Ageing in *íslendingasögur*

A Study of *Laxdæla saga, Njáls saga, Eyrbyggja saga,* and *Egils saga*

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Abstract

This thesis discusses how the elderly are represented in the four Icelandic family sagas, *Laxdæla saga, Brennu-Njáls saga, Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar.* It looks to analyse what ‘old’ is, what the signs of being ‘old’ are, how society views the elderly and how the elderly view themselves. Since these sagas focus on the wealthy and powerful, the scope is limited to the powerful, with only a few instances of lower-class elderly individuals. Of particular interest to this thesis are the differences in physical ageing between men and women and how they are treated as they age.

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For all my grandparents

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Introduction

This thesis will analyse and discuss the depiction of the elderly in *íslendingasögur* (Icelandic family sagas) and how the elderly react to their changing situations, with an emphasis on how men and women respond to ageing differently. I will specifically discuss *Eyrbyggja saga, Brennu-Njáls saga, Laxdæla saga,* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar.* There are many more examples of the elderly in other *íslendingasögur,* but to keep within the limits of this thesis I have chosen to leave them aside and focus on these four. These four sagas have long narratives that follow individuals through their lives into old age and death, and each includes different proportions of men and women. *Laxdæla saga* contains more details about women in their old age than men, while *Njáls saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* focus more on men, and *Egils saga* includes vivid images of old age in men, but none of old women. The questions that this thesis hopes to answer about these *íslendingasögur* are: How do these *íslendingasögur* treat the ageing of men and women differently? What is ageing/what are its characteristics in these sagas? How do the elderly, and people around them, react to the changes in situation that accompany age?

The main characters of these *íslendingasögur* are all from powerful and wealthy families. Their families contain *goðar* (chieftains), many of them can afford ships to sail abroad and have audiences with kings. This means that these characters are only a small sample and do not represent a very broad strata of society. It is further made smaller by the fact that many of the characters in the sagas do not reach old age. Interesting characters that are worthy of being in the stories are usually a part of battles and feuds that lead to them dying at fairly young ages. As such, the elderly characters that remain in the sagas are few, and so are not an absolute representation of what the authors, society in real life, or the sagas, thought about the elderly. There are a few mentions of less important elderly individuals that assist in carrying the plot, but they receive only very brief descriptions. Frequently, as people age, the sagas simply stop talking about them or give them a brief farewell by saying that they are old, and then move on to talking about their heirs or other more important matters.

Scholarship in the fields of gender and ageing studies in Medieval Iceland has increased greatly in the last twenty-five years or so. Nevertheless, they are still small

fields of study. Previous scholars have emphasised the negative perception the *íslendingasögur* have of the elderly and how personhood in medieval Icelandic society was based on function. When a person could no longer contribute to the household or society, and they were chronologically old enough, then they were 'old.' As they became old, they began to lose their place in society.[1] For instance, Egill Skalla-Grímsson of *Egils saga* starts off as a very powerful individual from a young age, but as the saga follows him into his old age, he loses his power and is no longer treated as the person he used to be. The issue is more complex however, as responses to the elderly differ and people age differently.

I intend to focus on the cases of elderly individuals in *Njáls saga, Egils saga, Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* from a cultural studies point of view, without participating in the discussion of whether the literature is strictly historical or not. The sagas represent how the authors, and perhaps the larger society as a whole, viewed the age group. I will also include an element of gender studies, as I will analyse the differences between men and women in ageing.

First, I intend to look at the physical signs of ageing that are closely connected with the concept of ageing. This includes hair loss, vision loss, weakness and stiffness in the body, and changes in the reproductive system. Most of these have negative connotations, but some have benefits, and they are different for men and women, especially regarding sexual changes. I will then look at cognitive changes in the elderly in these sagas, the ambivalence that is shown regarding physical and mental changes, and the attitudes towards them. Next, I will look at how society responds to the changes in the elderly, and the loss or retention of roles in society and the family. Lastly, I will discuss how the elderly view themselves, their changing positions, and how men and women differ in their responses to their own ageing.

[1] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old', Ageism and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland *c*. 900-1300," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson, The Northern World (Boston, United States: Brill, 2008), 230-31. Thomas Morcom, "After Adulthood: the Metamorphoses of the Elderly in the *Íslendingasögur*," *Saga-Book* 42 (2018): 25-26. Gillian R. Overing, "A body in question: Aging, community, and gender in medieval Iceland," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1999): 212.

Old Age in Medieval Iceland

To begin, a definition of old age is needed. This is a fluid term and can be used to describe chronological age, physical age, or mental age. Societies define what 'old' is differently, so it is difficult to describe absolutely. Ageing is usually a slow process that is dependent on a variety of factors, including the society and an individual's place in that society. Medieval European theorists have created many theories on the stages of life, with the onset of old age starting variously at thirty-five and up to seventy-two years of age. As is usual, most of these are specifically designed around men and not women. Across Europe the elderly were recognised as a separate group from adults and some accommodations were made. For instance, old men could be exempt from military service.[2] However, the situation is different in the sagas being discussed because most of the people have settled in Iceland and left the kings behind. The settlers started new lives in a country with no governing body. After the *Alþingi* was created, the expectations of people were different than in most European kingdoms. For instance, while the testimony of the elderly was valued in European courts, Icelandic disputes were settled by *goðar* and age was not particularly valued for this.[3]

In Medieval sources, the image of 'the old person' could be varied. The more flattering stereotype shows older people as wise and restrained, the ideal adult. The unpleasant stereotype describes them as impulsive, stingy, and prone to ill moods, similar to cranky children. Some, of course, could be a combination of these, such as wise and stingy. Regardless of the individual's personality, the older body itself was regarded with distaste. This adds to the seemingly ambivalent attitudes towards the elderly, as the changes in the body could give people opportunities to improve themselves through their suffering, along with the possibility of less lustful or emotional tendencies. However, feebleness and illness could be a punishment for a person's life and sin. In both cases, the old body itself is viewed as unpleasant.[4]

Several scholars have argued that ageing in Iceland was based on a person´s ability to function in society. When the elderly could not function because they were growing weak or went blind, then they lost their position and became liminal beings.

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[2] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages : 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain'* (London, United States: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 12, 15-19, 25-26.
[3] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 236-37.
[4] Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages,* 55-56, 70-71.

Regardless of whether a famous hero had a notable reputation, or family and friends valued an elderly person, the elderly were on the edge of society much like children. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has argued that in Iceland, there were three stages of life as determined by a person's functionality. A child becomes an adult when it functions as one, and then loses this status and becomes 'old' when they no longer can function as one.[5] The old are divided into the chronologically old and the functionally old. For instance, there are many characters with the byname *inn gamli* (the old), who are still important in society, they are still in control of their household and participate in the *Alþingi*. Especially for those who are powerful, there is much to lose. Where they once were in control of their homestead and could participate in the larger society, they are then living at the mercy of those with whom they live, and they do not have a role in the law.[6] Ármann Jakobsson has argued that medieval Icelanders could reasonably have lived into their eighties and nineties and retained power. While the accuracy of these specific characters being discussed and their ages is questionable, it is not unreasonable to consider that people could have been quite old, and still retained their positions in their families and society.[7]

The issue becomes more complicated as characters in these sagas do not age in the same way. Some people retain their positions even when they are physically weak. Men and women also experience ageing differently. Moreover, the sagas often write off a character with a variation of the phrase "x bjó í y til elli," (x dwelled at y into old age) for instance, "Óláfr… hann bjó í Hvammi til elli,"[8] and "Sǫkkólfi gaf hon [Unnr] Sǫkkólfsdal, ok bjó hann þar til elli."[9] This means that we do not get many details about people through the ageing process. Those few people that do get depicted in old age show that the saga writers did not view old age as one simple stereotype. They saw that people aged differently, some died young, some lost their eyesight, some lost their physical strength, some lost respect, while

[5] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 230-31. Morcom, "After Adulthood," 25-26. Overing, "A Body in Question," 212.
[6] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 237-42.
[7] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Patriarch: Myth and Reality," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson, The Northern World (Boston, United States: Brill, 2008), 283.
[8] *Laxdæla saga*, vol. V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, (Reykjavík: Híð íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 13. "[Olaf] lived at Hvamm into his old age." "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 6.
[9] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 10. "To Sokkolf [Unn] gave the valley Sokkolfsdal, where he lived into his old age." "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 5.

others had none of this happen and retained their bodily and societal powers until death. Many people had combinations of the features of ageing and a few even gained power in their old age.

Depictions of Ageing in these *Íslendingasögur*: Physical and Mental Changes

In *Egils saga, Njáls saga, Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, there are several common physical changes that characterise when someone is old. Some of the characteristics displayed in these sagas are hair loss, vision loss, hearing loss, stiffness/weakness in limbs, and sexual changes. Some of these are more important than others, and the combination of two or more enhance the signs of age. Previous scholars have argued that when these changes rendered a person unable to function in Icelandic society, then they were considered old. These changes affected both men and women, but they could do so differently. The most obvious difference is changes in the reproductive systems. Different societal roles of individuals could result in the same signs of ageing, such as blindness, bringing different results to different people.

Hair Loss

Simply being bald could result in a nickname or insults, but if a person was entirely capable otherwise it did not signify truly being old. Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson is bald at the age of twenty-five, so is called *Skalla* (bald) Grímr.[10] His son Egill also "varð snimma skǫllóttr*."*[11] In their younger days Skalla-Grímr and Egill are powerful men, and their lack of hair is less important than their abilities. However, later in life Egill connects his own baldness with the rest of his ageing body:

> *Vals hefk vǫfur helsis;*
> *váfallr em ek skalla;*
> *blautr erum bergis fótar*
> *borr, en hlust es þorrin.*[12]

The loss of hair was, and is, most commonly a male issue. Carl Phelpstead argues that the loss of hair for men in the Icelandic sagas was a form of emasculation because it was so closely connected to gender. There were specific social norms for how men and women should cut and style their hair, with women

[10] *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, vol. II, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, (Reykjavík: Híð íslenzka fornritafélag, 1993), 50.
[11] *Egils Saga*, II, 143. "became bald early."
[12] *Egils Saga*, II, 294. "I have a shaking horse of the collar [= neck]; I am inclined to fall onto my bald head; my borer of the hill of the leg is soft, and my hearing has diminished." Carl Phelpstead, "Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders," *Exemplaria* 19, no. 3 (2007): 425.

having long hair and men cutting theirs. However, for men, when their hair is cut too short, especially involuntarily, it is humiliating. Both Phelpstead and Ármann Jakobsson have compared it to castration. Baldness was associated with lack of manliness and people could have their heads shaved as a punishment. Baldness may have been less common since life expectancy was lower than today, but when people became bald such as Egill and his father, they were mocked for it. Phelpstead notes that this is a very clear sign of how masculinity and identity are unfixed and can be lost easily.[13] While hair is connected to masculinity, the loss of it does not seem to have connections with femininity. A man might lose his hair and be less of a man for it, but it does not make him more like a woman. Instead, long hair would have that connotation. The tonsure could be mocked and compared to women as "real men…are warriors, not monks,"[14] but this has less to do with age and more to do with lifestyle choices. The appearance of old age was undesirable even if one was still physically capable because of the negative connotations associated with it.

