases an attempt on the part of the saga author to present the matter as a kind of absolute truth.

---

86 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.III, P. 210

87 Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VI. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print. P. 259.

88 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.II, P. 391.

3.4 The Look of Shame

On the subject of insults, we may add to this surprisingly enduring model of the shameful femininity of man, another universal "shame"-related fact, this time having to do with our evolution as a species. In the first chapter of this thesis, we have discussed the idea of the "shaming gaze", which we have inherited, claims Darwin, from our primeval ancestors. At its core, it is simply the "shame" of being seen naked, specifically of exposed genitalia, still according to Darwin. He frequently refers to the act of blushing in his book "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal", a behavioral trait specific to human beings, as a common reaction to feeling ashamed. This involuntary reaction originates in the realization of one's nudity being exposed to an audience, and would not occur in a private space. It accompanies "shame" but is not exclusive to it, and may be linked to other emotions such as "embarrassment". This universal fear of being "caught with one's pants down", as Erikson put it, is an amusing[89] and frequently employed motif of the *Islendingasögur*.

There is a certain trend in Icelandic sagas to cut off the buttocks of an opponent deemed morally inferior, with the intent of shaming them. This happens, for instance, in *Fóstbræðra saga* after a major battle which had left Þormóður mortally wounded. As it was taking him a rather long time to die, Þormóður had the opportunity to present the reader with a cautionary tale, about a certain yeoman from Trondheim i.e. the enemy base who, upon hearing the "howling of the wounds" of King Ólafr's men, which he had mistaken for moans, calls them "spineless" for complaining.

> Þormóðr svarar: „Sýnisk þér svá, félagi. sem þeir sé eigi þróttmiklir, er hér eru inni?" „Já," segir hann, „svá sýnisk mér sem hér sé flestir menn of þreklausastir saman komnir." Þormóðr svarar: „Vera kann þat, at nǫkkurr sé sá hér inni, að eigi sé þrekmikill, ef til er reynt, ok eigi mun þér mitt sár mikit þykkja, þótt þú hyggir at því." Bóndi svarar: „Ek ætla þá væri betr, at þú hefðir bæði mǫrg ok stór." Snýr bóndi þá útar eptir hlǫðunni ok ætlaði út at ganga. Í því høggr Þormóðr eptir honum. Þat hǫgg kom á bakit ok hjó hann af honum báða þjóhnappana. „Styn þú eigi nú," kvað Þormóðr. Bóndi kvað við hátt með miklum skræk ok þreif til þjóhnappanna báðum hǫndum. Þormóðr mælti: „Þat vissa ek, at vera myndi hér inni nǫkkur maðr, sá er eigi myndi þróttigr reynask; er þér illa saman farit, er þú finnr at þrek annarra manna, þar er þú ert þróttlauss sjálfr. Eru hér margir menn mjǫk sárir ok vælar engi þeira, en þú bræktir sem geit blæsma ok veinar sem merr, þó at þú hafir eina vǫðvaskeinu litla."[90]

---

[89] Senses of humour may vary and we speak only for ourselves.

[90] Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VI. P. 272-273.

> (Thormod answered, "So, my friend, you think the men in here lack courage?"
> "Yes," said the man, "a great gathering of weaklings, if I ever saw one."
> Thormod answered, "If one were to search, perhaps one might find a coward. You probably wouldn't consider my wound too serious if you thought about it."
> The yeoman answered, "It would be better if you had larger wound and more of them."
> Then the yeoman turned and was about to leave the barn, and as he did, Thormod struck at him. The blow caught him on the back and cut off both of his buttocks.
> "Let's hear no groaning from you now."
> Then Thormod said, "I knew I could find a man in here who would prove to lack courage. You are a hypocrite, looking for courage in other men when you lack such courage yourself. Here are many who are severely wounded, and not one of them complains. But you bleat like a she-goat in heat and whinny like a mare over one small flesh wound.)[91]

The moral of this story was presumably the value of real courage and the very shameful attitude of being a hypocrite and overstating one's real worth. These must have been truly despicable faults to deserve this much insult added to that much injury. Aside from cutting off the yeoman's buttocks, Þormóður compares him both to a she-goat and to a mare; that is not one, but two instances of using the ultimate Old Norse insult, which was evidently socially accepted when it was well deserved.

