

# *Romancing the Dark Ages: The Viking Hero in Sentimental Narrative*

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**Abstract:** Among the cultural images of the Dark Ages one that has drawn much attention on the part of literature is that of the Viking. Conventionally accepted as the embodiment of Germanic racial heroism since the Romantic Period, the popularity of this character is attested in numerous poems as well as in historical and adventure novels. This paper explores how late 20<sup>th</sup>-century popular fiction takes this process of cultural appropriation a step further as the genre of the «hot historical» romance relocates the Norseman as object of feminine erotic desire. The archetypal Noble Barbarian is thus transformed into a peculiar Sensitive New Man, and sentimental narrative becomes a territory of negotiation for the contemporary discourses of feminism and the new masculinities.

**Key words:** popular literature – romance – medievalism – Viking –gender studies – new masculinities

**Resumen:** Una de las imágenes culturales de la Edad Media temprana que ha recibido mayor atención por parte de la literatura es la del vikingo. Aceptado convencionalmente como la encarnación del heroísmo racial germánico desde el Romanticismo, la popularidad de este personaje ha quedado patente en multitud de poemas, así como en la novela histórica y de aventuras. Este trabajo explora cómo la ficción popular de fines del s.XX lleva este proceso de apropiación cultural un paso más allá en tanto que el género de la novela rosa de tema histórico redefine al vikingo como objeto de deseo erótico femenino. De este modo, el arquetipo del «noble bárbaro» se transforma en un peculiar representante del «nuevo varón sensible», y la narrativa sentimental se convierte en terreno de negociación para los discursos del feminismo y de las nuevas masculinidades contemporáneas.

**Palabras clave:** literatura popular – novela femenina – medievalismo – vikingo –estudios de género – nueva masculinidad.

The Middle Ages have captivated the imagination of the subsequent ages as they provide a convenient mirror for other historical periods whose self-

definitions have been built in contrast to the medieval. In Brian Stock's words: «The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to redefine itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In their widest ramifications 'the Middle Ages' thus constitutes one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world» (69). In fact, this fascination with the medieval past has been operative both in the traditions of high and low culture; within the sphere of the popular, the appropriation of the Middle Ages has turned out a most profitable device to sell not only cultural products, but also goods as disparate as beer or wooden flooring.

The association with the medieval elicits connotations of authenticity and naturalness, conferring on the products the prestige of tradition even when the tradition invoked has been created *ad hoc*. Thus, most people's perception of the Middle Ages is not based on historical evidence but on what Hobsbawm and Ranger termed as «invented traditions,» in this case perpetuated through the popular genres<sup>1</sup>. As in contemporary appropriations the stress falls on the legendary and the magical regardless of national borders, the medieval past of modern fiction departs significantly from the «myth of origins» central to the 18<sup>th</sup>-and 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist vindication of the period. Thus, for popular audiences the Middle Ages is a narrative niche for fantasy where the historical and the invented –and sometimes the anachronistic and the unlikely– coexist. Régine Pernoud denounces this inaccurate, melting-pot character of the popular medieval in which the alluring and the evocative replace historical accuracy:

Le Moyen Age fournit, à tous ceux pour lesquels l'Histoire n'est qu'un prétexte, un terrain de choix: une période que le grand public ignore, avec quelques noms qui émergent, Charlemagne, Jeanne d'Arc, l'Inquisition, les cathares, la *Chanson de Roland*, les troubadours, les Templiers, Abélard, *le Graal*, féodal qui rime avec brutal et les serfs occupés à faire taire les grenouilles. Tel est à peu près le bagage moyen délivré par les manuels de la classe de cinquième ou ceux de l'enseignement élémentaire. Si l'on souhaite le corser, on y ajoute le secret des Templiers et le trésor des cathares, ou inversement le secret des cathares et le trésor des Templiers. (126)

This picturesque reading of the Middle Ages as a land of fantasy has provoked the interest of different forms of fiction narratives, notably (pseudo)historical novels and films but, interestingly, beyond that the popular revisiting of this past has also proved a suitable vehicle for modern political propaganda; John Aberth argues that, for instance, diverse medieval films as Serguei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), Michael Curtiz's *The Ad-*

<sup>1</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).

ventures of *Robin Hood* (1938) or, more recently, Kevin Reynold's *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* (1991) have proved effective means to voice the discourses of the Soviet regime, the American New Deal, and that of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century neoconservatism respectively (3). As well as for political uses, the medieval matter has also been appropriated by popular genres to address other contemporary preoccupations as ethnicity, religious conflict, gender roles, or family values.