Vision and Hearing Loss

The loss of vision is a much more problematic change as it inhibits a person's ability to function, and it is tied closely to ageing. Those who became blind at younger ages could be employed as skalds or labourers, but it was very difficult for them to gain a high status. Those who went blind with age, did not get to find use in other occupations. Going blind after youth, and without a cause such as an injury, made one old whether they were in their fifties or eighties.[15] Many characters in the *íslendingasögur* go blind and some even receive the byname *blindi* because of it.[16]

Þóroddr Þorbrandsson´s foster-mother in *Eyrbyggja saga* has the gift of foresight and she has gone blind in her old age. When a bull-calf is born with Þórólfr *bægifótr´s* spirit in it, she warns that the calf should be killed, or it will end badly for

[13] Carl Phelpstead, "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland," *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 1 (2013): 4-8. Ármann Jakobsson, "Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of "Hrólfi saga kraka"," *Scandinavian Studies* 71, no. 2 (1999): 154.
[14] Phelpstead, "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow," 12.
[15] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 232; Christopher Crocker, Yoav Tirosh, and Ármann Jakobsson, "Disability in Medieval Iceland: Some Methedological Concerns," in *Understanding Disability Throughout History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Iceland from Settlement to 1936*, ed. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James G. Rice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 19.
[16] For instance, Ámundi *inn blindi* Hǫskuldsson, who is blind from birth. He cannot get revenge or compensation for his father's slaying until he miraculously gains sight to kill Lýtingr. He then goes blind again for the rest of his life. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, vol. XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, (Reykjavík: Híð íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), 272-73.

them. No one heeds her warnings because they think she is doting and Þóroddr even goes so far as to try and trick her into thinking he killed the calf but instead kills a cow-calf. She is correct in the end and Þóroddr is killed by the bull.[17] Jon Gunnar Jørgensen has argued that there is a connection between blindness and foresight, as the blind are able to see things that are hidden from ordinary vision. This is often connected to time, seeing the past or the future.[18] The men choose not to listen to her because they see her as old and senile, yet the narrator states that her seeing abilities have continued into her old age. Her blindness actually emphasises her abilities to see beyond the norm. The narrator is indirectly saying that the younger man of Þóroddr is foolish to not listen to the woman, old though she is, because she still has her abilities. Her blindness is the only sign of ageing that is mentioned, but presumably her body is also ageing. This, and her chronological age, seem to be enough for the younger men to decide that her counsel is unimportant.

Egill of *Egils saga* also goes blind, and loses his hearing, in his old age. His vision loss is discussed more than his hearing loss, and appears to be more of an impediment. He laments his blindness, and how he cannot see to place himself and his limbs where they ought to be. When he is in the way around the home, the working women mock him and one of the men advises him to be careful not to burn his feet near the fire. Egill also laments his vision loss in his poetry:

> Hvarfak blindr of branda,
> biðk eirar Syn geira,
> þann berk harm á hvarma
> hnitvǫllum mér, sitja;
> es jarðgǫfugr orðum,
> orð mín konungr forðum
> hafði gramr at gamni,
> Geirhamðis mik framði.[19]

His weakening senses are an impediment to Egill being able to retain his old social position as head of a household, yet he finds a way to have the last say about

[17] *Eyrbyggja saga*, vol. IV, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, and Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit, (Reykjavík: Híð íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), 171-76.
[18] Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, "Kunnskap i det Mytiske Universet," *Maal og Minne* 112, no. 2 (2021): 75, 86-87, http://ojs.novus.no/index.php/MOM/article/view/1900.
[19] *Egils Saga*, II, 295. “Blind I wandered to sit by the fire, / asked the flame-maiden for peace; / such affliction I bear on the border / where my eyebrows cross. / Once when the land-rich king / took pleasure in my words / he granted me the hoard / that giants warded, gold.“ "Egil’s Saga," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 175.

some of his wealth even so.[20] Despite his blindness, he orders two thralls to go with him, he takes his silver, hides it, and then kills the two thralls.[21] Another example of blindness also comes from *Egils saga.* Ǫnundr *sjóni* becomes old and loses some of his vision, so gives over the control of the household to his son, Steinarr. However, Ǫnundr still plays a part in the dispute between his son and Egill´s son, Þorsteinn, because of his friendship with Egill. He also continues work on the farm despite his vision loss.[22] Yoav Tirosh has noted that while people who were deaf, or had difficulty speaking, were limited in their ability to participate in the legal system, they were still protected somewhat. They could use runes or gestors to communicate.[23] So while the lives of people with disabilities were limited, they were not necessarily omitted from society because of their disability.

The writer of *Laxdæla saga* indicates that they are unsure whether Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir loses her sight, or not. She lives as a nun in her old age and her solitude leaves it to be guessed.[24] Thomas Morcom argues that this preserves her image because it does not show her falling into decreptitude.[25] It also indicates that going blind was commonly associated with old age, as the writer is not sure if it happened but it is quite probable. Jørgensen connects Guðrún‘s blindness with her new faith, as through her new faith she gains a new and deeper insight. Thus, vision loss is a symbol of old age and a debilitating effect of old age, however it can also be connected with seeing that which is hidden from normal sight.[26] The younger characters in the sagas usually do not respect the old and blind, but the narrators indicate that people should not be so quick to disregard the elderly. The old and blind could still be wise and dangerous.

Weakening of the Body

The most debilitating sign of bodily ageing is the stiffening and weakening of the body. In medieval European texts and images, the old body was visually unappealing and there was no image of the straight-backed old man, this came

[20] Crocker, Tirosh, and Jakobsson, "Disability in Medieval Iceland," 20.
[21] *Egils Saga*, II, 294-98.
[22] *Egils Saga*, II, 277, 84-88, 90.
[23] Yoav Tirosh, "Deafness and Nonspeaking in Late Medieval Iceland (1200-1550)," *Viator* 51, no. 1 (2020): 319-23.
[24] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 228-29.
[25] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 45.
[26] Jørgensen, "Kunnskap i det Mytiske Universet," 88.

later.[27] Weakening is frequently mentioned when a person is declared old in these sagas. Most of these are men specifically, with Unnr *djúpúðga* being one of the few female characters whose loss of physical strength is mentioned. She has a more traditionally male role than the other women however, so this might be why it is mentioned for her and not the others. She is also an important person, so receives more details about her life than many other women.

Unnr *in djúpúðga* (the deep-minded) Ketilsdóttir is a chieftain in *Laxdæla saga.* She has a ship built, moves her family to Iceland and establishes a settlement there. She arranges marriages for her children and grandchildren. She remains in control of her household until her last day, even as she ages. She stops travelling but people come to her for advice, and she does not let people see her when she is weak. Because of her age, Unnr goes to bed early and rises late, but does not let people see her when she is in her bed chamber. She also becomes irritable with people when they ask about her health. She goes on to choose her heir, her youngest grandson Óláfr *feilan,* and she arranges his marriage with the expectation that it will be her last feast. On the day of the wedding feast, she gets up and performs her duties well. Unnr then hands over the household to Óláfr and goes to bed. When Óláfr comes to see her, he finds her dead, sitting up in her bed. She is then given a ship burial with much wealth inside of it.[28] Unnr hides her weakening body to the best of her abilities and adapts so that she can retain her role in her family and community. If people saw her as incapable of fulfilling her position, she would lose it.

There are several brief mentions in these sagas about how a character is older and weaker. In *Laxdæla saga,* Víga-Hrappr is a violent man in his prime, but in old age he weakens and is forced to lie in bed.[29] His brother-in-law, Þorsteinn *surtr*, also becomes old and in need of care, so his son-in-law, Þórarinn, and daughter, Ósk, live with him.[30] In *Njáls saga,* Njáll begins to weaken and at the *Alþingi,* Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson helps Njáll off of his horse, takes him inside, and sits him in his highseat. Later at the burning of Bergþórshváll, Njáll says that he does not want to

[27] Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages,* 51.
[28] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 3-13. Unnr is mentioned in other works, *Landnámabók, Eiríks saga rauða, Grettis saga, Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga*, but *Laxdæla saga* provides the most details about her in her old age.
[29] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 39.
[30] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 20.

live because he is old and cannot avenge his sons.[31] Njáll thus acknowledges clearly at his death that he is old and, presumably, physically unable to seek revenge. These specific passages do not tell us that Njáll is weak directly, but he would not need someone to carry him inside if he was physically strong, and likewise if he was physically hale, he would be able to fight to avenge his sons´ deaths.[32]

Egils saga follows several generations into their old age as well. There are two other characters, along with Egill, that create verses to bemoan their growing old and failing in body. The latter is described as growing old, and growing weaker and slower, by both the narrator and Egill in the verses shown previously. At one point Egill is walking by a wall, trips and falls. A woman sees this and laughs at him saying that "Farinn ertu nú, Egill, með ǫllu, er þú fellr einn saman."[33] He also becomes cold, and so tries to stay close to the fire. Jesse Byock has argued that the size of Egill's bones, as mentioned at the end of the saga, are a sign of Paget's disease. This would account for his complaints in old age, poor balance, loss of sight and hearing, cold feet, headaches, and swaying head. It is not simply old age but advanced Paget's disease.[34] Another example of poetry lamenting old age comes from earlier in the story. King Haraldr asks Kveld-Úlfr to join him and his fleet, but "Kveld-Úlfr svarar, sagði, at hann var þá gamall, svá at hann var þá ekki til færr at vera úti á herskipum; 'mun ek nú heima sitja ok láta af at þjóna konungum'."[35] Kveld-Úlfr's son Þórólfr goes in his stead and later on when he dies Kveld-Úlfr creates verses about how his weak limbs prevent him from getting vengance:

> Nú frák norðr í eyju,
> norn erum grimm, til snimma
> Þundr kaus Þremja skyndi,
> Þórólf und lok fóru;
> létumk þung at þingi
> Þórs fangvina at ganga,
> skjótt munat hefnt, þótt hvettimk
> hugr, malm-Gnáar brugðit.[36]

[31] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 296, 330.
[32] It must be noted that Njáll was never a fighter himself, and scholars have argued that Njáll chose to die there for other reasons than being unable to avenge his sons, some of which I will discuss later.
[33] *Egils Saga*, II, 294. "You're completely finished, Egill, now that you fall over of your own accord." "Egil's Saga," 174.
[34] Jessie L. Byock, "Egil's Bones," *Scientific American* 272, no. 1 (1995): 83-86.
[35] *Egils Saga*, II, 13. "Kveldulf replied that he was too old for being on fighting ships: 'So I shall stay at home now and give up serving kings'." "Egil's Saga," 37.
[36] *Egils Saga*, II, 60. The spinner of fate is grim to me: / I hear that Thorolf has met his end / on a northern isle; too early / the Thunderer chose the swinger of swords. / The hag of old who once

“The hag of old“ mentioned here is old age herself and Kveld-Úlfr is old so he cannot bring about the revenge he wants. Later Kveld-Úlfr is forced into battle where he uses his berserker rage or shapeshifting abilties, which make him a very effective killer, but afterward leave him weak and he dies. So while he is physically capable of fighting, despite his previous complaints, it does result in his death. In *Laxdæla saga,* Hólmgǫngu-Bersi creates verses when the baby Halldórr falls out of his cradle and Bersi is feeling ill so cannot help. He compares the powerlessness of them both but with the distinction that Halldórr will get better, grow up, while Bersi’s condition will only worsen.

