

Valentine A. Pakis

Honor, Verbal Duels, and the New Testament in Medieval Iceland

In an article on preaching and insults in medieval Iceland, Siân Grønlie makes two excellent points: first, admonishments against the “potentially dangerous character of human speech” are common to both biblical and Old Icelandic literature and, second, Christian Icelanders, at the time of the conversion, were no less prone to slinging insults than their “heathen” opponents.¹ In the end, however, Grønlie implies that it is Christian speech that “redeems” and heathen speech that “destroys,” and thus supports the conventional pagan-Christian binary that underlies a great number of studies.² At the heart of both the “romantic” and humanist schools of saga scholarship, as Vilhjálmur Árnason notes, has lain the idea that Christian values were incompatible with the Icelandic ethos of honor and vengeance,³ and the notion of conflict also appears in works, old and new, of a more anthropological or historical sort. Here we read, for example, that the Icelandic sense of courage and manliness (*drengskapr*) is “bestimmt

¹ Siân Grønlie, ‘Preaching, Insult, and Wordplay in the Old Icelandic *kristnibóðspættir*,’ *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103 (2004), 459, 471.

² *Ibid.*, 474.

³ Vilhjálmur Árnason, ‘Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,’ *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90 (1991), 157-61.

kein christliches Ideal,”⁴ and that medieval Icelandic society was “under strain,” “rifted,” or “facing a dilemma.”⁵

Though such conflict doubtless existed, it might be an exaggeration to describe it in these terms. The stereotype that sets the peaceful new religion against the violent ethic of the pre-Christian faith is, as Eric J. Sharpe puts it, “evangelical.”⁶ Andreas Heusler dispelled a part of this stereotype when he wrote, nearly a century ago, “Unter den Laien hat die Vorstellung, daß Rache und Christenglaube sich widerstreben, kaum irgend Wurzel gefaßt.”⁷ More recently, William Ian Miller and Jesse Byock have stressed the ease with which the native Icelandic social system accommodated certain Christian demands, especially that for peacekeeping: “Peacemaking was not something that had to be learned from Christianity, despite rather facile observations to that effect in the scholarly literature.”⁸ Before them, Lars Lönnroth mentioned what is more

⁴ Walther Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen: Studien zum Lebensgefühl der isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1937), 89.

⁵ Peter Foote, ‘The Audience and Vogue of the Sagas of Icelanders – Some Talking Points,’ in *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies*, ed. Michael Barnes et al. 47-55 (Odense: Odense UP, 1984), 55. R. George Thomas, Introduction to *Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, 11-45 (New York: Twayne, 1970), 26; Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, reprint 1990), 154.

⁶ Eric J. Sharpe, ‘Salvation, Germanic and Christian,’ in *Man and His Salvation: Studies in Memory of S. G. F. Brandon*, ed. Sharpe and John R. Hinnels, 243-62 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1973), 246.

⁷ Andreas Heusler, *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit* (Berlin: Verlag der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1912), 31. Dorothy Whitelock would later make the same case for medieval England. ‘The Audience of *Beowulf*,’ in *Old English Literature: Twenty-Two Analytical Essays*, ed. Martin Stevens and Jerome Mandel, 279-300 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 287.

⁸ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 267. See also Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 154-55.

obvious, namely that certain Christian writings allow for violence: "The old ethics of revenge could also be legitimized by the Augustinian doctrine of the Rightful War [...] and by the numerous examples of honorable deeds of revenge found in the Old Testament."⁹ Below I intend to offer a more synthetic approach to the problems surrounding the Northern confrontation with Christianity, one that takes into account the anthropological findings of scholars such as Byock and Miller, as well as the issues of Christian doctrine touched upon by Lönnroth.

In that Christianity, in one way or another, is central to the studies mentioned above (and the many like them), it is striking how seldom the New Testament enters into the discussion. After all, as Jónas Gíslason has reminded us, "Christianity is the religion of the book, of the Bible. It is not merely the performance of outward religious observance, but first and foremost the profession of belief in Jesus Christ and the observance of his teachings."¹⁰ There are clear reasons for this neglect. The New Testament has not survived in an Old Norse translation, nor has any Gospel harmony of the Tatianic type; Old Norse exegetic and homiletic literature is scarce; and the New Testament is seldom mentioned in the saga literature. However, numerous Old Norse quotations of the New Testament have come down to us,¹¹ and on the basis of this evidence Ian J. Kirby has argued that an Old Norse version of the Gospels existed by the early half of the twelfth century, if not before 1100.¹² A few

⁹ Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 154.

¹⁰ Jónas Gíslason, 'Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland in the Year 1000 (999),' in *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, 223-55 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 229.

¹¹ These are compiled in Ian J. Kirby, *Biblical Quotation in Old Icelandic-Norwegian Literature*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1976).

