

“Ravished by Vikings”: The Pre-modern and the Paranormal in Viking Romance Fiction

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Abstract: The trope of forced sex in romance fiction has found itself under scrutiny and pressure since the feminist movement, and even more so now as women's media, especially e-media and social media, grow increasingly concerned with what is called "rape culture". A thriving subgenre of romance fiction is the Viking-themed romance, a paranormal-inflected subgenre that invariably features non-consensual sex ("ravishment"). My contention is that the Viking in these romance novels is a symbol of the pre-modern, allowed to be a brutal dominator precisely because he is freed from the restrictions of rational modernity. Moreover, the persistence of the paranormal in these stories marks them as clearly existing outside the general consensus of reality. Socially unacceptable behaviour becomes reframed as part of a fantasy, pre-emptively defusing any criticism that the acts of rape within are meaningful in a contemporary real-world context. The genre of Viking romance fiction, then, creates a more comfortable space for these stories by projecting rape into the past, and obscuring it with the veil of the numinous. Ravishment is accepted more readily when it is represented within a context that is neither "modern" nor "normal": rather, it is *pre-modern* and *paranormal*. The genre uses a number of observable moves, related to the pre-modern and the paranormal, to manage the transformation of a potentially guilty reading pleasure into a less-encumbered reading pleasure.

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Maggie realized then, if she had not already, that this was not a modern man who did things according to politically correct rules. He was a Viking warrior with savage sexual appetites and barbarian ways of seduction. An uncivilized lover.

She would have him no other way. (Hill 4474)

The quotation above, taken from Sandra Hill's 2001 romance novel *Truly, Madly, Viking*, is exemplary in how it enacts a double meaning that is central to this essay's argument about Viking romance fiction, a thriving subgenre of contemporary romance fiction. In this novel, Viking jarl Jorund time travels to modern-day Texas, where he finds love with Maggie, his psychiatrist. On the surface, "she would have him no other way" is a standard affirmation that she likes him just the way he is. The other meaning, though, is that she would not or could not "have him" unless he forced her with his "barbarian ways". My contention is that the Viking in these romance novels is a symbol of the pre-modern, allowed to be a brutal dominator precisely because he is freed from the restrictions of rational modernity. Moreover, the persistence of the paranormal in these stories marks them as clearly existing outside the general consensus of reality. Socially unacceptable behaviour becomes reframed as part of a fantasy, pre-emptively defusing any criticism that the acts of rape within are meaningful in a contemporary real-world context. Vikings have long been associated with the twin terms "rape and pillage", and while contemporary renderings of Viking "pillaging" may be a fairly straightforward proposition to discuss, a discussion of contemporary representations of Viking rape is compromised by the emotive nature of the topic of rape, especially male aggression against women. The discourse of "rape culture" across popular media, particularly popular women's media, potentially compromises or makes impossible the pleasure of reading about forced sex in literature. It is not the purpose of this essay to argue that such a pleasure should be allowable or condemned. Rather, I follow Angela Toscano's lead in rejecting the impulse to evaluate such scenes only in terms of how they "affect or reflect the lives of real women", which limits discussions to how they function as possible mimesis rather than as literary tropes (n. pag). While Toscano is interested in the narrative function of rape, this essay is interested more in the *generic* function of rape in a particular subgenre. When twenty-first century romance fiction resists twenty-first century feminist censure and self-censure, the subgenre of Viking romance fiction creates a "safe zone" for imaginings of male sexual aggression by representing the men as pre-modern and the context as paranormal.

I adapt the title of this essay from Delilah Devlin's 2011 novel *Ravished by a Viking*, which signals male sexual aggression as a key pleasure of the text in large letters on the front cover. The title invites discussion about the term ravishment, pertinent here because it is a word that comes, like Vikings, from the Middle Ages. "Ravissement" at first meant "carrying off a woman" then later "carrying a soul to heaven" then the "secular, affective" meaning of "being 'carried away' emotionally" and from there, carried away with sexual desire (Gradval 5). The word has always represented a slippage from "violent abduction to sexual pleasure" (Gradval 5), which may not be out of place with some medieval notions of love being likened to "a violent experience which happened to you—entered or penetrated you, took possession of you, corrupted your reason and imprisoned you, male and female—against your will" (Vitz 22). Rape and ravishment are expressions of what Gradval would call the same "trope", that is, the trope of forced sex in literature, whether through forced marriage or trickery, or physical violence, or supernatural agency. In her title, Devlin has