In general terms, the popular imagination divides the Middle Ages roughly into the categories of the «Barbarian Dark Ages» and the «Knightly Medieval.» Among the cultural images of the Dark Ages one that has drawn much attention is that of the Viking. Conventionally, the Norseman embodied the archetypal European heroic masculinity. The figure rises in the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century within the revision of the Norse legacy, a cultural phenomenon fostered by the vogue of Gothicism; this can be appreciated in the popularity of works as Thomas Percy's 1770 translation of Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* (1756) and in his «Five Pieces of Runic Poetry» (1763), as well as in Thomas Gray's poems «The Fatal Sisters» and «The Descent of Odin» (1768) and Magnus Magnusson and William Morris's translations for the *Saga Library* (1891-99). Progressively, the fierce and feared Danes of the medieval chronicles were vindicated as role-models within a process of rewriting history that presents significant connections with the Germanophilia of the Victorian Age. In this reading, the Viking was legitimated as a cultural icon since it evoked military ethics that perfectly suited the contemporary discourses of imperialism and racial propaganda. Besides, the figure of the Germanic pagan echoed the confrontation of the Northern and the Mediterranean civilizations, later reformulated as the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided a relevant cultural myth of origins for Northern European nations<sup>2</sup>.

In this frame, the interest in the Viking bloomed in the genre of the historical adventure novel between the 1830s and World War One, with examples as successful as George Dasent's *Vikings of the Baltic* (1875), H. Rider Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes* (1891), F. Whinshaw's *Harold the Norseman* (1897), and Charles Whistler's *A Sea-Queen Sailing* (1907) or *Dragon Osmund* (1914). Likewise, in the United States the novels of Otilie A. Liljencrantz on the

<sup>2</sup> See Frank E. Farley, *Scandinavian Influences on the English Romantic Movement* (Boston: Ginn, 1903); Conrad Nordby, *The Influence of Old Norse Literature upon English Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1901); Ralph B. Allen, *Old Icelandic Sources in the English Novel* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1933); Olive Anderson, «The Political Uses of History in Mid-Nineteenth Century England,» *Past and Present* 36 (1967): 87-65; Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970); Hugh MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982); and Claire Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990).

viking discovery of America were much appreciated at the turn of the century. These narratives had highly conventional plots including adventures in distant seas, storms, battles, pirates, and mutinies, and viking protagonists portrayed as noble heroes. Although on occasions the Norseman might be rude, he was the epitome of the free man, his personality assuming features of another cultural myth, that of the Noble Savage. Edward Bulwer-Lytton celebrates this idea in *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), a Victorian historical romance which makes much of the Scandinavian heritage of England:

A magnificent race of men were those war sons of the old North . . . they plunged into barbarism the nations they swept; but from that barbarism they reproduced the noblest elements of civilisation. Swede, Norwegian and Dane . . . had the same prodigious energy, the same passion for freedom, individual and civil, the same splendid errors in the thirst for fame and the «point of honour.» (17)

The interest of popular fiction in the Viking re-emerges in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with novels as Henry Myer's *The Utmost Island* (1951), Evangeline Walton's *The Cross and the Sword* (1956), or Henry Treece's popular series *Viking's Dawn* (1956), *The Road to Miklagard* (1957), *Viking's Sunset* (1958), and *The Horned Helmet* (1963)<sup>3</sup>. Because of its appeal to wide audiences, the stories and characters of this kind of novels were transferred to other popular media and formats as the comic book or cinema. Among the most relevant comics are the Marvel series *Thor*, by Kirby and Lee, and *Thor-gal*, by Rosinski and Van Hamme, which popularized the image of the muscular viking hero<sup>4</sup>. Regarding films, the most famous production is probably Richard Fleisher's adaptation for the screen of Edison Marshall's novel *The Vikings* (1958). The unforgettable scene in which Kirk Douglas, cast as Einar the Viking, walks on the oars of his longship as it advances towards the village's haven has become a Hollywood classic<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> From different ideological quarters, the Cold War climate of fear of a new armed conflict produced a pro-pacifist, interesting revision of the Scandinavian past as W. H. Canaway's *The Ring-Givers* (1958), a novel revisiting the Old English poem *Beowulf*.