Liggjum báðir
í lamasessi
Halldórr ok ek,
hǫfum engi þrek;
veldr elli mér,
en œska þér,
þess batnar þér,
en þeygi mér.[37]

Skalla-Grímr ages similarly to Egill; he gets older and becomes infirm, leading to his son taking over the management of the property. When Egill refuses to give Skalla-Grímr any of the silver he received from King Aðalsteinn, Skalla-Grímr takes a chest and kettle, rides away, and hides them. He then returns home and dies the same night. His body is so stiff in the morning that only when Egill comes back and forces him, will the body relax.[38] Even in death Skalla-Grímr refuses to lie down. Like his father and son, Skalla-Grímr becomes old and weak but manages to pull off one last feat of strength before his death.

Laxdæla also has the only other mention of an older woman becoming physically weaker with age. Melkorka is the daughter of an Irish king, and she is brought as a slave to Iceland. She has a son, Óláfr, with Hǫskuldr and he later goes to Ireland to meet his grandfather and Melkorka’s foster-mother. The foster-mother is old by this time and bed ridden, but she is so happy to receive news of Melkorka that she needs no staff to support her when she first goes to see Óláfr. Her health is also

wrestled with Thor / has left me unprepared to join / the valkyries‘ clash of steel. Urge as my spirit / may, my revenge shall not be swift. "Egil’s Saga," 59.

[37] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 76. In *Kormáks saga* a similar occurrence takes place, see *Kormáks saga, vol. VIII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, (Reykjavík: Híð íslenzka fornritafélag, 1958), 261.* “Both of us lie, / flat on our backs, / Halldor and I / helpless and frail. / Old age does this to me, / but youth to you, / you’ve hope of better, / but I, none at all.” "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 38.

[38] *Egils Saga*, II, 173-74.

better over the winter after this.[39] This leads to the more complex issue of physical ageing in these *íslendingasögur,* which is that people are described as old and weak in one sentence, only to not be described as such a short while later. Melkorka´s foster-mother is bed ridden, yet when she receives good news, she can suddenly walk without any aid. Egill is also described as weak and blind, yet when he is determined, he is able to ride away from home with a chest of silver, hide it and kill two people. We do not know how the killing happens, whether there is any resistance from the slaves, or whether the process is easy. Either way, this whole scene seems to contradict the narrator´s comments and Egill´s previous verses about how incapable he is. Skalla-Grímr is also said to be *hrumr,* (infirm or decrepit), and he also makes one last adventure on horseback before his death. This physical ageing is connected with emotions, as when Egill, Skalla-Grímr and the foster-mother are sad and out of place in the world, they deteriorate. With one last hope, news of Melkorka for her foster-mother, and determination to do what they want with their wealth for Egill and his father, they regain some strength for a while. Egill´s verses might be exaggerating his situation, but the narrator seems to indicate that he is in fact faring this poorly. As these elderly people lose their position and they feel emotionally down, they lose their physical capabilities, but as they regain some purpose or hope, so too do they regain physical strength, if only for a short while.

Changes in the Reproductive Systems

Along with these other signs of ageing, the reproductive systems undergo changes as people age. This for men was associated with becoming unmanly, although for women like Unnr and Guðrún it could mean more freedom. With the onset of menopause, women were unable to bear children, and likely grew less attractive. This means they were no longer sexual objects for men and were not expected to produce children.[40] While there were many other factors to deciding on a marriage, the ability to have sex and produce children were contributors. Women were less likely to be sought as wives once older. For wealthy widows this meant they had more independence, could own property, had some control over their children and would get a say if another marriage were arranged. Once they are past

[39] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 58.
[40] Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 61.

the childbearing age, there are less reasons for a woman to remarry, especially a wealthy one.[41] Guðrún is still fertile after her third marriage, and this may have contributed to her decision to marry again. Guðrún´s fourth marriage to Þorkell Eyjólfsson results in a child, proving she is still able to bear children when they marry, but after this she is likely fairly old, and past this point. After Þorkell´s death she does not remarry. Unnr also lives out her later years as a widow, with much independence. [42] Both of these women have married and born children, so their female role of being mothers and wives is not in question when they are no longer going to bear children or marry again. They have done these things, and while they are no longer bearing children or acting as wives they are not entirely stripped of the value that they received when they were so doing so. They retain successful reputations and are able to act more like men. Their reproductive changes contribute to them being able to take on more male roles, as well as to be more independent and authoritative. This is only speaking of women who are wealthy and have born children, it does not speak to women who are poor, or those unable to bear children.

There is a connection between the biological male sex organs and maleness as a social identity in the Icelandic sagas. Carl Phelpstead discusses this in light of Carol Clover's argument for a one-sex system in early Icelandic history. Clover has argued that the Viking and Medieval Scandinavian culture viewed the sexes on a scale rather than as two separate states of being; "the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall, the potential for sexual overlap in the social hierarchy was always present."[43] Phelpstead argues that on this scale, the possession of a *functional* set of male sex organs was necessary to being the ideal person.[44] The inability to have sex could be cause for a divorce and result in mockery as with Hrútr Herjólfsson, who Unnr Marðardóttir divorces for this reason, and children later mock him. Accusing him of being unable to have sex is an insult to Hrútr´s manliness.[45] Later in *Njáls saga,* Njáll´s manliness is questioned in a insult from Flosi, and Skarpheðinn defends him by saying that proof

[41] Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 368.
[42] Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 61-62.
[43] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 380.
[44] Phelpstead, "Size Matters," 421, 26-27.
[45] Phelpstead, "Size Matters," 430-32; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 24-29.

that he is a man lies in his children.[46] If he was not a man (could not perform sexually), he would not have the many children that he does. This is not necessarily saying that he can have children now, however, it implies that he certainly has been a man because of this. His other proofs, that Njáll does not leave family unavenged, etc, defend his current honour. This also challenges the more superficial argument of Flosi´s that insults his inability to grow a beard, which is less important to manliness than the ability to have children.

Egill also talks about his sexual abilities in his verses about his ageing, although this requires interpreting and the result is that he could be talking about his tongue, his penis, or both. He may be having issues with both of these in his old age. In the verses shown previously about hair loss Egill says: “my borer of the hill of the leg is soft”[47]

Phelpstead argues that,

> The “hill of the leg” may then be interpreted to mean “head,” in which case its borer or drill is the tongue and Egill is confessing an inability to compose verse as fluently as in the past. Alternatively a more obscene meaning of “hill of the leg” entails that its borer or drill is Egill’s penis. Given the skaldic love of double entendre it is likely both meanings are intended.[48]

Egill also begins to use words like *blautr* (soft/wet) and *helsis* (necklace) in his poetry, which have feminine connotations. The use of the tongue was associated with women and whetting, and erectile disfunction was a loss of manliness. This detracts from his identity as a man according to saga society’s standards.[49] Egill’s poetry, including the words he uses, reflect his change of status as less than a man.

Elderly men in these sagas have more to lose, in regard to sexual abilities, than elderly women. The women are less desirable as sexual objects, but it is not mentioned that they lose respect from this change as men do. The four sagas being discussed here never explicitly mention an old woman’s reproductive abilities or ability to perform sexually, so much of it must be inferred. There are, however, mentions of sexuality in women who are of unknown ages. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Katla, a widowed woman asks if a younger man, Gunnlaugr Þorbjǫrnson, will go to Geirríðr

[46] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 314.
[47] Phelpstead, "Size Matters," 425.
[48] Phelpstead, "Size Matters," 425.
[49] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 383-84; Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Boston, United States: Brill, 2008), 298-300.

Þórólfsdóttir “ok klappa um kerlingar nárann?”[50] In response Gunnlaugr reproaches her for insulting the other woman’s age because she is not young either. In accusing him of this, Katla is indicating that it is worthy of mocking a young man for having sexual relations with an old woman. However, Gunnlaugr turns this back on her with his response, indicating she cannot make such an insult without insulting herself. Shortly after this, Gunnlaugr is found severely wounded and people accuse Geirríðr of having “riðit honum,“[51] although Katla later admits she was responsible. We do not know how old these women are exactly, but as they both have grown sons, they cannot be very young, yet they seem to be very active in society and their bodies function well, so they cannot be very old. The underlying meaning here is that older women and younger men should not have sex together. When it does happen it is the older woman who has the power. The Norwegian queen, Gunnhildr, has romantic relations with many men across the sagas. One such man is Hrútr Herjólfsson, and while Gunnhildr is older than him, we do not know her exact age either. She is a character that is frequently connected with magic, and she later curses Hrútr for lying to her.[52] Medieval Iceland connected old age with magic. Magically powerful women were often dangerous, old, and ugly; although Gunnhildr, herself is not ugly.[53] Magic could be used as a way for women to assert power to achieve their own ends. They could use it for evil, but also to uphold the family, and avenge or protect it. So while old men suffered with the loss of sexual abilities, women had less to lose, and could be accused of witchcraft and being lecherous if they had sexual relations with men younger than them.

Age Without Physical Losses or Weakness

As I have previously mentioned, scholars have pointed out that true old age is connected to function in society. However, there are many characters that are chronologically older and physically strong. Plenty of people are given the byname *gamli* because they are chronologically old, yet they are still active participants in

[50] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 28. “to stroke the old woman’s groin?” "The Saga of the People of Eyri," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 142.
[51] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 29.
[52] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 15, 21.
[53] William Ian Miller, "Beating Up on Women and Old Men and Other Enormities: A Social Historical Inquiry into Literary Sources," *Mercer Law Review* 39 (1987-1988): 760-61.

society. Many of these are householders and specifically described as physically hale. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson also argues that there is a difference between the use of the two words for old, *elli* and *gamli,* with the former indicating decrepitude in old age and the latter indicating older age but without the negative aspects. Those who are physically capable can be chronologically old and still be a part of society. Those who exhibit the negative signs of ageing lose their positions and become outsiders. The word *elli* is often used to describe retired farmers, or people who are ´decrepit´ in their old age.[54] It is the old woman named *Elli* that the god Þórr wrestles in "Gylfaginning," not *Gamli.* She is the personification of decrepit old age, so she is the worse, inescapable fate.[55] There are many people with the byname *gamli* who still run their own farms, an example is Kleppjárn *inn gamli* of *Eyrbyggja saga*. At one point he is part of a band of more than five hundred men, yet he is a name of importance since he is one of five names mentioned and while he is called old, he is an active participant in this band of men.[56]

Another strong example of a capable old man is Hrútr Herjólfsson. He is eighty years old when, in *Laxdæla saga,* he kills Eldgrímr. Most people think highly of him because of this, except Þorliekr, for whom he did the deed. The saga tells us that "Hrútr var þá áttrœðr, er hann drap Eldgrím, ok þótti hann mikit hafa vexit af þessu verki."[57] The mention of his age, directly next to how people thought highly of him, indicates that this was noteworthy. Not many people were achieving such feats at such an age, yet he was clearly physically capable of this. Hrútr was old, and this is what makes his actions so remarkable. Other characters receive briefer mentions, such as Þorsteinn *surtr* who is described as "hniginn nǫkkut ok þó inn hraustasti ok vel hress."[58] Gellir Þorkelsson lives at Helgafell until he is old, then leaves and goes to Rome. However, he falls ill and dies in Denmark on the return journey.[59] He was old before he began his travels, and yet he makes it to Rome and then back to Denmark before falling ill, thus proving his independence, along with showing that his physical and mental powers are still intact.

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[54] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 231-32.
[55] Snorri Sturluson, *Snorra Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1996), 61-62.
[56] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 153-54.
[57] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 105. "Hrut was over eighty when he killed Eldgrim, and gained a great deal of respect as a result of the deed." "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 53.
[58] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 40. "[Thorstein] was an elderly man by this time, but still strong and in good health." "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 19.
[59] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 229.