Another similar episode occurs in *Grettis saga*, following a struggle between Grettir and a mound-dwelling ghost. Grettir, who manages to overpower the ghost and slay him, proceeds to cut off the ghost's head and place it by his buttocks[92], which we shall interpret as a shaming gesture, inviting the shamed to join his own shaming audience in witnessing his exposed – both literally and symbolically – and diminished self.

What the sum of the examples we have produced so far tells us is that dishonourable behavior, the major components of which can easily be established as they are but the counterparts to what constitutes honourable deeds (i.e. cowardice, femininity and disloyalty), was to be repaid in kind, with the "gift" – to stick with Miller's metaphor – of "shame". Therefore "shame" could be used as a weapon effective only in the hands of the honourable – or, at the very least, the more honourable than the shamed party – for there where it was taken away, "honour" was usually gained by somebody else.

Aside from being a gift, "shame" was sometimes merely a suggestion; a reminder of what it *could* do to a man's reputation. Such was its function in the context

---

91 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.II, P. 400.
92 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.II, P. 75.

of goading rituals. Let us now consider a specific detail from the same example we provided before, and that is the bloody piece of clothing produced by Hildigunnr and belonging to her late husband Höskuldr who had been slain wearing it, and used as what Miller calls a "shaming ritual"[93] in order to convince Flosi to avenge his kinsman. We could potentially link this to the important role of the gaze; whether it is the person looking or being looked at, "shame" is always more striking when it is seen (and this explains the idea of placing one's severed head in front of one's buttocks to "shame" them postmortem a little bit better). In fact, it was "seeing" the great injustice suffered by Höskuldr, and symbolized by this blood-token that triggered what we can only interpret as an emotional reaction from the part of Flosi.

Regarding the purpose of these goading rituals and the reason for their frequency in the *Islendingasögur*, and on why it was only women, old men and servants who performed this type of ritual, Miller writes that "[t]hey had to "shame" and importune to get a hearing, since relative differences in power prevented them from being included as equals in deliberative sessions." In fact, all three social categories depended completely on the men of their household for their own safety and associative reputation and saw to it that they were given their due. "Shame" would thereby become, in the context of goading rituals, a tool used by the lesser social classes in order to guarantee their rights.

3.5 Who Is Ashamed?

What about shame-the-emotion then? How was it perceived by saga society? Was it primarily ignored? Ought one in an *Islendingasaga* be ashamed of their own shame? The answer is – well – yes. But a number of examples found in this literary corpus hint toward the presence of this emotion: In an episode of *Grettis saga*, the warrior Onundr, who had lost his leg in battle and was called Onundr tree-leg ever since, is not acting like his normal self.

> Ǫnundr var hljóðr mjǫk; ok er Þrándr fann þat, spurði hann eptir, hvat honum bjó í skapi. Ǫnundr svarar ok kvað vísu:
>
> 1.Glatt esat mér, síz mœttum,
> mart hremmir til snimma,
> oss stóð geigr af gýgi
> galdrs, eldþrimu, skjaldar;
> hykk, at þegnum þykki,

[93] Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, P. 212

> þat ´s mest, koma flestum,
> oss til ynðis missu
> einhlítt, til mín lítit.
>
> Þrándr kvað hann þar mundu þykkja rǫskvan mann, sem hann væri þá helzt. „Er þér sá til, at staðfesta ráð þitt ok kvángask; skal ek ok leggja orð mín til ok liðsinni, ef ek veit, hvar þú horfir á.“ Ǫnundr kvað honum drengilega fara, en kvað þó kvánfǫngin horft hafa vænna, þau er slœgr sé til.[94]
>
> (Once, when Onund grew very quiet, Thrand asked him what was on his mind. Onund replied with a verse:
>
> 1.
> I am not happy after facing
> the arrow-hail pounding on shields.
> Much happens too early; we flinched
> at the ogresses' howling.
> Most men, I feel, doubtless
> deem me of little mettle;
> this is what most has deprived
> me of my delights.
>
> Thrand told Onund that he would always be thought a brave man: "You should settle down and marry. I shall support you in word and deed if you let me know whom you have in mind."
> Onund said this was a noble gesture, but that he once had better prospects of making a good marriage.)[95]