made a conscious choice *not* to use the word most associated with Vikings and sexual assault (“rape”), but to emphasise the possibility of being swept away by pleasure, even in the experience of being threatened by sexual aggression and violation. In a sense, the semantic slippage performed by the title is also performed by the texts under consideration: sexual aggression does take place, but is constantly framed as a pleasure that exists outside of rational modernity.

Vikings, as noted above, also have their origin in the Middle Ages. They make their first appearance in English in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s entry for 787, which records the “first ships of the Danish men that sought land in England” and a welcoming reeve who is slain because “he knew not what they were.” They are called “pagans” and “barbarians” in Aethelward's *Chronicle*; are “seagoing robbers” according to Malmesbury; and known for “burning and plundering and manslaughter” in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. However, early chroniclers also evidence admiring fascination with the Vikings: for example, with the exoticness of their ships and their perceived attractiveness to English women (Frank 23-27). In fact, Vikings might have been the first counter-culture heroes, an example of the commonly expressed sentiment that monsters of any kind exert powers of attraction as well as powers of repulsion: an idea that clearly underpins the entire paranormal romance genre. Of all the characters that history presents us with, there would be few, if any, better suited to represent both brutal, masculine danger and desire than Vikings.

The Middle Ages are called the Middle Ages for a reason: in the narrative of progress and supersession to which Western culture subscribes, it sits between the two “great” periods of classical antiquity and the Renaissance. It is in the middle: its function is to define and validate the two bracketing periods. When we reimagine the Middle Ages now, we are very much still saying something about the modern, the thing that has superseded and flattened it: the medieval, according to Fradenburg, secures “for modernity, its intelligibility to itself” (211). The ongoing cultural impulse to represent Vikings as an irrational pre-modern people allows us to compare ourselves favourably against them and be more certain of our rational modernity. As an example, think of the origins of the modern word “berserk”: the bearskins (literally “bear-shirt”) that some Viking warriors wore while in a battle frenzy. I note that an aspect of the berserker legend has always been the possibility that they were actually shape-shifters, an example of the blurring between historical fact and supernatural fantasy that I explore in more detail below.

According to Geraldine Heng, the medieval romance and the contemporary popular romance can both be recognised by the “structure of desire” that drives the narrative (3): an object is desired, and obstacles cause the deferral of resolution to that desire. More specifically, the chivalric romance usually centres around gender and sexuality as well as adventure, and features the idea of courtly love (longing for an object that remains forever out of reach). This idea displays a similar “pattern of desire” and “economy of pleasure” to the contemporary popular romance (Heng 5). Importantly for the argument I present here, the medieval romance often featured supernatural creatures and events. Heng argues that in contemporary representation, the medieval romance has become almost indistinguishable from the lived Middle Ages, to the point that the whole period is “characterised and depicted in later eras as if it were a romance” (2). In the romance, as in contemporary representations of the medieval, fact and fantasy “collide and vanish, each into the other” (2).