Several characters are presumably old in these sagas, but are never described as displaying any of the signs of ageing. Bergþóra and Rannveig of *Njáls saga* reach old age without their ageing bodies ever being mentioned. Rannveig is the mother of Gunnarr and lives with him and his wife, Hallgerðr, and their children. She is thus a grandmother, and she lives to see her grandchildren grow into adults, as well as her son´s death. After his death, she runs the farm with her grandson Hogni.[60] The saga does not tell us when she dies, so we do not see her as anything other than fully capable both mentally and physically. Bergþóra is also older by the time of her death, yet while her husband is said to be old and receives help from others, she is not mentioned to have any weaknesses and continues to run the farm with Njáll until their deaths.

Ageing and the Mind

The signs of physical ageing do not necessarily correspond with mental ageing. These sagas do not explicitly state that any character has mental challenges with age, such as memory loss or confusion. Egill is still mentally capable of composing some poetry, although they are shorter than before, and planning his revenge on his family. Unnr is in control of her family until her death. Njáll however, is a more complex case, as scholars have debated whether Njáll was in his right mind when he gave Flosi Þórðarson the silk garment as part of the payment for the slaying of Hǫskuldr, or when he told his sons to come inside the house before the burning, where they died.[61] The one argument is that Njáll did all of these things deliberately, knowing the disasters that would ensue. The other is that Njáll's wisdom was failing in his old age.[62] William Ian Miller argues that Njáll dies in a way that will insure repercussions on the burners. He dies like a saint, his body undamaged by the flames, and impresses his son Skarpheðinn by not making any sounds while dying. Miller argues that Njáll is quite successful in getting what he wants. He forces his sons to "obey him and die with him."[63] He also ensures that he will be avenged

[60] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 191-92.
[61] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 312, 26-34.
[62] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 38.
[63] William Ian Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?': A Reading of Njál's Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 234.

afterwards by dying in such an impressive manner. Njáll chooses his own death and knows that his time is up.

There is a common theme throughout these sagas, where the younger men assume that, because someone, particularly a woman, is old, she is doting. Þóroddr´s foster-mother, and Sæunn, the woman in *Njáls saga* who warns about the chickweed, are assumed to be doting but they are proven to be correct. Þóroddr´s foster-mother repeatedly warns that things will go badly if the bull is left alive, but no one listens and Þóroddr ends up dying. Sæunn warns Skarpheðinn that the chickweed will be used to burn down Bergþórshváll with the family inside, but he laughs at her, and refuses to do as she requests and get rid of it. She may have looked somewhat crazy as he finds her beating the heaps of chickweed with a cudgel, but nevertheless, she is correct about what she says.[64] The problem the saga writers seem to be warning against, is assuming that just because someone has the physical features and chronological years to be old, they are mentally incapable. The narrators are not particularly nice in their descriptions of the old, but they also seem to realize that people make incorrect assumptions about the elderly, whether they are pleasant to look at, and to be around, or not. The writers also show a particular respect toward foster-mothers as with Þóroddr´s, Bergþóra‘s and Melkorka‘s.

There is also a change, or lack of change, in personality that comes with age. Egill is consistently an aggressive man, even as his body weakens. Njáll and Unnr are consistently collected and commanding. Whether for better or for worse, Guðrún however, changes her attitude in her old age. She is unapologetically confident and demanding throughout her four marriages, even causing fighting between two foster-brothers who were very fond of each other, and which results in them both dying. She makes demands of her husbands/suitors and does not take well to refusal. She also relentlessly seeks vengeance for the husband who is killed. In old age however, she becomes a firm Christian and the first Icelandic nun. She regrets some of her past and how she treated her husbands. She chooses to live in seclusion and leave behind the world in which she was powerful in her younger days.[65] Thomas Morcom argues that Guðrún shows vulnerability in her old age as “she becomes a *sponsa*

[64] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 320.
[65] *Laxdæla saga*, V.

Christi´ bride of Christ´, pledging herself to the one spouse she cannot hope to outlive or overtop."[66] In her old age she is no longer choosing to be powerful, and chooses a relationship in which she is less powerful and important. Thomas Morcom says that there is a link between more peaceful attitudes and Christian morality, as well as the idea of a "correlation between ageing and mellowing…"[67] This is depicted in some ageing characters in the *íslendingasögur*, including Guðrún.

There are also people that become more difficult with age. Þórólfr *bægifótr* is a difficult person in his youth, but in his old age he becomes even more so. "Hann tók nú at eldask fast ok gerðisk illr ok æfr við ellina ok mjǫk ójafnaðarfullr; lagðisk ok mjǫk ómjúkt á með þeim Arnkatli feðgum."[68] He treats his son and neighbours poorly, he steals, and he plots (at first unsuccessfully and then successfully) the death of his neighbour, Úlfarr. Even after death, Þórólfr comes back as a revenant and kills animals and people.[69] Þórólfr ages opposite to Guðrún, where she mellows out, Þórólfr becomes "*illr"* (evil). Personalities are thus diverse in the elderly in these sagas, despite the fact that the elderly are rarely important characters. Their personalities can remain static, mellow out or become more evil.

The Medieval and Saga periods of Iceland did not have an image of an ideal "old wise man." Wisdom was usually something people had as adults and then carried into their old age, but it did not come from old age. Njáll and Snorri *goði* are wise and are sought for their advice throughout their adulthood and into their old age, but their wisdom does not increase in old age. There is no sense that it is their age that brings wisdom, instead it is a quality that they possess independently of age and can wield because they are powerful. The intelligence connected with skalds is also something that is not a quality of age. Egill is able to create poetry from a very young age all the way into his old age. He creates less verses when he is a child, and when he is old, than when he is a younger man, but he is skilled nevertheless. Hólmgǫngu-Bersi also composes in his old age when his body is failing him. He and Egill miss their younger days as warriors and lament their current states. Egill

[66] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 43.
[67] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 27.
[68] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 81. "He began to age quickly, growing more ill-natured, violent and unjust with the years. His relationship with his son Arnkel grew very hostile." "The Saga of the People of Eyri," 167.
[69] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 13-14, 81-95.

particularly changes the words he uses, talking less of the sea and fighting, and uses feminine words, thus adding to his lament in his change in circumstances.[70]

The narrator of *Egils saga* indicates that the knowledge aquired from the elderly is valued. Having lived through events in the past, they have stories that they can pass down to younger generations. This aquired knowledge and experience is something that can grow with age. At the end of *Egils saga* the narrator says that large human bones were found under a church altar, which old men said were Egill´s.[71] The narrator is thus indicating that he trusts the testimony of these older men. It is also necessary, since by the time this place is dug up, time has passed and the older people have the most knowledge about the past. The sagas themselves were also passed down through oral testimony which relies on the memories of the generations before.[72] So while there can be an increase in knowledge, age itself does not increase wisdom.

Gender and Bodily Changes

Various scholars have noted that the verses spoken while Egill is surrounded by women indicate that Egill is becoming more like the women around him and/or less like a man.[73] Thomas Morcom disagrees, and says that Egill is more like the trope of *kolbítr* than like the women who mock him, and thus separate him from themselves. A *kolbítr* is an idle young man who sits by the fire. He is usually lazy and shameful but later displays extraordinary abilities. The way in which the women complain about Egill sitting near the fire indicates he is more of a *kolbítr* than woman.[74] I would argue that while he has some things in common with both categories, he is neither. Egill no longer belongs to the category of lazy young men, as he would not sit by the fire if he was healthier. He would also not spend his time near women and talk instead of fight. Indeed he finds a way to have an adventure and killing before the end, but he cannot truly improve himself. Egill's killing is only a

[70] Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson," 295-304; Alison Finlay, "Elegy and Old Age in Egil's Saga," in *Egil, the Viking Poet*, ed. Laurence de Looze et al., New Approaches to 'Egil's Saga' (University of Toronto Press, 2015), 125.
[71] *Egils Saga*, II, 298-99.
[72] Carl Phelpstead, *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders*, New Perspectives on Medieval Literature: Authors and Traditions, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), 26-31.
[73] Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson," 299-300; Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 382. Clover argues that it is less turning "female", instead more about becoming more powerless and less manly. Finlay, "Elegy and Old Age," 125.
[74] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 46-47.

temporary reprieve, he has already been the hero of the story and this is a final show of strength amidst his decline. This separates him from *kolbítr,* women, and ordinary or powerful men. He is in this new stage that has features from childhood, femininity, and manhood, that is old age. Njáll, Egill, Unnr, Þóroddr‘s foster-mother, and Guðrún all begin to show similar attributes of ageing. They begin to retreat within their dwellings, do not have much strength, three of them go blind, and they find ways to assert their worth, even if people do not really listen. Egill kills and hides silver, Njáll uses the law, and he and Unnr both control their families. Guðrún becomes a nun and Þóroddr‘s foster-mother advises Þóroddr on how to stay alive. Þórólfr *bægifótr* however, becomes increasingly difficult and murderous, and comes back to torment people even after his death.

With the physical changes of old age, men could lose their manliness and become something less than they were before, but they are not women or children either. Women change also, with the inability to bear children, and often in widowhood, women can take on male roles and be more independent than ever before. However, once they become unable to function well, they too begin to fall into the same category as old men.

Diversity in Ageing

There is no one picture of old age that emerges from this. There are common themes that people lose their vision, hair, strength, and have sexual difficulties. Yet, this is not universal, and many characters have different combinations. Since we are not given detailed accounts of many people ageing in the sagas, we have limited examples. The ones that do exist show that old age was not seen as just one stereotype. There were “nasty old men” (as Ármann Jakobsson says), as well as wise men and women, pious and peaceable women, people that kept their power into old age, those that lost power in old age, strong elderly people, weak elderly people, and people somewhere in between. Þórólfr *bægifótr* is an example of how to age poorly, while Unnr receives respect for how she manages in her last days. The ageing of the body could be unpleasant and provoke pity or mistrust, yet it is how people dealt with their ageing that makes them praiseworthy or blameworthy. Some, such as Egill, are perhaps somewhere in between. He is pitiable in his weakened state, but there is also a sense of justice because the bully that he once was is now

unable to bully the working women of the house. He also has an element of the Viking that returns when he leaves and hides his silver. He is making one last bold move, which is both petty and impressive for a man who is blind and has trouble walking.

The Elderly in Society and the Family

In medieval and saga age Iceland, old age is generally connected to ugliness, weakness, and senility. The elderly are rarely mentioned because they are not normally of interest. As discussed in the previous chapter, Icelandic society did not view the elderly as wise simply due to their age; the householders and chieftains had power and were authority figures, but age did not add wisdom or respect to their positions. As Jón Viðar Sigurðsson says, “the term ageism covers perfectly the situation in Iceland in the period c. 900-1300.”[75] For instance, the figure of Unnr is respected because she is old but refuses to show her age. The people at the feast are impressed with her ability to carry on despite her age. It is this defiance of age that is praiseworthy, rather than praising the woman, including her old age. Egill’s last bid for independence is multiple things, it can be seen as selfish and nasty, but it is also characteristic of him and a tougher action than lazing around the fire. In this last sense it is praiseworthy. He has his second last adventure before he finally accepts his old age, and then the story does not bother to talk about him anymore, except to say he died (his final adventure). It is the things that harken back to people in their youth that are worth talking about and writing down, rather than enjoying the characters during their old age.