¹² Ian J. Kirby, *Bible Translation in Old Norse* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1986), 117; idem, 'The Bible and Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Iceland,' in *Old*

early references also support this view, the best of which being that of the First Grammarian (c. 1150), who mentions the Icelandic tradition of composing “þýðingar helgar” (sacred writings/translations/interpretations).¹³

Textual evidence aside, it is difficult to imagine that the citizens of the post-conversion Free State got by without hearing the Gospel stories in an intelligible language. My first assumption, then, is that they did. My second assumption is that what they heard, the example of the Gospel narratives, shaped their understanding of Christianity as much as the exegetical commentary appended to it. That is, when an audience of Icelandic laymen heard, for example, “Eigi kom ec til þess at senda frið nema helldr suerð,”¹⁴ these supposed words of Jesus – “I have not come to send peace but rather sword” – impressed them as much as one patristic interpretation or another. In light of what we know about first century Mediterranean culture (the world in which the New Testament was produced) and what we know about medieval Scandinavian society (the “reception culture”), certain aspects of Christianity, as presented in the New Testament, seem compatible with the ethos of the North. My focus below is the practice of verbal dueling, otherwise called “challenge and riposte,” and the prominent role of such behavior in honor-driven societies. The game of challenge and riposte pervades the New Testament as it does medieval Scandinavian texts. In this case, the New Testament example does not undermine – but perhaps supports – the native Scandinavian expectation for agonistic (competitive) interaction, exemplified in the lit-

Icelandic Literature and Society, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 287-301 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 292-93.

¹³ *The First Grammatical Treatise: The Earliest Germanic Phonology*, ed. Einar Haugen, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 12. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ Matt 10.34, quoted from *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, ed. R. Keyser and C. R. Unger (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmark, 1851), 121 (ch. 125).

erature by *níð*, *senna*, and *mannjafnaðr*.

Honor

Honor and shame are considered pivotal values of both early Mediterranean and medieval Scandinavian society. In general terms, honor is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged, and shame, its reciprocal value, is a claim to worth that is publicly denied. The opening line of Gehl's *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen*, however redolent of *Deuschtümelei*, has echoed many times: "Ehre is die innerste Triebkraft altgermanischen Lebensgefühls."¹⁵ Thus, looking through recent works, we read that Icelandic culture was "honor-based,"¹⁶ or that, in medieval Iceland, "honour is the dominant ethical principle."¹⁷ The Laws and the Contemporary Sagas make it clear, too, that the sense of honor so prevalent in the Family Sagas is not just a literary motif but also a reflection, though glorified, of everyday Icelandic life.

Honor and shame have been regarded as the chief values of Mediterranean societies since anthropologists first turned to that region. The book *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*¹⁸ has been the starting point of a number of studies, among them the more recent anthology *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*.¹⁹ Led by Bruce J. Malina, several scholars have applied the

¹⁵ Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre*, 7.

¹⁶ William Ian Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), 16.

¹⁷ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and Their Relations to Literary Production,' in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 8-29 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 23.

¹⁸ J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965).

¹⁹ David D. Gilmore, ed., *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington, D. C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987).

work of anthropologists to biblical studies. They repeatedly stress the importance of honor and shame, among other aspects of Mediterranean culture, in the biblical world and therefore to our understanding of the Bible.²⁰ As in medieval Scandinavia, “[h]onor and shame were the core, the heart, the soul of social life in Mediterranean antiquity.”²¹

Jerome Neyrey presents a clear model to illustrate the systematic features of honor in the biblical world.²² He is aware of the hazards of such a presentation – the general problem of representing others – but is confident of its utility. With the same reservations, I intend to juxtapose certain features of his biblical model with comparable aspects of medieval Scandinavian culture. The aim is to show the general congruence, as far as honor is concerned, of the two

²⁰ See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 25-50; idem, ‘The Received View and What It Cannot Do,’ in *The Social World of Jesus and The Gospels*, 217-41 (London: Routledge, 1996), 231-35, originally *Semeia* 35 (1986), 171-94; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 121-24; Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,’ in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Neyrey, 25-66 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991); Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 76-77, 213-14, 309-11; K. C. Hanson, ‘How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew’s Makarisms and Reproaches,’ *Semeia* 68 (1996), 81-112; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Joseph Plevnik, ‘Honor/Shame,’ in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, 105-14 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000); S. Scott Bartchy, ‘The Historical Jesus and Honor Reversal at the Table,’ in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann et al., 175-83 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

²¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 121.

²² Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 14-34. Similar treatments can be found in most of the works cited in note 20.

worldviews, and to provide some idea about the social setting of challenge and riposte.

Ascribed Honor. Lineage was a great source of honor in early Mediterranean and Scandinavian societies. The honor that one acquired at birth, on account of genealogy and, to some extent, geography, has been called ascribed honor. In the New Testament, genealogy and kinship are important components of reputation; this is especially clear in the way that relations are used both to support and undermine claims to worth. The author of Matthew's Gospel, on the one hand, begins by placing Jesus neatly into the House of David – "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1.1)²³ – and goes on to provide details of his subject's honorable lineage. Jesus's contemporaries, on the other hand, seem to have had a different take on the matter. The people of Nazareth, who knew Jesus's family well, took offense at his authoritative teachings: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? [...] Where then did this man get all this?" (Matt 13.54-56).²⁴ As regards geography, a line from the first chapter of John's Gospel points to the link between one's honor and birthplace. In response to Philip of Galilee's claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah, Nathanael answers: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1.46).