The medieval romance genre that Heng cites above postdated the Viking age by several hundred years, but nonetheless the flattening of the Middle Ages that allows (or perhaps invites) superstition and the supernatural to colour its representation is also apparent when we consider how Vikings are represented across time. In 793, Norse raiders famously sacked the monastery at Lindisfarne on the English northern coast, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* characterises the attack as supernaturally monstrous, heralded by whirlwinds, lightning, and “fyrenne dracon” (fiery dragons) (my translation). The language itself is reminiscent of the apocalyptic language that describes Ragnarok, the mythological end times of the Viking gods: “The sun turns black, earth sinks in the sea / The hot stars down from heaven are whirled / ... fire leaps high about heaven itself” (*Völuspá* 57, trans Bellows 24). This elision between history and the supernatural turns up again in the contemporary fantasy novel *Wolfsangel*. As Vali waits aboard a longship for his first raid with his Viking colleagues, the berserkers begin to chant wildly and a series of images form in his mind: “Odin fighting the Fenris Wolf... gallows and slaughter, fire and blood” (Lachlan 77). Story and history slip in and out of each other from earliest records. The boundaries between historical events of the Viking age and Viking mythology are shown to be porous, tinged with a particular complexion of the supernatural: dark, menacing, apocalyptic. What we see, then, is a privileged relationship developing between brutal pagan masculinity and the paranormal, and it is this relationship that provides an engaging dynamic for the contemporary Viking romance novel. For example, in Tanya Anne Crosby’s *Viking’s Prize* (2013), protagonist Elienor is an unwilling prophetess who is cursed by paranormal dreams and haunted by accusations of witchcraft; in Sandra Hill’s *Truly, Madly, Viking* (2011), Jorund is a time-travelling Viking who eventually discovers other time-travelling Vikings, including his vanished brother; and Delilah Devlin’s *Ravished by a Viking* (2011) is set in the colony of New Iceland on a distant planet, where Vikings have been magically transported by the Norse gods via the mythological bridge Bifrost. It is interesting to note that complementing these traditionally published novels is a thriving subgenre of *Twilight* fan fiction that reimagines Edward as a Viking, and Isabella as his thrall. The nexus between Viking and vampire has already been explored in a sustained way in Charlaine Harris’s Sookie Stackhouse series and is more fully developed in the television series adaptation *True Blood* through the character of Eric Northman. The Viking, like the vampire, is bound by a different set of cultural rules and expresses a different and dangerous set of drives. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine these fan fictions as well, not the least reason being that (paradoxically) nothing paranormal takes place in them. But what this intertextuality between Viking romance and *Twilight* fan fiction may point to is the enduring popularity of romance that features submission, domination, and forced sex, and some of the generic conventions that can make those things more palatable to a twenty-first-century audience.

A great deal of scholarship of romance fiction takes as its objects past iterations of the genre. Given the romance genre, like all genres, is contingent and constantly shifting, criticism can easily become outdated (Vivanco 1061). As Luther has written, the standard trope of the rapist turned true love became far less common after the eighties and nineties (n. pag). Vivanco tells us that it is more likely that twenty-first-century romance novels will explicitly address “issues surrounding gender and sexual politics” (1085). Romance fiction now “at times reveal[s] an ardent, feminist awareness of the extent to which patriarchal societies can seek to control women” (1077). *Ravished by a Viking’s* protagonist Honora is a

smart and powerful spaceship captain who represents a complete subversion of the women's roles her Viking love interest has come to expect: "Didn't she know women were meant to be soft and yielding?" (68). Maggie, in *Truly, Madly, Viking* has a doctorate in psychology and Jorund must learn to hide his "show-vein-is" (i.e. chauvinist) tendencies around her (2831). Elienor in *Viking's Prize* is the feisty heroine so valued by historical fiction: an "independent, strong, feisty, and passionate" woman, around whom the "silent rank and file" of unexceptional women exist. The feisty heroine "must be exceptional"; she "lives a life less ordinary" (Tolmie 146), and her feistiness is presented for a female audience's reading pleasure. In many ways, these stories represent feminist values, and they do it quite naturally and smoothly: there is no sense that it is uncommon for twenty-first-century romance fiction to operate in this manner. However, the trope of ravishment is central to the erotics of every story. In each case, male aggression is presented as uninvited and insistent. Honora has to physically fight Dagr off: "she sputtered and slammed her fists against his chest" (Devlin 69); after Elienor tells Alarik, "You have no claim over me, nor shall I give you anything freely!" (895) he sexually assaults her while she sleeps: "he found himself undulating softly into the sweet warmth between her thighs" (Crosby 2134); and Jorund uses threats as foreplay: "You will bend to my will one day" (Hill 1896). The volume of scenes across this genre that operate as these do supports the idea that male sexual aggression is a key pleasure of the genre. The acknowledgement that reading pleasure is gained from representations of forced sex presents an undeniable conundrum for readers and theorists. As Katie Roiphe points out, such imaginings in popular fiction "seem to be saying something about modern women that nearly everyone wishes wasn't said" (n. pag).