The Medieval view of ageing and bodies believed in the Humoral theory along with various standards for the ‘Ageing of Man.’ This viewed the bodies as different and healthy based on the balance of the humours in the body, which were different in male and female bodies. Life was also viewed as a cycle, or stages through which people progressed, like seasons. [76] “The imbalance of humours in the elderly was considered to return them to a childlike state; both children and the elderly were regarded as economically unproductive, and lacking in mental and physical capabilities.”[77] While the sagas I have chosen to discuss never mention such Classical theories, the writers likely knew about them.

In these sagas, the elderly are considered a separate category of people, and are often mentioned in connection with the lesser and more vulnerable peoples such as children, slaves and women. In both *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga*, old men and

[75] Sigurðsson, "Becoming ‘Old’," 237.
[76] Roberta Gilchrist, "Experiencing Age: the Medieval Body," in *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 33-34; Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages,*1-5.
[77] Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 4-5.

women are permitted to leave besieged buildings. In *Njáls saga,* Bergþóra and Njáll are offered safe passage out of their home.[78] Bergþóra is both a woman and old, so they would have allowed her to leave with the other women, regardless of age. Njáll is not a threat physically, nor the target of the attack, and Flosi does not want to kill him, so he is allowed to leave also. Old men are not much of a threat, are not worthy opponents, and killing them is not an honourable thing to do. Male children who were close to being 'men' could be killed, and women could be injured in battles, but it was usually avenged furiously.[79] In allowing old men to leave, along with the children, women and slaves, it shows that they now fall into this category with them, rather than what they used to be as men.

Caring for the Elderly

The younger generations would expect to take over from the previous generations as they age. Since the sagas typically address elite society, the sons would expect to either move out or to take over for their father. Males were preferred as heirs, but females could inherit, particularly as dowries which could be given before the father's death. The older person doing the giving would hope for their investment to be repaid and to be cared for by their heir.[80] Shulamith Shahar indicates that a good son, in Icelandic sagas, is one that provides for their parents.[81] It is expected that at some point others will gain the lands and wealth of characters like Njáll, Egill, and Unnr. Njáll does not live to witness this transfer, but Egill and Unnr do. When Egill is getting old, his heir Þorsteinn goes to the *Alþingi* without him and takes Egill's cloak without his consent. He seems to have assumed that with his growing power over his father, he has a right to it. Neither son nor father is particularly fond of the other, but Þorsteinn is not likely to have presumed to do this if his father was still young. Egill, shortly after, gives over the household to Þorsteinn and leaves to live with Þórdís and Grímr, his stepdaughter and son-in-law.[82] Þorsteinn assumes his position has changed since he is the one riding to the *Alþingi,* and his father is staying home. Politically he has the power, so he takes his father´s

[78] *Egils Saga*, II, 52. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 329-30.
[79] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Soceity in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 207-08.
[80] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 144, 54.
[81] Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 91.
[82] *Egils Saga*, II, 274-75.

possessions as well. Þorsteinn does this behind Egill's back however, so perhaps there is still some lingering worry about his father finding out. Since we see this from Egill´s point of view, and he composes some verses about how his son is unworthy, the writer is indicating that this is not the right way to treat one's ageing father. It also shows how Þorsteinn fails to measure up to his father, both physically and metaphorically, since the cloak is too long and it is ruined from dragging on the ground.[83]

These details about Egill also tell us that other people can care for the elderly, not only the direct heir. Egill chooses not to live with his son, but Þórdís and Grímr are good to him and take him in. He is not financially beneficial to keep around, especially after he makes the aggressive move to hide his remaining wealth from them. However, Egill wishes to be there "því at hann unni mest Þórdísi,"[84] and they are willing to care for him. The medieval Icelandic law code, *Grágás,* says that sons were responsible for caring for dependents, such as their parents and children, as long as they could afford to.[85] Thus, there was a societal expectation that families provide care for each other, however in practice it was not necessarily the direct heir.

The poorer people had to rely on those wealthier than them to help them in their old age. Itinerants were sent from house to house for care, as these people were often old or ailing so were not able to do much work.[86] Households were not expected to stretch beyond their ability to care for others. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has argued that people were closer to their household, and friends nearby, rather than family that may have lived spread out across the country. These communes were where loyalty lay, so there were strong bonds of loyalty between household members and friends. He also argues that the treatment of the old did not change much after Christianity was introduced. Chieftains held more wealth than the churches before the 1300s, and not many monasteries had been created, so they usually cared for more of the poor and old than did the church. The wealthy churches that did exist were controlled by chieftains.[87]

[83] Finlay, "Elegy and Old Age," 124.
[84] *Egils Saga*, II, 275. "because he loved Þórdís most. "
[85] *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 2 vols., ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), 1b, 3.
[86] Overing, "A Body in Question," 216.
[87] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 229, 37-41.

Laxdæla saga provides both an example of caring for the elderly out of obligation and caring out of affection. Guðrún wishes to leave Iceland with Kjartan Óláfsson, but he tells her that she must stay for her father who is ´*gamall*´ and her brothers who are ´*óráðnir*´ (undecided), and if she leaves, they will not have protection. Guðrún is extremely unhappy with this, but she stays.[88] Her brothers and father both need her to be there to care for them, and Kjartan seems to be saying that Guðrún has a responsibility to them. She accepts the argument grudgingly, as caring for her family is holding her back. It is a labour of responsibility rather than love. Helga Kress and Loren Auerbach argue that when Guðrún is told to stay home by Kjartan it shows the clear divide between the sexes. Her role is to stay behind and take care of things at home while the men are away. Auerbach adds that this division shows that Guðrún´s role is different and lesser than the men.[89] This creates an image of the old, young, and vulnerable, as a burden for the women, while the greater people, the men, have the adventures and go abroad. Also in *Laxdæla saga,* Þorsteinn *surtr* lives with his daughter Ósk and son-in-law Þórarinn "því at Þorsteinn var þá hniginn ok þurfti umsýslu þeira mjǫk."[90] Notably, the sagas mention that the female members of the family care for the elderly males, (Guðrún, Ósk, Þórdís) while the male family members show affection for elderly females (Þóroddr and his foster-mother, Bolli and his mother Guðrún). There are few instances of older men choosing to live with their male relatives, or of affection between older men and younger male family members.

Children could be less bitter than Guðrún, and care for their parents or foster-parents with affection towards them. Þóroddr´s foster-mother is very upset about him leaving the bull-calf alive. She knows that it will lead to something bad and will not let it rest. Þóroddr cares about how upset she is and tries to calm her by killing the cow-calf, and instructing people not to tell her that the other calf still lived. He must think that she will not know the difference because of her old age and blindness, which belittles her intelligence, yet it concerns him that she is upset.[91] When Guðrún herself is old, she chooses to live in seclusion, but her son Bolli visits her. While he is

[88] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 115.
[89] Helga Kress, *Mattugar Meyjar*, Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga, (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993), 141-43. Loren Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla saga*," *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 30.
[90] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 20. "because Þorsteinn was sunk [in age] and needed their assistance greatly" (my translation).
[91] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 171-72.

not responsible for her, he chooses to visit and talk with her. Presumably this is because he has affection for her. [92] In *Njáls saga,* Mǫrðr tries to convince his father, Valgarðr *inn grái,* to take the new faith because "þú ert maðr gamall,"[93] but his father absolutely refuses, and to ensure his son knows how vehemently he is against it, breaks crosses in front of him. While the two do not have a particularly warm relationship, Mǫrðr is presumably concerned for his father´s soul since he is old and will likely die soon.

Sons were important in supporting their elderly fathers in fights, or the law, when the father could not be expected to act affectively anymore. In *Eyrbyggja saga,* Þórólfr *bægifótr* challenges Úlfarr *kappi* to a *holmgang* because he is old and childless. Þórólfr wins and takes Úlfarr´s land. Úlfarr is old, so is weaker, and he does not have a son to take the challenge for him, thus making him an easy target for Þórólfr. Þórólfr has a son himself, Arnkell, who is a powerful man in his own right, but the father and son do not like each other. Þórólfr often tries to persuade his son to back him in unfair circumstances, but Arnkell values his friendship with others over his father´s wishes. Þórólfr attempts to get Arnkell to help him against his neighbour Úlfarr *bóndi*, from whom he steals, and eventually has killed. Arnkell repeatedly tells him he does not want to get involved in disputes with Úlfarr or with Þórólfr's other rival Snorri *goði,* and even pays Úlfarr for the theft.[94] Arnkell takes his father´s property after his death, but he did not need it before. As an adult he was able to live independently from his father, and when he thought Þórólfr was acting dishonourably, he did not need to side with him. Þórólfr was still capable of maintaining himself and his land, so did not need his son to take over until his death. Nevertheless, Þórólfr hopes to use this father-son relationship to back his cases.

In *Egils saga,* King Haraldr *hárfagri* summons Kveld-Úlfr to join his fleet, but Kveld-Úlfr says he will sit at home because he is old and not fit for war. In the end he promises to send his son in his stead.[95] His son, Þórólfr, takes over his military role because of his age, and in a more indirect way, is protecting his father from the displeasure of the king. Although, they later anger the king anyway and both die.

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[92] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 228-29.
[93] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 275. "You're an old man." "Njal's Saga," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 129.
[94] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 13-14, 81-92.
[95] *Egils Saga*, II, 13.

Njáll's sons do his bidding and support him in disputes. They add to his power, and while he is not a very physical man, people know that his sons are willing to do whatever is needed. Njáll's power is great, but his sons support him, as they also endanger him. Their actions can affect Njáll both positively and negatively, which is why they are so important to the story and to Njáll. Later generations thus have the ability to both help and harm the previous ones.