First of all, Onundr is displaying the type of behavior typically exhibited by someone experiencing the emotional state of "shame": he is quiet, – the fact that his friend notices proves that this was atypical of him – his skaldic poem denotes an obsession with a past failure; he is rehashing the episode in his mind, as well as projecting his own feelings regarding that failure onto other men, thereby subjecting himself to the judgement of an imaginary audience. This, he says, is what bothers him the most. When Thrand suggests that he marries, perhaps as a gateway to regain his masculinity[96], Onundr's answer is something along the lines of "I am no longer good enough", implying that his entire self-image is diminished as a result of his "shame".

Another example is this famous excerpt from *Njáls saga*:

> Flosi mælti: „Útgǫngu vil ek þér bjóða, því at þú brennr ómakligr inni.“ Njáll mælti: „Eigi vil ek út ganga, því ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skǫmm.“[97]

---

94 Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. P. 9-10.
95 Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.II, P. 75. P. 52
96 "Sexuality and marriage were a part of manly honour", says Miller in "Bloodtaking and Peacemaking", P. 37
97 Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Brennu-Njáls saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. XII. P. 330.

> (Flosi spoke: 'I want to offer you the chance to come out, for you do not deserve to be burned.'
> Njal spoke: 'I will not leave, for I'm an old man and hardly fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame.')[98]

It is true that Njál's words show a concern for his honour, but there is always a strong emotional component whenever the phrase "I do not want to live with/without x" is uttered. Njál made a choice, and a difficult one at that. This choice of his coincides with the unfortunate property that "shame" has, to trigger in its victim the desire "to hide, to disappear, or even to die".

[98] Vidar Hreinsson, ed., The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Vol.III, P. 156.

Conclusion

The examples of shame-as-an-emotion presented in the last chapter are by no means common in the *Islendingasögur*, but this bears no consequence on whether "shame" was or was not part of their context. We have demonstrated the unbreakable connection between the concepts of "shame" and "honour", as well as the simultaneous omnipresence of both concepts in the society of the *Islendingasögur*. If "honour" was in such high demand, then it was only natural that "shame", its opposite, should be avoided as much as possible.

We have based a certain portion of our argumentation on a somewhat problematic idea; that is Macintyre's statement that morality and social status were one and the same in heroic society, which includes medieval Iceland. It has been pointed out that this might miscast the members of that society as being emotionally primitive. However, this is not the case. Having strict social guidelines for a moral framework did not mean that people lacked emotion, simply that morality overshadowed the emotional aspects and how often emotion was revealed. We cannot speak for real life people from so long ago, but at least in the *Islendingasögur*, it is as plain as day that a man ought not to display his emotions, for fear of being perceived as "feminine" and thereby running the risk of being shamed by his peers; that risk, as we now know, was not to be taken lightly.

In many ways, saga characters were imprisoned by their honour-competitive society with its extreme standards, for the higher the standard, the greater the "shame". For instance, when the standard is to risk one's life "*fyrir frændsemi sakir*", the kinsmen in this context commonly being a relatively large number of people, and unless human nature has drastically changed over the course of the centuries separating us from the Middle Ages, it is reasonable to assume that one would not have been overjoyed at such a tall order.

If we apply this to the real medieval Icelandic society, and assuming that the sagas only aimed at portraying a rather romanticized version of things, serving as – an entertainment piece, of course but also – a means of educating and setting the moral ideal, there would have been a lot of failure in the quest for honour, causing a great deal of "shame". The *Islendingasögur* tend to not give much credit to characters who try but

fail; what mattered was the result. Only death was forgiven to a man – for everyone had to die – but the most honourable men died slowly and valiantly, fallen in battle in an extraordinary display of courage and strength, while the shameful died shamefully.

Both "honour" and "shame" were seen. More than just seen, their presence (or absence) was pointed out verbally by anyone who just happened to be passing by. This was done through praise and through insult. "Honour" and "shame" were quantified by measuring certain types of actions: actions of courage, of masculinity, of friendship, and of avenging one's kin when vengeance was warranted.