Paranormal romance author Anne Rice says that a woman "has the right to pretend she's being raped by a pirate if that's what she wants to pretend" (in Dowd, n. pag), co-opting the language of feminism ("has the right", "what she wants") to support her assertion. What is revealing about Rice's proclamation is that she needs to say it at all. It is framed as a response in anticipation of the feminist censure that attends representation of rape fantasies, and fantasies of domination and submission. Certainly the widespread success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* aroused much popular consternation, exemplified in Frank Bruni's article for the *New York Times* that took on the "post-feminist power dynamics" of both *Fifty Shades* and popular HBO television series *Girls*: "Gloria Steinem went to the barricades for *this*? Salaries may be better than in decades past and the cabinet and Congress less choked with testosterone. But in the bedroom? What's happening there remains something of a muddle, if not something of a mess" (n. pag, original emphasis). Postfeminism is a term mostly used to refer to women "who are thought to benefit from the women's movement" but "do not push for further political change". The opening quotation of this essay, where Maggie explicitly expresses pleasure that Jorund is not "politically correct" exemplifies the postfeminist outlook. Postfeminists, according to Aronson, are seen by feminists as "depoliticized and individualistic" and these tendencies are associated with "the 'death' of feminism" (Aronson 904-05). Gill agrees that the tendencies of postfeminism work against the goals of the feminist movement, citing particularly the postfeminist "resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference" (158). Writing about romance fiction specifically, Harzewski also identifies "the pleasures of femininity" afforded "through the recognition of sexual difference" as an integral concern of postfeminism (Harzewski 3469). Not every theorist is as sanguine as Harzewski, with Gill

noting that the reinstatement of natural sexual difference serves to “(re)-eroticize power relations between men and women” with the end result that “discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable and... pleasurable” (Gill 158-59). Bonomi, Altenburger, and Walton point to popular fiction’s role in representing as positive what they call “dangerous” ideas of abuse against women (733), while Philadelphoff-Puren implicates a certain strain of romance novels—those marked by a “consistently violent representation of heterosexual sex” (32) and the heroine’s “dissimulating ‘no’” (39)—in the low conviction rates of rapists, arguing that these novels have shaped “a *legal-romantic imaginary* which has material effects on the lives of women who charge men with rape” (38, original emphasis). These reactions exemplify what Roiphe describes as the “upstanding feminist tsk-tsking” about the choices postfeminists make about what to read and what to watch (n. pag). In this discourse, clear discomfort exists around the idea of male aggression as pleasurable to women. The genre of Viking romance fiction, then, creates a more comfortable space for reading pleasure by projecting rape into the past, and obscuring it with the veil of the numinous. The pleasure of ravishment is accepted more readily when it is represented within a context that is neither “modern” nor “normal”: rather, it is *pre-modern* and *paranormal*. The genre uses a number of observable moves, related to the pre-modern and the paranormal, to manage the transformation of a potentially guilty reading pleasure into a less-encumbered reading pleasure.

Essentialised sexual difference is a key feature of this genre. Vikings represent an unreconstructed masculinity that is almost fetishized, and which is presented as impossible for modern men to attain. The difference between the Viking male and the modern male is most clearly evidenced in Hill’s *Truly, Madly, Viking* because Jorund has time-travelled to present-day Texas, allowing for deep contrast. When Jorund sees men in fashionable cowboy boots, he says, “High-heeled boots on men! Are the men of this place demented? Do they not know how ridiculous they look? Do their toes not hurt and their ankles not ache at the end of a day spent in men’s work?” (Hill 664). Jorund’s default assumption is that men work with their bodies, and that anything that interferes with that is “ridiculous”; but in a way it echoes contemporary criticism of the “metrosexual” man as somebody who privileges fashion over traditional male pursuits. Modern man’s inability to match the essential masculinity of the Viking is exemplified when another male character dresses up as a Viking: “On his head was a long, blond wig that Jorund could swear he’d seen on a scullery maid just yestereve. On his upper arms were two makeshift bracelets formed from strips of tinfoil, a product used in modern kitchens to save food” (2018). The particular complexion of the humour in this description is not simply derived from the sharp difference between real Viking and make-believe Viking, but also from the way the dressed-up man is feminised by being associated with women’s accoutrements (wig, bracelets) and domestic work (maids, kitchens, food preservation). A similar strongly drawn image of the inability of the modern to be as masculine as the pre-modern is a scene in which a man dressed in a toga bends over to reveal “bare flabby buttocks” (2016). The modern man is not associated here with sexual aggression, rather with femininity and flaccidity. He is no sexual threat; in fact, he is barely sexual.