The Transition of Power Between Generations: Heirs, Changing Society and Religion

The transition of power and property from one generation to the next is closely connected to the care of the elderly. Those that gain land, usually also take on the elderly person that gives it to them. However, some die before they pass on their property, as Njáll and Þórólfr *bægifótr* do, while others go to live under someone else, as Egill does. Neither sagas nor laws define exactly when sons took over from their fathers, but it could be a gradual process.[96] It was not uncommon for fathers and sons, or for brothers, to share control of a farm. Similarly, wives usually had control over the hiring of slaves and the running of the household. Bergþóra shares power with Njáll over the household into their old age. Njáll also includes his sons in some of his decisions. For instance, Njáll and his son Skarpheðinn are sought by outsiders for meetings. This shows that Njáll does not entirely rule the whole family from above, even if he usually has the final say.[97] While Gunnarr is alive, his mother, Rannveig, lives with him and his wife, Hallgerðr. During this time Rannveig reproaches and warns her son and daughter-in-law but does not take direct action to control them. Hallgerðr and Gunnar are in control of the homestead and responsible for Rannveig. However, after Gunner has died, Rannveig blames Hallgerðr for Gunnarr´s death so Hallgerðr leaves with one of her sons. The other son lives with Rannveig and they share power over the farm. They both meet with outsiders, and directly after Gunnarr´s death the attackers ask Rannveig, rather than Hallgerðr, for permission to build mounds for their dead on the property.[98] Thus the responsibility goes from Hallgerðr and Gunnarr, to Gunnarr´s mother and son. A somewhat backwards transition, but Rannveig has retained respect even though she had

[96] Miller, "Beating Up on Women and Old Men," 761.
[97] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 119-20; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 95-96, .
[98] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 191-92.

limited power over the household while Gunnarr was alive. Although we do not know her precise age, she must still be capable of the responsibility. The transition of power between Skalla-Grímr and Egill is gradual. Skalla-Grímr is an old man when Egill returns from abroad. He is glad to see his son and begins to share the care of the property with him because he is getting old. Later Skalla-Grímr becomes even older and Egill takes over full management of the property. Skalla-Grímr has thus given up all of his power and must rely on his son. Egill is his heir, at first only sharing the responsibility and power, but taking on full responsibility over time. Skalla-Grímr goes from being called a "maðr gamall"[99] to being called both "gamall ok hrumr af elli."[100] As he ages his power wanes, until he has none except his legacy, and his son has it all. Egill's son Þorsteinn later takes over his father´s land, begins going to the *Alþingi* without Egill, and Egill moves out. On a grander scale, *Egils sagas* says that when King Haraldr *hárfagri* got older, he gave his kingdom over to his son Eiríkr as the ruler over Haraldr´s other children.[101]

The children of the wealthy, the focus of these sagas, thus take on land and power. As the men in charge of the household, they now represent the household and ride to the *þing.* They are responsible for ensuring the family has enough to eat and upholding the family honour. This transition of roles can happen slowly as with Egill, taking a share in the responsibility and then later the whole responsibility, or it can happen suddenly when someone dies. Sons will ride with their father to the *þing,* as do Njáll's sons, and they will be a part of discussions and work at home, so they are trained to understand the role. The younger generations also become responsible for maintaining family honour and pursuing vengeance. Njáll does this through the law, but his sons begin to assert themselves and take vengeance where they think they should. Njáll is not able to control them entirely, as they are coming into their own. Njáll himself becomes unable to pursue vengeance for his sons and dies, leaving it to Kári to seek vengeance.

Njáll also provides a good example of slow ageing. He remains in control of his family until his death, but he is slowly losing his powers. The saga gives the reader little indications that Njáll is getting old, through what people say about him, and the narrator's description of him. He is becoming physically old and weak. His

[99] *Egils Saga*, II, 151. "old man."
[100] *Egils Saga*, II, 173. "old and decrepit of old age."
[101] *Egils Saga*, II, 163.

sons are married and old enough to take on further responsibilities, which they begin to do without his permission. Ultimately, if Njáll had lived a few more years, he would have begun to lose all control. Njáll is chronologically an old man, but by the end of his life the reader begins to see that he is starting to descend into that physical old age which would eventually make it difficult for him to retain control.

This transition between generations is not always smooth. Njáll chooses not to begin this transition and William Ian Miller argues that the Njálssons rebelled because their father ´lived too long´ and controlled their lives. He chose who they married and where they lived. He controlled a long running feud so that he lived to old age. They would have gained more freedom and wealth when their father died, but they died with him, so did not.[102] In *Egils saga* a son begins a feud when he refuses to share his inheritance with his half siblings. When Bjǫrgólfr is old and his wife has died, he meets young Hlidiríðr, Hǫgni's daughter, and asks to marry her. His son Brynjólfr is not happy with this and does not let their two sons inherit. As soon as Bjǫrgólfr is dead he sends the mother and her children away.[103] The transition of power is important to the plot of the sagas and affects the courses of characters' lives immensely.

With the passing of the more violent Viking Age into the Medieval period, Icelanders became more focused on farming and settling disputes in the area than going abroad for plunder. Characters like Egill thrive on violence, but those that survive to old age are out of place and time. Their values and style of living do not fit with the younger generations.[104] Georges Minois argues that warrior society respected old men more than did the agrarian society in Iceland. A warrior could be respected for their reputation, but a farmer did not have many past deeds to be praised for. A peasant was simply expected to live and work until they were unable to do so. Minois has argued that many historical and literary warriors have continued to be active despite blindness or other infirmities; and as long as they continue to do so they retain their value.[105] For the determined and violent warrior characters, it is difficult for them to accept their situation and leave the spotlight. As with Þórólfr

[102] Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?'*, 246-47.
[103] *Egils Saga*, II, 16-17.
[104] Finlay, "Elegy and Old Age," 112.
[105] Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 190-98.

bægifótr, Skalla-Grímr and Egill who are aggressive men and who do not take kindly to ageing.[106]

With the changing times, there is also a change of religion. People choose to take the new faith or not, with the younger generations being more willing, and eventually being born into it. In *Njáls saga,* Mǫrðr is concerned for his father´s soul and tells him to take the new faith, but his father in return tells him that he should drop the new faith and see what happens. Valgarðr then destroys holy objects, falls ill, and dies. He is determined against change and is displeased with his son for changing. The illness and death that follows, soon after the destruction of holy tokens and crosses, might be a form of divine punishment for his actions, although the writer does not clearly state this.[107] The saga was written in Christian Iceland, so Valgarðr´s actions would have been seen as an example of the violent, 'heathen' times. This is not to say that Iceland after Christianity was all peaceful, and the process of Christianisation at all levels of life would not have been instant. The presentation of 'heathens' in Icelandic family sagas could be positive, and not always negative, but here it is Valgarðr´s refusal to accept Christianity that shows his faults. The rest of this conversation also shows the general unpleasantness of Valgarðr, since he is plotting to bring about Njáll and his family´s deaths so that Mǫrðr can seize power. Mǫrðr is also an evil character, but he does not have the fault of refusing the new religion and dying. Njáll takes the new faith willingly, which inspires mockery from some, but also shows his wisdom (in the medieval saga author's context). It is the faith of Medieval Europe, and the writers of these sagas were living in this Christian context so it would have affected their writing.

The taking of the new faith could be connected with better ageing and death. Guðrún´s personality changes alongside her religion. She becomes more of a passive old woman as she becomes a devout Christian, and finalises this by becoming a nun. She moves into the new times, rather than resisting them, and accepts her new role. Consequently, she fares differently than Valgarðr and is given a less unpleasant death. Readers might prefer Guðrún's younger self, but as it is presented in the saga, Guðrún's changes are for the better, not worse. Njáll dies in a more violent manner at the burning, yet the bodies of him, Bergþóra, and their foster-

[106] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of the Icelanders," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 3 (2005): 310.
[107] Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?'*, 182.

child, are unburnt under the coverings which is similar to the way the bodies of saints are found unspoiled.[108] The new faith did not spare the old from death, but they could die well. The older generation, and their religion, were replaced over time. Those that adapted fared better than those that clung to the past.

The Elderly, Law, and Violence

In the arena of law, male householders held power. Those such as Njáll and Snorri *goði* are afforded much respect because of their knowledge of the law, and Njáll's foresight, which lasts into their old age. Both he and Njáll earned their reputations and homesteads when they were younger and retain them into their old age. Njáll utilizes his abilities in the legal arena to remain useful and respected when he is old, although he remains a somewhat liminal character throughout his life as he cannot grow a beard.[109] Other people, including the narrator, view such people as retaining their mental capacities and so they also retain their positions as head of their lands. In *Njáls saga,* another character who uses the law in his old age is Mǫrðr *gígja* Sighvatsson, who is a very knowledgeable and successful lawyer. In one case he is defeated however, by his old age and more specifically his inability to successfully fight a younger man. He has a daughter, Unnr, who Hrútr Herjólfsson woos, and the two men agree to marriage terms, but before the marriage can take place Hrútr learns he must go abroad. Mǫrðr agrees to this because the trip should increase Hrútr´s wealth, but Hrútr has a relationship with Gunnhildr, the mother of Haraldr *gráfeldr,* the king of Norway at the time. When he leaves her, she asks him if he has a woman at home and he denies it. She then curses him so that he and Unnr cannot have sex. The marriage then takes place and Unnr is given charge of the household, but she is unhappy so tells her father of the problem. He then counsels her on divorce and tries to win back her dowry. Hrútr challenges him to a duel and Mǫrðr is forced to back down because he knows he cannot win against the younger man.[110] William Ian Miller argues that Mǫrðr did not expect to be challenged to a duel because common decency discouraged this. Mǫrðr thought he could hide behind his age, but instead is defeated by it. This is later used against Hrútr himself when the young Gunnarr challenges him to a duel. After the initial challenge, Hrútr witnesses

[108] Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?'*, 233-34.
[109] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 37-39.
[110] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, Chapters 1-8.

children acting out the events at the Althing. His brother is angry at this and hits the child playing Mǫrðr, but Hrútr gives the boy a gold ring and tells him to not provoke people again. Miller argues that this is symbolic for Hrútr, knowing that he did not treat Mǫrðr very well and he is making up for it.[111] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson disagrees, and says that it is only Mǫrðr's social position that determines his status and not age, so it is acceptable to propose a fight with Mǫrðr.[112] Despite Mǫrðr's failure, the legal system could provide old men with power when interacting with other families and participating in feuds, especially in the violent stages. It gave them opportunities to face men who were more than a match for them physically and socially.[113]

Violence was often an extension of, or closely connected to the law. Younger generations would take on the roles that the older could no longer fulfil. As sons take on the military roles of their fathers, they supplant them as the main characters in the narrative. Many of the old men settle into their homes as they age, and their sons go abroad to raid, or join the retinues of kings. In *Egils saga,* Kveld-Úlfr's son Þórólfr is killed by the king, so he and his other son Skalla Grímr fight against the king and move to Iceland. Kveld-Úlfr dies after going into a berserker frenzy on the way and Skalla-Grímr settles at Borg where his body washes ashore. Later, Skalla-Grímr´s sons Egill and Þórólfr go abroad and continue this feud. As they rise to action, Skalla-Grímr begins to fall out of the narrative. They carry on the family and the story, while he fades out and eventually dies. Egill too becomes old, and his son takes on the responsibilities of going to the *þing* while Egill stays home. As mentioned previously, these sagas, especially *Laxdæla saga,* frequently use a variation of the phrase *´x bjó í y til elli´* (x dwelled at y until old.) This indicates that the character is now old, and will be staying at home until they are decrepit. They are still able to do some labour, but they begin to lose their active role in society and do not fight or go abroad. Although some, like Njáll, do not let this happen. Njáll's sons provide for the violent needs of the family, while he continues to provide legal counsel. They do not get to truly supplant him because they only outlive him by a few minutes. *Eyrbyggja saga* says that Snorri *goði* becomes more secure in his old age because his enemies were dead or dying and he had made good connections through his children's marriages. Snorri dies non-violently at his home, and is buried

[111] Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?'*, 28-32; Miller, "Beating Up on Women and Old Men," 755-59.
[112] Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old'," 233.
[113] Morcom, "After Adulthood," 32.

on church grounds.[114] Snorri actually gains security as he ages because of his wisdom in making alliances and controlling feuds so that he avoids dying violently. Hrútr Herjólfsson, in *Laxdæla saga,* retains his strength and ability to be violent into his eighties when he kills another man. Snorri and Hrútr stay physically and mentally capable of participating in society through legal and violent means into their old age, and this is what makes it possible for them to remain powerful.

How Society Viewed Ageing Men and Women Differently

Individual men and women age differently, but these sagas do not differentiate between a womanly way of ageing and a manly way. Both men and women can die young, be deemed old while still young because of bodily changes, retain their power into old age, keep their power until death, pass on their power to another as they age, die, or come back as a ghost. They are not depicted as being treated in any one way. Society does not view ageing women and men any more differently than they do younger men and women. Chronologically old men are treated similarly to adult men as are chronologically old women to their younger counterparts. However, when they lose function, men and women are treated very similarly to each other.