Though the kinship system of medieval Scandinavia differed from that of the ancient Mediterranean world – it was ego-centered, not ancestor-centered²⁵ – genealogies functioned in both societies as a source of ascribed honor. In the sagas of Icelanders,

²³ See also Luke 1.27. English translations of the New Testament are from the New Revised Standard Version.

²⁴ See also Mark 6.3; Luke 4.22.

²⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature* (Odense: Odense UP, 1993), 20-27.

for instance, it is common for the lineage of characters to be traced to mythological noblemen. That the value of such a lineage was extremely high is evident, in *Njáls saga*, from Bjarni Brodd-Helgason's assessment of Eyjólfur Bolverksson, who supposedly descends, like so many saga characters, from the mythological Ragnar loðbrók: "[P]ú hefir marga þá hluti til, at engi er þér meiri maðr hér á þinginu. Pat er fyrst, at þú ert ættaðr svá vel sem allir eru, þeir er komnir eru frá Ragnari loðbrók" (You have many qualities that show that no man is greater than you here at the Althing. First of all, you are well born, as are all that are descended from Ragnar loðbrók).²⁶ Bjarni goes on to express his confidence that Eyjólfur will have success, solely on account of his noble ancestors, in the forthcoming lawsuit. The importance of geography shows itself in the inventive genealogies of *Íslendingabók*, where Ari Þorgilsson traces the lineage of four bishops to a distinguished settler of one of the island's geographical quarters.²⁷ With this symmetrical genealogy, as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has suggested, Ari intends to demonstrate the unity of the state, the evenly distributed roots of its spiritual leaders, and the familial cornerstones of the society.²⁸

Limited Good. George Foster introduced the term "limited good" to describe an attitude toward the world, observable in peasant societies, according to which everything desirable in life – land, wealth, health, security, honor, for example – is taken to exist in finite and short supply.²⁹ The chief implication of this attitude is an acute sense of competition and envy, for it entails that one person's gain corresponds to another's loss. It is evident that the early Mediterranean and medieval Scandinavian societies viewed the world in this

²⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF 12, 367 (ch. 138).

²⁷ *Íslendingabók*, ÍF 1, 6-7 (ch. 2), and 27-28 (*Ettartala*).

²⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, 26-27.

²⁹ George M. Foster, 'Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,' *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965), 296.

way. Representative of the early Mediterranean perspective are the frequently cited words of an anonymous pre-Socratic philosopher: “It is not pleasant for people to honor someone else (for then they think that they themselves are being deprived of something).”³⁰ Further examples are numerous.³¹ From Scandinavia, the general idea appears in *Hárbarðsljóð*: “Þat hefir eic, er af annarri scefr, um sic er hveirr í slíco” (One oak-tree thrives when another is stripped, each is for himself in such matters).³² With respect to honor, Miller observes: “[H]onor was a precious commodity in very short supply. The amount of honor in the Icelandic universe was perceived to be constant at best [...] Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else’s expense. When yours went up, someone else’s went down.”³³ A fine example from the New Testament is the reaction of John the Baptist, addressing the frustration of his disciples, to Jesus’s growing fame: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3.30). In a thirteenth-century Icelandic homily the same verse appears thus: “mon haN vaxa at virþingo en ec mon þuerra” (He must increase in honor, and I must decrease).³⁴ It is interesting how the homilist has filled in the blank.

³⁰ *Anonymus Iamblichi* 2.3, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Hermann Diels, 5th ed., rev. Walther Kranz, vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), 200.

³¹ See Jerome Neyrey and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “‘He must increase, I must decrease’ (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001), 464-83.

³² *Hárbarðsljóð* 22, in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 5th ed., rev. Hans Kuhn, vol. 1 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983), 82. The translation is from *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 72.

³³ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30.

³⁴ ‘Nativitas sancti Johannis baptiste,’ in *The Manuscript Sthm. Perg. 15 4^o: A Diplomatic Edition and Introduction*, ed. Andrea van Arkel-de Leeuw van Weenen (Doctoral diss., Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht, 1977), 6r. See also: Andrea van Arkel-de Leeuw van Weenen, *The Icelandic Homily Book: Perg. 15 4^o in the Royal Library, Stockholm*, Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1993.

Honor and Gender. Miller has gender in mind when he writes: “[H]onor and shame in the saga world are not like the honor and shame of the Mediterranean region in some important respects.”³⁵ The main difference in this regard is that masculine honor in Scandinavia did not depend so greatly on the protection of female chastity, as is the case throughout the Mediterranean area.³⁶ Here, writes David D. Gilmore, “male honor derives from the struggle to maintain intact the shame of kinswomen; and this renders male reputation insecurely dependent upon female sexual conduct.”³⁷ For this reason, the most honorable quality for women in the biblical world is exclusivity,³⁸ as seen in the positive attitude of the New Testament toward women in private (domestic) space,³⁹ and negative attitude toward women in public.⁴⁰ Things were different in medieval Scandinavia, where “[l]ittle premium was placed on a woman’s virginity or on a child’s legitimacy,”⁴¹ and where the lines between female (private) and male (public) space were not so sharply drawn. In Iceland, for instance, unrelated men and women would bathe together,⁴² a highly shameful act – for women, at least – by Mediterranean standards.