Even the modern day alpha male pales in comparison to the authentic masculinity of the Viking. Maggie’s ex-husband is a surgeon, arguably the top of the tree in modern masculine hierarchies. Maggie explains that he had aspirations as a thrill seeker: “He

wanted to [s]et a record for skydiving. Climb the highest mountains. Race cars. Scuba dive" (3144). Jorund, by contrast, finds the idea of seeking danger for empty reasons puzzling. In Viking times he had been close to death when "a Saracen horse soldier had... put a scimitar to his throat while dangling him off the side of a cliff." This experience is presented as a genuinely fearful moment—"had not felt such fright"—an authentic male experience of battle with another authentic male (2871). The challenges facing Jorund's performances of masculinity present real consequences; the modern thrill seeker's are consequence-free.

Jorund's focus on manly physical activity colours his attitudes to the other patients in the psychiatric institution he finds himself in. He takes particular interest in paraplegic Gulf War veteran Steve: "Even those who live in those wheeled chairs should be working muscles that are still alive," he says (1940). His interest extends to Steve's mental state. Steve is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and Jorund explains to Maggie that he is aware of a kind of shellshock among his own people "after a particularly gruesome battle" (1629). This connection across time, however, is not completely shared: Jorund is quick to point out he speaks "not from personal experience" (1629). Within a few weeks, Jorund has instigated a physical activity program to help rehabilitate his fellow inmates, particularly employing the pre-modern activities of sword fighting and rock hurling as a way of helping these modern men reclaim their masculine agency.

The hypermasculinity of these characters functions to heighten the contrast between male and female characters. This eroticization of sexual difference is often focalised through the female viewpoint. Female characters in these scenes seem to lose control of thought and rationality when confronted with the erotic potential of this contrast. Maggie notes that when Jorund's "maleness [is] pressed against her femaleness, sanity seemed to be lacking" (Hill 1846), and Elienor's thoughts turn "against her will" to "the firmness of [Alarik's] flesh beneath her palms as he'd carried her out from the kirken" (Crosby 141). Honora even loses control of her basic bodily functions when she reluctantly agrees to group sex with Dagr and his friends: she "imagined how she must look, her slight frame dwarfed by three large Vikings, and she grew so excited she gulped for air" (Devlin 152). Another pleasure that comes from this representation of contrast is that it allows women to see the desire available in pre-modern notions of feminine beauty: for example, Elienor's "generous curves" (Crosby 626), or the "soft, full curves" and "ample breast" of Viking woman Tora, who serves as Dagr's sex thrall (Devlin 37). These notions of attractive female bodies are offered as essentialised archetypes that the pre-modern man understands as perpetually desirable: Jorund notes that Maggie "thought she carried too much weight, but she was wrong. Men did not like skin-and-bone females.... On that issue, men were men" (Hill 3491).

Often, this eroticised difference between men and women is extended imaginatively to signify not just contrast, but conflict. Alarik from *Viking's Prize* finds such conflict arousing when Elienor resists him: "Tightening his hold upon the woman's hair, he rose from his stooped position, hauling her up against him as he came to his feet, and the feel of her soft body hardened his more fully" (559). In this quotation, contrast between masculinity and femininity ("her soft body hardened his") shares the same space as aggressive domination (dragging Elienor by her hair). The conflict between male and female is at the heart of the sexual pleasure the main characters experience in *Ravished by a Viking*: "we battle every time we fuck", Dagr tells Honora (Devlin 162), and his