Gillian Overing has argued that, overall, the views are negative towards old women, but it is more complex than this. Old women are usually associated with "…evil, foreboding, or gossipy nastiness…"[115] Women like Sæunn, who make prophesies, are benign and yet exist alongside women such as Katla, who are malevolent and magical. There are also women such as Guðrún, who is a loving grandmother, and Unnr who is powerful and well praised. Position and wealth were more important than gender in the holding of power. Thus, women like Unnr could have power, but an unknown poor old man could not.[116] The women in these sagas who are wise are praiseworthy, and independent women are so also, provided they are not shaming men along the way. It is good if they are acting forcefully and independently to the benefit of the men of the story. Having foresight and prophetic dreams were also valuable assets for women, so the magic, or strength, itself is not

[114] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 180-84.
[115] Overing, "A Body in Question," 221.
[116] Overing, "A Body in Question," 218-21.

evil.[117] When women in the narratives, especially women with foresight, are treated poorly, it is a sure sign that they will be correct.

There is more loving affection directed from, and towards, women, than any of the men. The men are cared for, but the women, particularly foster-mothers, have close bonds with their kin, be they male or female. Examples of this are Melkorka and her foster-mother, Þóroddr and his foster-mother, Egill and his stepdaughter and Guðrún and her son Bolli. Bergþóra is also very loyal to her husband and chooses to die with him. Their foster-child, Þórðr Kárasson, also decides to stay with them and die because of a promise between him and Bergþóra that they would not part. In explaining his decision to die he uses the dual word *ykkr* (you two), emphasising his desire to die with them both, and that his loyalty is to Njáll also.[118] The family sagas do not typically show characters expressing strong emotions, so love is not a strong topic. Instead, it is through actions that people express their feelings.[119] There are strong bonds between the old men and other men, however the most care and affection seem to come from, and be directed at, women.

Men were viewed as continuous until physical ageing set in. As capable people, they either had power or did not. Once they lost their ability to function properly, they were in much the same category as old women. The difference lies most in the holding and passing off of power. More men had power to pass onto their heirs and they are mentioned more than women. Fewer women had such power, so usually had less to lose. Unnr has the most power of the women being discussed here, but other women could still lose control over their home. Once this is done, they are like the old men and have no power.

The men with warrior pasts also lose their strength and status as a warrior. Women never have a direct societal role in violence. They witness it and play a part in the background. Sometimes they enact it themselves, but it is not their usual role. For the men that become functionally old, they are no longer warriors and are not worthy of being killed. They change categories, and fall into the same category as women and children. For women there is no change. They can still use their usual

[117] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the "Íslendingasögur"," *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 4 (2009): 28-29.
[118] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 330.
[119] Sif Rikhardsdottir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts*, ed. Sif Rikhardsdottir and Carolyne Larrington, Studies in Old Norse Literature, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 57-58, 85.

methods of whetting and acting through others. Men too now have this as their only option. Men who retain their power, such as Snorri *goði* and Njáll, have the ability to participate in the law, while younger and older women do not. Women usually manage the households, while men tend to the outdoor work and travelling. Women are accustomed to being in the home and do not travel as much. They also do not have a role in legal disputes, so when they can no longer leave the home, they lose less than the men, who are used to travelling, both in Iceland and abroad, and having a role in legal disputes at the *þing*.[120]

Old men and women in these four sagas are treated similarly once they become functionally old. Neither was useful or pleasant. Younger generations would care for them, or not, very similarly and neither would have any real power. People did not have much respect or fondness for the elderly, but there was an expectation that people take care of them if they could and not be cruel to them. The respect shown to a figure like Unnr is for her fight against old age. It is like praising a warrior for fighting an enemy that continually grows stronger until it finally wins. There is no acceptance of the old age part of her as anything but bad. Other people who do give in are weak or pitiable.

[120] Friðriksdóttir, "Women's Weapons," 9-10. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 151-52; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 120-21.

How the Elderly Respond to Their Own Ageing

It is difficult to assess how the Viking Age or Medieval elderly actually viewed themselves, as these sagas can only tell what the writers thought the characters felt. This is further complicated by the fact that the sagas do not describe emotions directly, but indirectly through the actions of characters or through the poetry of the characters. The different ways of ageing in these four sagas show that the writers did not have one simple model of ageing, but they also did not explore the topic very deeply or frequently. The most vivid and explicit expression of feelings about ageing come from Egill and Hólmgǫngu-Bersi in their poetry. Most other responses to ageing from the elderly themselves are few, and must be inferred from their actions. The elderly people in these sagas adapt to their ageing differently. Some receive names like *gamli* and are still a part of society. Some begin acting through others. While some receive guests but do not visit others, and some grow bitter. The elderly may rely on the law and wisdom for power rather than force. Some control their heirs, while others lose control over their heirs. Those who have power as adults have everything to lose if old age deprives them of their ability to function. Those with less power have less to lose, and are not as devastated when they lose it. Here we particularly do not get insight into anybody other than the main characters, and so the powerful/wealthy characters.

Retaining Roles, Adapting, and Refusing to Change

Several characters retain their positions in society through their old age until their deaths. Njáll, Unnr, and Þórólfr *bægifótr* are all householders who retain their positions as they age. Njáll is not a particularly physical individual when he is younger, preferring to use his foresight and knowledge of the law to achieve his goals. He also has others, like his sons, to do the physical work when necessary. This means that his weakening body does not change his status in society. He is somewhat of a liminal character already because of his beardlessness, his willingness to embrace Christianity, and because he is not very violent himself. His manliness is always questioned and mocked by others, and when he grows old this does not change. Njáll is able to retain his position by already having made the decision to not do things himself. When he is older, he can send others to do the work and it does not make him less of a man. Njáll's lack of a beard is much talked

over, and it puts him in a liminal position between being a man and not. Beards and hair are signs of manhood, they symbolise the transitions between youth, manhood, and old age.[121] As such, Njáll is fighting for his identity all through his adulthood and he continues to do so into old age. He adapts to his position as 'different' when he is younger, so he, like Unnr, knows how to continue being important throughout ageing. Unnr is also able to retain control over her family by adapting to ageing. She also needs to make less changes, because as a woman, she is not expected to be out fighting anyway. She makes the journey to Iceland, settles her family, and then she stops travelling. This means that people must come to her, and she can still send out others to do her bidding, so her physical losses do not inhibit her control over her family. She is forced to go to bed early and rise late, but she will not let people see her in her room in this weakened state. She controls her image and is angry when people ask about her health. She does not want people to see or talk about her weaknesses caused by age. When people do see her, as at the feast for her grandson, she walks upright and determined, she does not totter about. While Unnr does not need great strength to retain her role, she does not want people to see her ailing. Perhaps she is ashamed of it, or she feels that if people see it, she will lose her position or become a mockery. Both Njáll and Unnr retain control to the end, and they die having fulfilled their roles in life.

Þórólfr *bægifótr* also retains his household in his old age. He was a Viking and expanded his land through violence when he was younger. He intends to do this again in his old age, but instead of doing it himself he now sends other people to attack his neighbour Úlfarr. He adapts, like Njáll and Unnr, and does less himself. However, as a Viking, he is accustomed to achieving things through violence, whereas the other two are more adept at pursuing things through other methods. Þórólfr fails to have Úlfarr killed on the first attempt, and he does not get the settlements he wants using the law. He does not age well, and although he adapts somewhat, he does not want to accept more peaceful methods of getting what he wants. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórgunna is an older Hebridean woman who comes to Iceland and lives with Þuríðr of Fróðá. She works for her living on the farm, is skilled and irritable, but strong enough to do work. Dramatically, she falls ill and dies after blood rains down on her when she is working outside. Before this last illness

[121] Phelpstead, "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow," 9-10.

however, she retains her autonomy and decides what work she will do, as she is also still physically able to do this work.[122] Þórgunna does not have to change to continue at the same social level, but this is only possible because she does not functionally decline until her death.

Several characters defy the weakening of their bodies even in death. Unnr, Þórólfr, and Skalla-Grímr are all found sitting up after their deaths. This matches their determined personalities, as they will not give in to the difficulties of old age or death. Njáll and Bergþóra also die in a significant way, although they are lying down. They lay down in their bed with their foster-son and cover themselves with an ox skin. Although their house burns down, when their bodies are found, they are unburnt.[123] Miller argues that this is an act of martyrdom, and that the staged way in which Njáll chooses to die ensures that there will be a proper revenge for their deaths. He also notes that it is symbolically similar to the way other fathers have taken to bed when a son dies.[124] Unnr sitting up in death retains her dignity and power, rather than shaming her or causing other people problems.[125] The most dramatic refusal to accept death is Þórólfr *bægifótr´s.* Not only does he die sitting upright, but he refuses to rest in death and comes back to haunt and kill for a long time. Þórólfr is not an easy-going person as a young man, and in old age he becomes more difficult. In death he is nothing but evil. Ármann Jakobsson argues that old age is like the beginning stages of becoming a ghost. It is all the negative aspects of a person, and this is what Þórólfr is left with, the ability to kill and to frighten. In his old age, Þórólfr begins to lose his position in society. In death he is beyond this. He is completely removed from society and is unable to create real change.[126] The way in which these characters die is an extension of how they lived in their old age. All of these people were unyielding, but the good and bad are reflected as well. Njáll and Bergþóra look like martyrs as they are unharmed by the fire. This reflects how they are Christians, and Njáll is the hero of the story. Unnr and Skalla-Grímr are unyielding, but not particularly unpleasantly so, and their sitting upright in death emphasises the former rather than any other characteristics. Þórólfr

[122] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 137-42.
[123] Except for the child´s finger which was out from under the covering. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, XII, 330-31, 42.
[124] Miller, *'Why is Your Axe Bloody?'*, 231-33.
[125] Sofie Vanherpen, "Remembering Auðr/Unnr Djúp(a)úðga Ketilsdóttir: Construction of Cultural Memory and Female Religious Identity," *Mirator* 14, no. 2 (2013): 20.
[126] Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 322-25.

is increasingly unpleasant as he ages and continues to be so in death, as he is quite powerful at killing and his body will not easily decay or be destroyed. Kirsi Kanerva argues that ghosts can have a role in society as when Þórólfr gets revenge on one of his son‘s killers through the bull attack.[127] The dead are thus an extension of the old person that died, and they exist in a liminal state in society as well as between life and death. Hrappr Sumarliðason, or Víga-Hrappr, is also a violent man in his prime. As he ages his powers lessen and he must lie in bed. He then dies and comes back as a ghost and haunts the area.[128] He too is a violent man who does not want to cease being violent, and will not allow old age and death to completely conquer him. Death, the inevitable end to old age, is unable to quieten those with strong, often violent, personalities.