³⁵ Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays*, 118.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 118-19, plus notes 40, 42, 43.

³⁷ David D. Gilmore, ‘Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor,’ in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. Gilmore, 2-21 (Washington, D. C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 4.

³⁸ Neyrey, *Honor in Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 32, 98, 100, 196.

³⁹ See for instance Luke 1.40-43; 4.38-39; 8.49-52; 10.38-42; 15.3-10; Malina and Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts,’ 62.

⁴⁰ See Luke 7.39; John 4.7-27; Malina and Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts,’ 63; Jerome H. Neyrey, ‘What’s Wrong With This Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space,’ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1994), 77-91.

⁴¹ Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays*, 118.

⁴² *Dórðar saga Hreðu*, ÍF 14, 176 (ch. 3); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), 123-24.

Though sexuality may not have played the defining part in the Scandinavian conception of honor, it was, as Miller admits, hardly negligible. *Grágás* has clear things to say on matters of adultery, public and private space, and accusations of sexual deviance. “[O]ne was allowed,” as Gunnar Karlsson summarizes, “to kill for a sexual assault against women in any one of six relationships to oneself: one’s wife, daughter, mother, sister, foster-daughter and foster-mother. If intercourse had taken place, the right to kill lasted until the next Althing; if not, that right was restricted to the place of action.”⁴³ Elsewhere we read that the proper place for women is “*fyrir iNan stock*” (within the threshold), that of men being presumably outside.⁴⁴ In the laws against *níð*, the three insults punishable by death involve the emasculation of the insulted. These were to call a man *ragr*, *stroðinn*, or *sorðinn*, that is, to claim that a man has played the female role in sexual intercourse.⁴⁵ To this list the Norwegian *Law of Gulathing* adds the following illegal insults: claiming that a man has given birth to a child, and comparing a man to a female animal.⁴⁶ In the sagas, moreover, cuckoldry and illegitimacy were not taken lightly. Gris, having caught his betrothed Kolfinna in the arms of Hallfreðr, regarded the scene as a challenge to his honor: “auðsætt er þat at við mik vill hann nu illt eiga ok er slikt til hræsni gert” (It is evident that he wants to quarrel with me and that he acts

⁴³ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 58; *Grágás: Konungsbók* (Odense: Odense UP, 1974), 164 (§ 90).

⁴⁴ *Grágás: Staðarbólsbók* (Odense: Odense UP, 1974), 173 (§ 141); Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 117.

⁴⁵ *Grágás: Staðarbólsbók*, 392 (§ 376); Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974), 6; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (Odense: Odense UP, 1983), 17.

⁴⁶ *Den eldre Gulatingslova*, ed. Bjørn Eithun et al. (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 1994), 123 (§ 196).

thus to ridicule).⁴⁷ The ascribed honor of Olaf the Peacock, whose mother was the Irish slave Melkorka, suffered on account of his illegitimacy. Melkorka, who stems from a noble Irish line, urges her son to visit Ireland: “Eigi nenni ek, at þú sér ambáttarsonr kallaðr lengr” (I am not willing to have you called a servant’s son any longer).⁴⁸

Though we cannot say that the relationship between honor and gender in medieval Scandinavia and the biblical world overlapped perfectly, the similarities are clear. Whereas a Scandinavian audience probably did not, for instance, understand the startled reaction of the disciples upon seeing Jesus conversing with a woman in public – “They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman” (John 4.27) – they surely would have understood the admonitions against adultery in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.27-30).

Challenge and Riposte

If we consider the primacy of honor in the early Mediterranean and medieval Scandinavian value systems in conjunction with the perception that honor existed in limited supply, it is easy to imagine that “claims to worth” in these societies were often contested. In a study of Kabyle society, Pierre Bourdieu described this contest for honor in terms of a dialectic of challenge and riposte.⁴⁹ Though the logic of the dialectic also applies to gift giving, battle, and, among other things, acts of blood revenge, it is most manifest in verbal ex-

⁴⁷ *Hallfredar saga*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 27-28 (Ch. 4).

⁴⁸ *Laxdala saga*, ÍF 5, 50 (ch. 20).

⁴⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society,’ in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, 191-242 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 197-215.

changes. Its steps, first applied to the biblical world by Malina,⁵⁰ may be summarized so: “(1) claim of worth and value, (2) challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim, (3) riposte or defense of the claim, and (4) public verdict of success awarded either to claimant or challenger.”⁵¹

A fine illustration of this type of exchange takes place at Luke 13.10-17, where Jesus is challenged for healing on the sabbath. In this case the claim to worth is the pronouncement of healing – “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (Luke 13.12) – which implies that Jesus has authority from God.⁵² The challenge comes from the ruler of the synagogue, who suggests that Jesus, having healed on the sabbath, cannot be a man of God: “But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day’” (Luke 13.14). Jesus begins his riposte with an insult, and goes on to show that his challengers also break the sabbath: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?” (Luke 13.15). The public verdict of this exchange favors the claimant: “When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.” (Luke 13.17). Examples of challenge and riposte can be found throughout the Gospels, though in many cases certain steps of the model are only implied.⁵³ Regarding the frequency of such

⁵⁰ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 31.