internalisations during their lovemaking bear this notion out: “crushed beneath his weight” she “smack[s] his arm”, and he compares her protests to that of a “kitten”, which makes him “bark” with laughter (306). Even when not playing out actual physical resistance and domination, aggression infuses the language around lovemaking. “When I look at you, I want to make fierce love with you,” Jorund tells Maggie (3368), and shortly after he continues, “The only question in my mind is whether, this first time, I should woo you or conquer you” (3441); Alarik achieves orgasm with a “powerful thrust and a savage cry” (Crosby 3507); and when Dagr and Honora first have sex in *Ravished by a Viking*, it is described as “no gentle taking”, peppered with verbs such as “prodded”, “gritted”, “ground”, “growled”, “slammed”, and “clawed” (78-79).

The most common metaphors employed in this contrast/conflict of the masculine and feminine are the tools of pre-modern warfare. Jorund threatens to “teach [Maggie] with my callused hands and hard staff not to tease a fighting man” (Hill 3368), and Dagr describes his erection as “harder than the tempered steel of his father’s sword” (Devlin 80). Even the Viking lover’s face is compared to pre-modern weaponry: “His gaze fixed upon the horizon, his expression hard as unyielding steel. His features were well chiseled like that of his namesake’s, the hawk, and his pewter gray eyes had been likened to the silver of his sword, Dragvendil, for they could slice into the heart of a man with the ease of a fine gilt-edged blade” (Crosby 181). These tools of battle create a curious mix of responses in the female protagonist. “The lethal chill” of Alarik’s “silver-flecked eyes” sends “shivers down [Elienor’s] spine” in a moment of fearful apprehension (Crosby 1371). Later in the same novel, with the same man, it is *desire* that creates the same physiological response: “A chill raced down Elienor’s spine.... The possibility that Alarik might kiss her made her heartbeat quicken and her breath catch in her throat” (Crosby 1536). Ultimately, though, enjoyment is derived from this battle of the sexes: “By the blessed virgin, was it supposed to feel so good to be caressed by one’s enemy?” (Crosby 488). The playing out of surrender and conquest is invariably shown to be pleasurable.

The pre-modern is the particular place that these pleasures of sexual aggression can go because of the long-held association between Vikings and rape. In these novels, the impulse to ravish is shown to be cultural for Vikings, part of their inbuilt drive to dominate by force, and an essential aspect that makes them who they are. The texts bear this essentialism out in the frank acknowledgement about forced sex in Viking culture. Alarik’s aunt tells Elienor how she was married against her will and found happiness. Dagr’s brother Eirik reflects in a pragmatic way on the sex thralls in his culture that “act the whore” while restrained by metal cuffs (6). Jorund is frank about rape in his family: “My brother Rolf advocated never asking for permission first. He said ‘tis better to do the act, then apologize later, but he was probably talking about something involving sex” (Hill 3300). Such stories arouse Maggie’s horror, which Jorund shrugs off with the declaration, “That is life in my land” (3121).

The essential pre-modern drive to dominate is also represented in scenes of rape in its most direct sense of forced sex accompanied by violence: “female servants ... screamed for mercy beneath the abusing bodies of ...Northmen” on the same ship that Elienor is transported on (710). The Viking lovers are often shown contemplating rape. Jorund’s earliest reflections on Maggie include: “He could break her slim wrists with a snap of his fingers. He could lift her by the waist and toss her over his shoulder. He could press her to the bed, and...Well, he could do things to her” (903); while Alarik’s first reaction to the

feisty Elienor is to be “sorely tempted to lie [the] wench flat and ride her against her will” (627). Importantly, this reflection is immediately followed by “But he would not.” Having established that the Viking lovers are Vikings (with the impulse to rape), the books then show these men performing self-restraint that indicates growing affection is present: Dagr’s sensitivity to Honora’s sexual needs “surprised her. She’d thought the savage marauder... [would]... force her quickly onto his cock” (Devlin 75). Nonetheless, the sex acts in these novels at the very least redefine widely held notions of what constitutes appropriate consent, and their pre-modern protagonists allow that perceived grey area of consent to be played out in a way that least offends modern sensibilities.