Reasserting Independence

Several characters attempt to reassert their independence when they are elderly. They wish to have more control over the lives of themselves and others. Some are more successful than others. Þórólfr *bægifótr* attempts to gain more land, like he did when he first takes over his property in Iceland, but is not as successful as he would like. He manipulates people because he is selfish and greedy. He refuses to give into other people´s expectations, and decides what is just and worthy for himself. Bjǫrgólfr remarries despite being old, and his son not approving. He even has children from this marriage. He refuses to retire quietly, but seeks to continue life and be a part of a family. Egill and Skalla-Grímr both hide their wealth to prevent their heirs from getting it. They refuse to let others dictate their movements and then receive their money as well. Njáll burns his sons with him as one last act of control. He controlled them all, arranged marriages and had them all live with him. He was not always in complete control, as when they kill Hǫskuldr, but he retains control most of the time. He tells them all to go inside before the burning and they decide to obey him, so he controls them until they all die.[129]

[127] It is not only the old that are problematic ghosts, however, but it is usually those with strong personalities, often angry, unpleasant ones. Kirsi Kanerva, "Restless Dead or Peaceful Cadavers? Preparations for Death and Afterlife in Medieval Iceland," in *Dying Prepared in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe*, ed. Anu Lahtinen and Mia Korpiola, The Northern World: North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 AD. Peoples, Economies and Cultures (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 23-38.
[128] *Laxdæla saga*, V, 39-40.
[129] Depending on the interpretation of these events. Miller, *‘Why is Your Axe Bloody?’*, 225-34.

How Men and Women Respond to Their Own Ageing Differently

Women tend to be more accepting of the negative sides of ageing. They have different expectations than the men and are accustomed to their lives being controlled by the changing of their bodies and other people. They became women when they could bear children, and left their father's home for their husband's home when they married. When they were no longer able to bear children, they gained more independence from men as they were no longer sexual objects. Women usually lived under the authority and protection of a male family member until marriage. After this they could have control over the household, although some, such as the women who marry Njáll's sons, live under their in-laws. Men pursued cases on the behalf of women, regardless of the woman's character or standing in society. While women could go to a *þing,* it was predominantly made up of men. Women did not take part in the official proceedings. The strong women I have mentioned so far do not allow men to control them easily. Unnr, Guðrún, Rannveig, and Bergþóra have power, yet this is something that they gain later in life. They are all given in marriage by men to men, and they are exceptional women, rather than the norm. Despite their strengths, they cannot have the same level of independence as men of similar social standings. As these women age, they gain more independence and men cannot control them as much as they did previously. Older men particularly lament not being able to control women as they age. As Grímr remarks to Egill, "Miðr hæddu konur at okkr, þá er vit várum yngri".[130] So while older men lose power over women as they age, older women gain more power over themselves as they age. Unnr and Rannveig both gain control over their families only after their fathers, husbands, and sons (one each), have died. When a son took over from the father, the mother's role would not change as much as the role of the father. A woman like Rannveig is still important in her son´s household even if she did not have much power. She is worth mentioning in the story, and other characters, even those who kill her son, show her some deference. Old women were still useful, especially when they were still physically and mentally capable. Even when no longer able to do much physical labour, old women could still be useful at smaller tasks and advising those younger than them.[131] In Iceland, both men and women were expected to

[130] *Egils Saga*, II, 294. "Women made less fun of us when we were younger." "Egil's Saga," 174.
[131] Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 151-52.

labour on the farms. Men managed the work that was away from the home, and although women could do so also, it was less common. Usually, women took what men gathered from nature and preserved it for later use, or turned it into something else. When the harvest was being gathered, women would work alongside men, often turning and raking the hay while the men cut it. Women had the knowledge, and could manage the farm whilst the male family members were away, even though they were typically in charge of the house rather than the outside.[132] In this way Iceland was different from Medieval Europe. The women and men were kept closer together in Iceland, and everyone had to do farm labour to ensure that there would be enough supplies to survive. Women did usually stay closer to the home, which might have made it easier to navigate when they began to feel the effects of old age. It is easier to find your way around a house than to round up sheep and drive them home when one's vision begins to fail. Thus, the expected labour of men and women differed, and it may have been easier for women to adapt to old age than for men.

While women more rarely held positions of power outside of the farm, they could still lose everything they had, if they were no longer able to be useful in society. Unnr holds onto her power to her last day, when she passes it on to her heir. She knows that she is old and must be aware that she is about to die, since she dies the very night of the feast when she gives everything to Óláfr. She does not let people see her in her weakened state in bed, and when she is in the view of others she bears herself well. She keeps her power to the end by continuing to give good advice and not appear incompetent. This is something she is careful in doing. She is defiant towards her body's ageing and eventual death. When she is going to die however, she plans for it to happen the way she sees best, and does not rail against the unfairness. She does not come back as a ghost in protest, or hide wealth to punish her heir, but instead accepts it peacefully. The author depicts her as dying perfectly. She does not go easily, but she does not cause problems either. Guðrún is mostly hidden from view once she becomes a nun, thus preserving her image. She also ages peacefully, although she undergoes a more drastic change than Unnr, and becomes more peaceful and repentant than in her younger days. She, nevertheless, asserts her strength and independence in choosing to become the first Icelandic nun and leave society. Once the decision is made, she is mentioned only briefly and dies

[132] Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 120-21.

quietly. Other women tend to accept their situation without much fuss. Þóroddr´s foster-mother tries to convince people to listen to her foreboding, and when they do not, she does not give up but continues to try and convince them. She is determined to save her foster-son´s life but does not seem concerned about her own reputation. She is distressed for the sake of others and is unconcerned by the way others treat her. She is accepting of her situation as a doting, blind, old woman, but she is also determined to save others from harm. In *Njáls saga,* the other woman in a similar position, Sæunn, is slightly more aggressive in her approach to convince the men to remove the danger. She beats at the chickweed and is insistent that it be removed. She knows that people will die from it. She does not say it, but she may have even known that she would die as well. Yet, no one listens to her despite her determination, and she dies inside Bergþórshváll. She herself could have tried to survive, but instead accepts that if Njáll, Bergþóra, and their children were not going to survive, then neither would she. She also does not seem to be fighting to regain her reputation as a woman who can foresee things, but is simply trying to preserve the household. Bergþóra herself is a powerful woman, but when Njáll decides to stay and die, she says that she will stay with him also. She has acted against Njáll´s wishes in the past, particularly in her feud with Hallgerðr, but at the end she accepts the death Njáll has chosen. Þórgunna controls her death in her own way as she tells what must be done with her body and her belongings. She is only restless when things are not done according to her wishes. She is strong before her illness and death, she sets the terms of her work, and she refuses to give in to the *húsfreyja* (mistress of the house), Þuríðr. After Þórgunna's death, Þuríðr keeps the bedding against her wishes and this begins a time of hauntings which causes the loss of food supplies and people to fall ill and die. During this a seal comes up through the floors and stares at the bedding, indicating that the bedding is a part of the problem. In death Þórgunna is helpful to those that bear her body to the church, but she starts a difficult time which leads to other people becoming revenants and continuing the problems. To solve this problem Snorri *goði* sends men who burn the bedding and then summon the dead and pass judgment on them so that they leave. In death, Þórgunna is also determined to ensure that those who are taking her body to be buried are treated properly. When the men rest at a farm and the farmers refuse to assist them, Þórgunna prepares the food for them herself; which frightens the

farmers into providing for the visitors further themselves.[133] Þórgunna is not as difficult as men in her death and returning, but she is not settled until everything is done according to her wishes.

Men lament their ageing particularly vividly in the poetry of Egill and Hólmgǫngu-Bersi. They are full of despair over the changes in their body and social positions. They do not find any good in their situations. Many of the old men, especially those that were Vikings, are used to achieving what they want through physical strength and violence, and as Ármann Jakobsson says, in old age “These men are nasty because they are powerless and insignificant, and they feel this lack strongly.”[134] The only power they retain is the ability to speak, thus they can still navigate laws, manipulate people through words, and goad others. The last of which is usually a feminine activity. He also notes that old women seem to deal with their being ignored and marginalized better than men.[135] The old men in these sagas are upset that they do not have the power that they used to have, and are not respected. Þórólfr is a difficult old man, and is displeased that he cannot simply get whatever he wants by force, and that his son has the power to stop him. He has been superseded by his son who is a powerful *goði.* He retaliates to this change in his situation by becoming even more difficult than when he was younger. When he dies, he remains sitting up, and then he is problematic after death as he walks at night and kills people. His determination to harm others is a part of his violent personality, but it is particularly old age that makes him worse. He clearly does not age with any sense of peace or acceptance. Njáll ages well as he retains his intelligence and control over his family. He does not fight ageing particularly, but ages much like Unnr, not showing off his weaknesses and trying to keep control of others. He is a liminal character with feminine characteristics, as in his beardlessness and non-violent tendencies, so it is perhaps fitting that he and Unnr are much alike. He dies in a violent manner, unlike her, however. Njáll´s manner of laying down in bed shows he has a plan and is accepting of the situation. However, he brings down his sons with him, never allowing them to have their freedom, possibly as a revenge for their defying him and killing Hǫskuldr.

[133] *Eyrbyggja saga*, IV, 137-52.
[134] Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 309.
[135] Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 308.

Egill and Skalla-Grímr give over control of their property to their sons willingly, yet both hide some of the wealth so their heirs cannot get it. They are both unhappy with their heirs. Egill does not give his father the silver he was supposed to, so Skalla-Grímr hides his. Egill´s family does not let him cause the trouble he wants, so he hides his silver as well. Egill is also unhappy when his son wears his clothing without permission, and soils it. He is continually disappointed with the younger generation, yet he must live at their mercy. Skalla-Grímr and his son used to be powerful men who had their way, and they lose it (almost) all as they age. The only thing left to them is words, and one last act of revenge. Egill's verses could be a true lamentation of what he has lost, but they could also have an element of show to them, where he is trying to incite pity or regret in those that hear him. The writer is allowing the audience some insight into the character´s emotions, which is not something that is normally dwelled upon. Medieval Icelandic literature normally shows emotion through external factors such as physical reactions like fainting or the reddening of a face. Poetry is a different medium through which emotions can be expressed without changing the narrative style.[136] Poetry is thus one of the few ways these four sagas tell us about the character's feelings regarding their own old age. The men in these sagas are shown as struggling much more than the women with their ageing. Even the women that are strong and determined do not try and cause problems for the people caring for them or to come back as ghosts to cause harm.

[136] Rikhardsdottir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts*, 57-58, 85.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to carry out a broad analysis of ageing as it is depicted in four of the Icelandic family sagas, *Laxdæla saga, Brennu-Njáls saga, Eyrbyggja saga,*` and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar.* These sagas show that there were many different ways in which people could age. Chronologically old characters display different physical and mental signs of ageing. Those that are chronologically old can retain their positions and even improve them while they retain their ability to function in society. Once they lose their ability to function well, they lose their position in society. This is the case for both men and women, although men often have more to lose. Both men and women who are deemed functionally old, are placed in the same category and are not valued very much or able to participate in society. Old age itself and the old body are depicted as unpleasant, however the saga narrators indicate that old age is not a sufficient reason for younger characters to ignore or mistreat the elderly. The younger generations expected to take over from the elderly. In turn, the elderly expected, or hoped, to be provided for by the younger generations. This care could be provided by direct heirs, or other family, and it could be done so lovingly or begrudgingly. In these four sagas, the men cling to their past much more than the women. The women adapt to their ageing better and less angrily. Both men and women attempt to retain control over theirs and others lives, but the men make more attempts to regain control. Men are also more difficult when they lose control. The writers of these sagas did not simply create stereotyped ‘old’ people. There are some common tropes used, such as the ‘nasty old men’ or the ‘tricky, evil, older women who perform magic.’ However, these are mixed in with other elderly people who are diverse. This study is limited to upper class individuals who are mentioned in the sagas, and there are not many who are given long descriptions. Nevertheless, this provides us with a surprisingly diverse image of the elderly in the Icelandic family sagas.

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