⁵¹ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 20.

⁵² Malina and Neyrey, ‘Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts,’ 50. See also John 9.31-33.

⁵³ See Matt 2.16-19; 4.1-11; 9.1-8, 10-13, 14-17; 12.1-14, 24-32; 13.53-58; 15.1-20; 16.1-4, 22-23; 19.3-9; 21.14-17, 23-27; 22.15-46; Mark 2.1-28; 3.1-6; 3.20-34; 7.1-8; 10.1-12; 11.27-33; 12.13-27; Luke 4.16-30; 5.17-26, 29-32; 6.1-11; 10.25-37; 11.14-26, 37-41; 13.10-17; 14.1-6; 15.1-32; 19.1-10; 20.1-9, 20-40.

exchanges, we must keep in mind that public space in the early Mediterranean world was the venue of constant competition among men and thus, as Neyrey notes, “every time Jesus appears in public, that is, outside of his own kinship circle, people engage him in honor challenges.”⁵⁴

Things were similar in medieval Iceland, as Miller describes it, where “[h]onor was at stake in virtually every social interaction,”⁵⁵ and where the game of protecting one’s honor was laborious “because it demanded the greatest sensitivity to insult and challenge and because there were no intermissions once it started at the onset of physical maturity.”⁵⁶ Vestiges of challenge and riposte from medieval Scandinavia are the laws against *níð*, mentioned above, and the stylized exchanges known as *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, which “refer to hostile verbal matches in which two or more contenders by boasts and insults, imputations and rebukes, or other degrading devices try to injure each other’s honor, or encroach upon each other’s social prestige.”⁵⁷ Though scholars have devoted most of their energy determining the specific literary features of these exchanges – some arguing for distinct genres,⁵⁸ some that they are the essentially the same⁵⁹ – in this context they are interesting as reflec-

⁵⁴ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 45.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁷ Marcel M. H. Bax and Tineke Padmos, ‘Senna – Mannjafnaðr,’ in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano, 571-73 (New York: Garland, 1993), 571.

⁵⁸ Marcel M. H. Bax and Tineke Padmos, ‘Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic: The Interactional Structure of the *Senna* and the *Mannjafnaðr* in *Hárbarðsljóð*,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983), 149-74; Antje G. Frotscher, ‘Old Norse Prose *sennur*: Testing the Boundaries of a Genre,’ *Quaestio* 2 (2001), 44.

⁵⁹ Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd’s Drinking Contest,’ in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al., 94-119 (Odense: Odense UP, 1979), 97; Carol J. Clover, ‘The Germanic Context of

tions of everyday agonistic interaction. Independent of Bourdieu, scholars have developed models of the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* that resemble the model of challenge and riposte outlined above. Joseph Harris observes: “It is possible [...] to extract a standard structural framework for the *senna*: there is a Preliminary, comprising an Identification and Characterization, and then a Central Exchange, consisting of either Accusation and Denial, Threat and Counterthreat, or Challenge and Reply or a combination.”⁶⁰ Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos schematize the *mannjafnaðr* of *Hárbarðsljóð* in similar terms, as an exchange of claims, rejections, and defenses.⁶¹

The flyting matches between Skarpheðinn and various chieftains at the Althing,⁶² whether representative of the *senna* or not, well suit the model of challenge and riposte. Throughout the scene, Skarpheðinn’s fierce appearance – his claim to worth – instigates challenges. In the last of these exchanges, Þorkell Þorgeirsson challenges the claim by saying that, however menacing, Skarpheðinn appears to him “ógæfusamligr ok illmannligr” (luckless and wicked). The riposte includes a row of insults: Þorkell threatened his own father, he seldom participates in lawsuits, he would be better off milking cows, and he performs disgusting acts on his mare:

the Unferþ Episode,’ *Speculum* 55 (1980), 445.

⁶⁰ Harris, ‘The *Senna*,’ 66. Harris is followed by Frotscher, ‘Old Norse Prose *sennur*,’ 50. See also Bax and Padmos, ‘Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic,’ 156, where the *senna* is likened to a fencing match; and Carol J. Clover, ‘*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 51 (1979), 125, who describes the “flyting” as “typically organized in the basic pattern of Claim, Denial, and Counterclaim.”

⁶¹ Bax and Padmos, ‘Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic,’ 161. Clover, ‘The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,’ 461, similarly describes Beowulf’s response to Unferþ (a *mannjafnaðr* scene) as “a paradigmatic Defense and Counterclaim.”

⁶² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF 12, 297-306 (chs. 119-20). The quotations below are from pages 304-05 (ch. 120).