The ultimate symbol of Viking pre-modern (even animalistic) hypermasculinity is the huge erect penis that each love interest possesses, an extension of the “size and sinew” of the men themselves (Crosby 3974). Devlin calls it a “Viking-sized cock” (74), Jorund needs three attempts to wrangle his “bull-size erection” into Maggie’s vagina (Hill 3478), and Alarik notes he must prepare Elienor “for the size of him” (Crosby 3365). These men exist outside the realm of normal in a similar way to the heroes of the *fornaldarsögur* or legendary sagas of the Vikings. Sitting between the more realist style of the family sagas and the full-blown mythological retellings of the Eddas, the legendary sagas share with these Viking romance novels the blurring between realism and the supernatural. In some ways, the “Viking-sized” erection is supernature literalised. The Viking erection affords a connection between the hypermasculinity associated with the pre-modern and the rejection of realism associated with the paranormal. It is a clear mark of a superheroic body, a mythical giant phallus associated more with fantasy than with realistic representation.

As I have argued above, there exists a special relationship between Vikings and the paranormal, acknowledged by Jorund himself when pressed to explain how he rationalises his travelling through time: “Mayhap the Norse culture is more inclined to believe in the spectacular than yours. Mayhap, because of our harsh environment, we tend to have more hope in the gods” (Hill 1301). Note that he ties his belief back to his pre-modernity, citing the harsh environment he is native to, and his belief and faith in pagan gods rather than secular rationality. The paranormal is another way that rape is projected out of the here and now in these novels, making it safer or more comfortable to imagine and gain reading pleasure from.

One way the paranormal is employed is to set the context of the story well beyond the realm of consensual reality. Jorund is transported to the modern world by a killer whale. With his pre-modern, supernatural-accepting mindset, he sees this method of transportation as heroic: “No doubt there would even be a praise-poem honouring Jorund, the warrior who rode in the cradle of a killer whale’s mouth and lived to tell the tale” (291). However, for the modern characters, Jorund’s story prompts them to lock him up in the Rainbow Psychiatric Hospital. The modern readers who belong to the same present are, by extension, implicated in a culture in which the irrational is punished by imprisonment and diagnosed and treated with medical science: law and medicine being two significant symbols of modern rationality. Jorund reflects on being forced to wear what he calls a “torture *shert*” and “ankle restraints” with “bars on his windows” while Maggie treats his delusions of time travel, insisting that he employ the very post-medieval psychiatric method of examining his own feelings: “How do you feel about that?” she asks during their treatment sessions of his resistance to being imprisoned (960). In a later scene, Jorund

breaks out of his straitjacket, a feat of superhuman strength that demonstrates the powerful dispositions of the pre-modern and the paranormal to erupt through the strictures of rational modernity (1348). This dynamic of attempted modern control being usurped by overwhelming Viking power is echoed in sex acts in the texts. Such eruptions of the pre-modern are presented as patently at odds with consensual reality, and so the sex acts too are projected outside the real, and into the realm of fantasy.

Another way that the paranormal works to consign the issue of rape to the outside of serious contemporary discourse is to play up the risible nature of the paranormal elements. Certainly, *Truly, Madly, Viking* veers often into a comedic tone, especially with regards to time travel: “Maggie put her notebook aside and rubbed at the furrows in her forehead with the fingers of one hand. ‘A killer whale brought you here... from Iceland? A killer whale with bad breath?’” (1097). Many of the paranormal elements of the romance genre could be seen as ridiculous or laughable if removed from their context. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the ways that genres work is that those on the inside (readers and writers) accept the reality presented within the texts without question: supernatural activity makes sense in the genre. From the outside, though, to a reader unfamiliar with generic conventions, the supernatural may seem ridiculous or even arouse contempt: “[i]t is easy to trivialise something that appears, on the surface, to be silly or childish” (Wilkins 274). When Maggie teases Jorund by comparing time travel to Santa Claus, Hill allows the possibility that the supernatural conceit is faintly ridiculous (3748). The erotics of the text, then, may also be framed as frivolous, a bit of harmless fun. The possibility that the supernatural elements allow the texts to occupy a space outside serious discourse is apparent in reader reactions as registered on sites such as Goodreads. One review for *Ravished by a Viking* starts with, “I HAD to buy this book, just because of the title and the premise of Vikings in space!!” As the reader goes on to note, this is not a text to be taken seriously: “I’m expecting a total cheese-fest” (Jeanine n. pag); while a review on the same site for *Truly, Madly, Viking* describes the book as an “[u]napologetically cheesy ... very light, suspend-your-disbelief... time travel romance” (Yz the Whyz n. pag). The presentation of the paranormal elements means that the serious themes in the book, especially that of sexual violence, have been successfully reframed as too light and “cheesy” to be paid serious consideration.