In a slightly perverse to the modern reader kind of way, "shame" in the sense of "shaming" was used as a gateway to honour, in a zero-sum type of exchange, wherein the piece of honour taken away from a person was replaced by its weight in "shame". It was also used as a form of punishment, and a very harsh one at that, perhaps to remind the members of society to fall in line with the standards; let us not forget that this was a people with no state and no one power to guarantee their rights and their safety, so "shame" was one way of keeping the peace, and in this sense it was not all bad.

As for the cost of "shame", that was more of a personal matter. It all depended on how much the person was willing – or indeed, unwilling – to risk for the sake of honour and status. Avoiding certain platforms where one's "shame" and "honour" were measured was potentially an option. In the *Islendingasögur*, however, with their morally superior heroes, the cost of "shame", just as the cost of "honour", was oftentimes rather straightforward: it simply cost them a life.

Bibliography

Ármann Jakobsson. ‘"Egils saga" and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family.’ *Scandinavian Studies* 80, No. 1, (2008): 1-18

Clover, Carol J. “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.” *Representations.* No. 44 (1993): 1-28

Darwin, Charles; Mead, Margaret (preface). *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.* New York: Philosophical Library, 1955.

Ekman, Paul, “Are there Basic Emotions?” *Psychological Review* 99, No. 3, (1992): 550-553

Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*. London: Paladin Books, 1977

Espace des sciences. “Le théâtre intime de la honte.” YouTube video, 1:50:18. October 14, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j0dz9aHGRg.

Gaiman, Neil. *Sandman*. Comic strip. Vol 1: “Preludes and Nocturnes.” New York: DC comics, 1991

Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Brennu-Njáls saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. XII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print.

Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Fóstbrœðra saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VI. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print.

Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. Print.

Harré, Rom. ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

Kanerva, K.T. “*Ógæfa* as an Emotion in Thirteenth-century Iceland.” *Scandinavian Studies* 84, No. 1, (2012): 1-26.

Kressel, Gideon M. “Shame and Gender.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 65, No. 1 (1992): 34-46.

Kristján Kristjánsson. ‘Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's "Megalopsychia".’ *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1, No. 4 (1998): 397-422

Lauren Hatvany. “James Gilligan, Shame / Pride.” YouTube video, 2:17. June 30, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw5STwOYouM&list=PL8E24030243314982.

Learning Stewards. “The Compass of Shame.” YouTube video, 2:59. April 7, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ1fSW7zevE

Lewis, Michael. *Shame: the Exposed Self*. New York: The Free Press, 1995

Lewis, Michael; Haviland-Jones, Jeannette M.; Barrett, Lisa Feldman, eds., *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008)

Ljungqvist, Fredrik Charpentier. “Rape in the Icelandic Sagas: An Insight in the Perceptions about Sexual Assaults on Women in the Old Norse World.” *Journal of Family History* 40, No. 4, (2015): 431-447

Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.* Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007

Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Miller, William Ian. *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Nedkvitne, Arnved. “Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities.” *SJH* 25, No 1-2, (2000): 27–51

Rosenwein, Barbara H. “Worrying about Emotions in History.” *American Historical Review* 107 No. 3, (2002): 821-845.

Rosenwein, Barbara H., ed., *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998)

Sroufe, Alan L. *Emotional Development: the Organization of Emotional Life in the Early Years.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995

Stearns, Peter N. and Carol Z. “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards.” *The American Historical Review* 90, No. 4, (1985): 813-836

Ström, Folke. “Níð, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes.” The Dorothea Coke Memorial Studies Lecture, University College London, 10 May 1973

The Economist team. “Animal Minds”. *The Economist*, December, 2015. http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21676961-inner-lives-animals-are-hard-study-there-evidence-they-may-be-lot-richer-science-once-thought

Tracy, Jessica L. and Matsumoto, David. “The Spontaneous Expression of Pride and Shame: Evidence for Biologically Innate Nonverbal Displays.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105, No. 33 (2008): 11655-11660

Tulinius, Torfi H. “Grettir and Bjartur: Realism and the Supernatural in Medieval and Modern Icelandic Literature.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 20 (2011): 14-25

Vidar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales* (Reykjavik, Iceland: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997) Vol. II&III

Williams, Bernard. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993

Zoëga, Geir T. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.