Skarpheðinn mælti: „Ek heiti Skarpheðinn, ok er þér skuldlaust at velja mér hæðiyrdi, saklausum manni. Hefir mik aldri þat hent, at ek hafa kúgat fǫður minn ok barizk við hann, sem þú gerðir við þinn fǫður. Hefir þú ok lítt riðit til alþingis eða starfat í þingdeildum, ok mun þér kringra at hafa ljósaverk at búi þínu at Øxará í fásinninu. Er þér ok skyldara at stanga ór tǫnnum þér razgarnarendann merarinnar, er þú ázt, áðr þú reitt til þings, ok sá smalamaðr þinn ok undraðisk, hví þú gerðir slíka fúlmennsku.“

[Skarpheðin spoke: “My name is Skarpheðin and there’s no need for you to pick out insulting words for me, an innocent man. It’s never happened that I threatened my own father or fought him, as you did with your father. Also, you haven’t come to the Althing often or taken part in lawsuits, and you’re probably handier at dairy work amidst your little household at Oxara. You really ought to pick from your teeth the pieces from the mare’s arse you ate before riding to the Thing – your shepherd watched you and was shocked that you could do such a filthy thing.”]⁶³

Defeated, Þorkell reaches for his short sword and threatens to kill Skarpheðinn as soon as the opportunity arises: “Ok þegar ek nái þér, skal ek reka saxit í gegnum þik, ok skaltú þat hafa fyrir fáyrði þín” (And as soon as I’m close enough to you, I’ll run you through with this sword, and that’s what you’ll get for your foul language). News of this exchange apparently swept through the Althing, and we learn of the assessment of Guðmundr inn ríki, who, pleased that he had not been the victim of such crushing insults, remarks: “er þetta vel orðit” (That happened well/It’s good that that happened).

It is noteworthy that a typical reaction of those on the losing end of a verbal duel, those “put to shame,” is violence or the promise of future violence. Frederic Amory introduces his discussion

⁶³ The translation of this passage is from *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin, 1997), 204.

of verbally provoked violence in the sagas with the following Icelandic proverb: “Tunga er höfuðs bani” (The tongue is the death of the head).⁶⁴ This has a clear parallel in The Letter of James: “And the tongue is a fire” (James 3.6).⁶⁵ Comparable to Þorkell’s reaction is that of the Pharisees at Mark 3.6 who, having just lost a verbal duel, “went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” The reaction of the Judeans is similar at John 8.59: “So they picked up stones to throw at him.” Violence is not the only possible response, however; often those defeated in verbal duels are simply silenced. Because it marks the shameful inability to riposte, their silence is often explicitly reported in the sources. In *Bandamanna saga*, Egill’s sharp insults leave the chieftains Styrmir, Þórarinn, and Þorgeirr humiliated and speechless: “Nú þagnar Styrmir” (Now Styrmir falls silent), “Þórarinn [...] sezk niðr ok þagnar” (Þórarinn sits down and falls silent), “Þorgeirr þagnaði, en þeir Skegg-Broddi ok Járnkeggi vildu engum orðum skipta við Egil” (Þorgeirr fell silent, and Skegg-Broddi and Járnkeggi didn’t want to exchange any words with Egill).⁶⁶ Parallels from the New Testament include the response of the Pharisees, before they begin to plot Jesus’s demise, at Mark 3.4 – “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill? But they were silent” – and also a similar situation at Luke 14.5-6: “If one of you has a child [son] or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day? And they could not reply to this.”

⁶⁴ Frederic Amory, ‘Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 106 (1991), 57.

⁶⁵ Excerpts from James’s discussion of the tongue (3.2-12) appear in the Icelandic *Hómiljubók*; see *The Manuscript Stbm. Perg. 15 4^o*, ed. Van Weenen, 98v.

⁶⁶ *Bandamanna saga*, ÍF 7, 355-56 (ch. 10). For further examples, see Clover, ‘The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,’ 465.

As regards insults, a necessary element of the *senna*,⁶⁷ compare Jesus's response at Luke 13.15, which begins with the exclamation "Hypocrites!" (see above). About this particular case Malina and Neyrey remark: "Jesus resorts to name calling [...], which is highly effective in ripostes."⁶⁸ This insult, among others, occurs elsewhere, especially in Matthew 23, a chapter as caustic, though not as crude, as any scene from the sagas. Here Jesus denounces the Pharisees with a string of insults, including: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! [...] hypocrites! [...] blind guides [...] You blind fools! [...] How blind you are! [...] hypocrites! [...] you blind guides! [...] hypocrites! [...] You blind Pharisee! [...] hypocrites! [...] hypocrites! [...] You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets [...] You snakes, you brood of vipers!" (Matt 23.13-32). Though the insult "Hypocrites!" ("Actors!") is less biting today, we should remember that this harangue is the backdrop to Jesus's persecution, and that, in medieval Scandinavia, it was hardly honorable to say one thing and do another. In *Lokasenna*, for instance, Loki's closing insult to Bragi – an example of *sárorð* 'wounding-words' – is: "Sniallr ertu í sessi, scallatu svá gora, Bragi, beccsrautuðr," which Carlyne Larrington renders, "You're brave in your seat, but you won't do as you say, Bragi the bench-ornament!"⁶⁹ Like Jesus, John the Baptist also addresses the Pharisees with biting words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matt 3.7). In *Jons saga baptista II*, the insult "brood of vipers" occurs twice – "afkvæmi þeira orma," "ei-

⁶⁷ A discussion of boasting, the characteristic element of the *mannjafnaðr*, is beyond the scope of this paper. For now let me refer the reader to Terrance Callan, 'Competition and Boasting: Toward a Psychological Portrait of Paul,' *Studia Theologica* 40 (1986), 137-56.