Moreover, the paranormal elements can be seen as linked intrinsically to the erotic elements. As I wrote above, the Viking erection is the most obvious symbol of the conflation of pre-modern and paranormal with erotic pleasure. In *Viking’s Prize*, the otherworldly state of dreaming is also implicated in this conflation. Elienor has prophetic dreams, which she tries to hide because they open her to accusations of witchcraft, a crime for which her mother was executed. When she has her dream visions, they are unwelcome and unsettling: “The merest notion that she might meet the same fate as did her mother made her knees weak” (259). In one of these dreams, she sees the face of the Viking who eventually enslaves her, and on first sight of him while awake, she is shocked and horrified: “That face! Sweet Jesu—that face! She recalled it from her dream and shuddered” (480-91). However, it is through dreams that Alarik is able to show Elienor his ability to be gentle and sensitive, when he comforts her when she cries out in her sleep; and ultimately dreams allow her to see Alarik’s fate and save him from it. As well as their paranormal potential, dreams for Elienor have erotic potential. When Alarik touches her naked body without consent in the night and she half-wakes, she tells herself it is “naught but a dream... a

hazy... pleasant... dream” and reflects that she “never wanted to waken” (2139). In this example, unsought sexual contact is allowed to occupy the same place as patently non-real and paranormal prophetic visions. Elienor reflects on the reality or otherwise of dreams, both prophetic and erotic, in these terms: “In reality, how could she even be certain that her dreams were anything more than her own fancy, she reasoned” (2707). The evocative word pairs—reality/dreams, fancy/reason—function as a kind of manifesto for how the text should be read. To paraphrase: in reality, how could imaginings of rape and sexual violence be considered more than fantasy to a reasonable person? Another key word in this regard is the word “witch”, which appears as the designation of a particular kind of paranormal character (Elienor) but also features repeatedly in the word “bewitch”, used in its sense to mean an overwhelming attraction, which Alarik associates with Elienor: “what [was it] about her bewitching eyes that made him lose all sense and reason?” (1826). Once again, sense and reason (markers of the modern) are presented as things in opposition to the paranormal and in opposition to the sexually aggressive erotics of the text.

Vikings rape. It is one of the things that modern culture understands about Vikings, whether or not history supports the notion with detailed evidence. It is a notion that holds sway as tenaciously as the notion that Vikings wore horned helmets (they didn’t). Vikings also share a privileged relationship with the paranormal. Their gods have become our superheroes and even the gritty, realist mode of Michael Hirst’s television series *Vikings* (2013) is interspersed with supernatural visions of the gods and Valkyries. The trope of forced sex in romance fiction has found itself under scrutiny and pressure since the feminist movement, and even more so now as women’s media, especially e-media and social media, grow increasingly concerned with what is called “rape culture”. Popular blog-site *Jezebel*, for example, lists the term as one of its most frequent tags. Viking romance fiction, then, is the perfect genre for fantasies of forced sex to comfortably be represented. These scenes are patently not real and patently not of the here-and-now, and thus can function as a safe zone for pleasurable, imaginative fantasies about male sexual aggression. They can also function as a kind of resistance to the detractors who want to see the romance genre, as Toscano argues, “as a kind of field study of women’s sexuality”, often with a view to condemnation (n. pag). A post-script on the bottom of Edvard/Bella Viking/vampire fan fiction “My Viking” provides a lovely summation of my argument: “[N]o negative comments on Edvard being too forceful with Bella”, author sheviking writes, anticipating possible censure for the “savage sensation” represented within. “He’s a Viking after all”.

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