⁶⁸ Malina and Neyrey, 'Honor and Shame in Luke/Acts,' 50.

⁶⁹ *Lokasenna* 15, in *Edda*, ed. Neckel, 99; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 87. For *sáryrðom*, see stanza 19.

tорма undireldi”⁷⁰ – and because of its effectiveness John is praised, it seems, for speaking “snarpliga” (sharply) and for delivering an “orðasláttir” (word-mowing).⁷¹ Finally, the insults that Jesus forbids in the Sermon on the Mount, “Raka” (meaning ‘empty-head, fool’) and “You fool” (Vulgate *fatue*; Matt 5.22), call to mind the opening of the *senna* between Grep and Ericus in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*: “Stulte, quis es?” (Fool! Who are you?)⁷²

As we have seen, the model of challenge and riposte applies quite well to the competitive, honor-driven societies in question. Two brief observations remain, however, that might provide a fuller picture.

Duels between Equals. Bourdieu stresses that, in Kabyle society, challenges of honor take place only between equals: “For a challenge to be made, the challenger must consider whoever he challenges to be worthy of it – to be, that is to say, in a position to riposte. [...] Recognition of one’s adversary as one’s own equal is therefore the basic condition of any challenge.”⁷³ This has been widely observed, and tends to hold true in most honor driven societies. About challenge and riposte in the biblical world, Neyrey remarks: “Only equals may play. Non-elites such as peasants or slaves simply do not have the honor capital to challenge aristocrats; nor will elites take the affront as an honor challenge, but simply punish insurrection and insubordination.”⁷⁴ Miller makes same observation about medieval Icelandic society: “[Honor was] accorded by people whom one admitted as equals. The ‘game’ required a competitive field populated by players everyone admitted as worthy

⁷⁰ *Jons saga baptista II*, in *Postola Sögur*, ed. C. R. Unger, 849-931 (Christiania: B. M. Bentzen, 1874), 874, 930 (chs. 18 and 41), respectively.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 930, 875 (chs. 41 and 18), respectively.

⁷² *Saxonis Grammatici historia Danica*, ed. Petrus Erasmus Müller, vol. 1 (Havniæ: Sumptibus Librariæ Gyldendaliansæ, 1839), 198 (Book V).

⁷³ Bourdieu, ‘The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society,’ 197.

⁷⁴ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 20.

of playing the game, all of roughly the same class and status. [...] A free man did not generally compete for honor with a slave or servant, nor a man with a woman, nor an adult with a child.”⁷⁵

It is to Jesus’s credit, then, that the learned scribes and Pharisees consider him fit to challenge. It is at the same time understandable why the high priests and Pilate, rather than regard Jesus’s activity as a challenge, dismiss it as a nuisance.⁷⁶ Telling examples from medieval Scandinavia are the introductory words of the *mannjafnaðr* between Eysteinn and Sigurðr in *Heimskringla* – “[J]afnt nafn höfum vit báðir ok jafna eign. Geri ek engi mun ættar okkarrar eða uppfæzlu” (We both are equal in name and possessions. There is no difference in our ancestry or breeding)⁷⁷ – and also the chieftain Hrafnkell’s reaction to being summoned to the law rock by Sámr, a mere *bóndi*: “Hann veiksk við skjótt ok kvaddi upp menn sína ok gekk til dóma, hugði, at þar myndi lítil vörn fyrir landi. Hafði hann þat í hug sér at leiða smámönnum at sækja mál á hendr honum” (He roused himself quickly and summoned his men and went to the court; he thought that Sámr had little defense. He had in his mind to discourage insignificant men from bringing cases against him).⁷⁸ Interesting too is how, in *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, King Harald, as if from a jester, actually invites the poet Halli to compose a potentially derisive verse about the queen: “Konungr bað Halla mælla nokkur tvíræðisorð við Þóru drottningu” (The king bid Halli to say some ambiguous words about Queen Thora).⁷⁹ In this situation, a

⁷⁵ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 31-32.

⁷⁶ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 32.

⁷⁷ *Magnússon saga*, in *Heimskringla III*, ÍF 28, 259 (ch. 21). See Bax and Padmos, “Two Types of Verbal Dueling,” 157.

⁷⁸ *Hrafnkells saga Freysgoða*, in *An Introduction to Old Norse*, ed. E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. A. R. Taylor, 58-86 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 74 (ch. 6).

⁷⁹ *Þátttr af Sneglu - eða Grantar - Halla*, in *Sex sögu-þáttir*, ed. Jón Þorkelsson, 2nd ed., 18-43 (Kaupmannahöfn: Skandinavisk Antiquariat, 1895), 41 (ch. 10).

man of Halli's social status could hardly affront the king.

The Public Venue. It has already been noted that honor is a publicly acknowledged claim to worth and that the verdict of the public forms the final step in the game of challenge and riposte. Honor did not exist without an audience, whose role it was not only to judge the performances of those engaged in competitions, such as battles or a verbal duels, but also to spread the news. We should keep in mind the simple idea that societies without televisions, radios, and newspapers had to devise other ways to make things known. The social function of rumor and gossip was therefore much greater in the early Mediterranean and Scandinavian societies than it is today. Already in the first chapter of Mark, for instance, rumors of Jesus's acts have traveled widely: "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mark 1.28). In classical literature, rumor is so influential a force that is often personified: "Rumor, a messenger, went swiftly throughout the whole city," "Rumor blazed among them," "By no means does a rumor perish that many people spread. It too is somehow a god," "Rumor, an evil swifter than any other: It strives when in motion, and acquires strength by going."⁸⁰

In Icelandic literature, the tidings (*tíðindi*) are constantly desired, and lines such as these are typical: "Þetta spurðisk um alla Breiðafjarðardali" (This was reported throughout all Breiðafjord Dales), "Á þetta lögðu menn mikla umræðu" (About this men made much talk), "Þesse tíþende fáo ro víþa" (These tidings spread widely).⁸¹ That honor and "being talked about" go hand in hand is clear in the Greek, Latin and Old Norse versions of Matt 14.1 – "At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus" – where, for "re-

⁸⁰ *Odyssey* XXIV, 413; *Iliad* II, 93; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 763-64; *Aeneid* IV, 174-75, respectively.

⁸¹ *Laxdala saga*, ÍF 5, 147 (ch. 47); *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ed. Gordon, 77 (ch. 6); 'Nativitas sancti Johannis baptiste,' in *The Manuscript Stbm. Perg. 15 4º*, ed. Van Weenen, 5v, respectively.

ports,” we read *tæn akoēn* ‘the hearing, report, fame’, *famam* ‘the talk of the multitude, public opinion, fame, glory’, and *frægð* ‘good report, fame, renown’.⁸² The importance of spreading the news is especially clear in a scene from *Egils saga*, in which Skalla-Grímr and his companions kill all but a few of their numerous enemies in order that those spared might relate the story: “Síðan lét Skalla-Grímr lausa fara þá menn, er hann hafði grið gefit, ok bað þá fara á fund Haralds konungs ok segja honum vendiliga frá þeim tíðendum, er þar gerðusk” (Then Skalla-Grímr let the men go free, to whom he had granted peace, and asked them to travel to King Harald and tell him the tidings, what had been done there, very carefully).⁸³

Conclusion

There would be little need to bring together the scholarship devoted to early Mediterranean and medieval Scandinavian social-systems if Christianity had never made it to the North. Because the Bible was of “fundamental significance”⁸⁴ to medieval Scandinavian culture, however, it is worth asking how this early Mediterranean text was understood in its new environment. Evidently, certain aspects of the New Testament did not clash with the honor-driven culture of medieval Scandinavia, and the arrival of Gospels did not, entirely, leave its new audience “under strain,” “rifted,” or “facing a dilemma.” Far from overturning the Scandinavian ethos of honor and vengeance – fueled as it was by the public acknowledgement or rejection of claims to worth – I suggest that Christianity, more than anything else, introduced a new member (judge) to the community, namely the Christian god. This conclusion has historical-religious implications to the extent that it alters, if only to a small degree, our

⁸² The definitions are from standard dictionaries. Old Norse *frægð* is from *Jons saga baptista II*, ed. Unger, 918.

⁸³ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF 2, 69-70 (ch. 27).

⁸⁴ Kirby, “The Bible and Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Iceland,” 287.

perspective of the Scandinavian reception of Christianity. It has literary implications, too, in that it reduces the long-standing importance of “pagan-Christian conflict” to our interpretations of honor-driven behavior depicted in Old Norse literature.

Neyrey argues convincingly that much of the Sermon on the Mount is devoted to the reversal of cultural expectations, especially as regards the values of honor and shame;⁸⁵ as mentioned above, it is here where Jesus preaches against insults and, it follows, verbal duels. Though a revisionist, Jesus was entrenched in the culture of his day. To various degrees he is portrayed as participating in the culturally specific practices that he denounces. In the case of the agonistic practice of challenge and riposte, Jesus must participate in the game in order to undermine it; he must defeat the authorities – scribes, Pharisees, among others – at the contest in order to proscribe, with his own newly achieved authority, the contest itself. Though we tend to overlook these things today, Jesus’s skill at verbal duels, and the honor he acquired through this skill, would not have escaped the attention of a medieval Scandinavian audience.

⁸⁵ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 190-211.