<sup>4</sup> *Prince Valiant*, created in 1937 by Hal Foster, also deals with the adventures of a Scandinavian character, Valiant, an exile from the Northern kingdom of Thule who seeks refuge in King Arthur's court. Although he is presented as a most noble Norseman, his figure is more consistent with the knightly values of the Round Table than with those of the Barbarian.

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting Hollywood «viking movie» was Jack Cardiff's *The Long Ships* (1963), in turn an adaptation of the Swedish novel of the same title by Frans G. Bengtsson. On its part, the more fantastic *The Saga of the Viking Woman and their Voyage to the Waters of the Sea Serpent* (Roger Corman, 1957) is much indebted to the comic book aesthetics, as is also the case of *The Viking Queen* (Don Chaffey, 1963). This film, in spite of its title, is set in the years 60-61 AD and is vaguely inspired in British Queen Boudica's resistance to

In the following decade the success of these productions was followed by many other historical romances. Later texts were influenced by the revisionist movement taking place in the 1970s, when scholars claimed that the Norsemen had been treated unfairly in history books; in Peter Sawyer's words, «once the prejudices and exaggerations of the primary sources are recognized, the raids can be seen not as an unprecedented and inexplicable cataclysm, but as an extension of the normal Dark Age activity» (202-03). This new approach stresses the importance of the vikings as voyagers, discoverers and settlers in novels as Michael Crichton's recreation of *Beowulf* in *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), Elizabeth Janeway's *The Vikings* (1981), Jane Smiley's *Greenlanders* (1988), or Charles Barnitz's *The Deepest Sea* (1996); in the same line, Poul Anderson's *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* (1988) and *The Wars of the Gods* (1997) present the violent societies of the Icelandic sagas and the Scandinavian lifestyle in a more positive light.

Progressively, by the turn of the century the emphasis shifts from adventure to the discussion of deeper cultural and ethical questions as the viking narrative provides a suitable ground for the religious debate between the pagan and the Christian. Formerly, the Romantic and Victorian revisions of Norse paganism had accommodated it to contemporary moral standards; sympathetically regarded as something picturesque and inoffensive, it was often rendered as a natural cult close to the ethics of Protestantism. In later times works as Harry Harrison and John Holm's trilogy *The Hammer and the Cross* (1988), *One King's Way* (1995), and *King and Emperor* (1996) rewrite however these ancient Germanic cults in tune with present day religious concerns. In fact, their novels assimilate early medieval Germanic paganism to New Age and neopagan cults as Wicca, Ásatrú and Folkish Odinism<sup>6</sup>. A good illustration of this point is the centrality of the religious matter in *The Hammer and the Cross*; the action is set in the Danelaw by the year 865, when the protagonist, Shef, son of a pagan Dane and a Christian Anglo-Saxon lady, suffers an spiritual crisis. Educated in the Christian faith, Shef abandons the fanaticism of Catholicism by entering a Norse mystic sect, the «Asgarth Way.» This new cult is a blending of ancient pagan Germanic rites, marked by their respect to the natural world and its magic, in combination with the Christian sense of piety and love ethics:

The trouble is, he [Shef] saw in a moment of contrast, that the Christians put their trust in rescue, and so do not struggle for themselves, just put their

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the Romans. In the same decade appeared a curious Spanish-Italian production *Eric il Vikingo* (Mario Caiano, 1965) which has the same title of Monty Python's parodic *Eric the Viking* (1989) directed by Terry Gilliam, with Tim Robbins as its protagonist.

<sup>6</sup> See Brian Bocking and Marion Bowman, eds. «Contemporary New Age Religions in the British Isles» (*Religion Today* 9.3 (1994)); and Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1995).

faith in their Church. The pagans struggle for victory, but they have no hope. So they bury girls alive and roll men under their longships, for they feel there is no good in the world. The Way must be between these two. Something that offers hope, which the pagans do not have: even Othin could not bring back his son Balder from the dead. Something that depends on your own efforts, which the Christian Church rejects: to them salvation is a gift, a grace, not something mere humanity can earn. (264)

In general, these novels tend to present the Viking's innate sense of religion as a very positive spirituality which, suspiciously, incorporates a (proto)environmental awareness that seems to respond more to modern ecological concerns than to medieval attitudes.

As a result of these changes, the Viking is no longer presented as the uncivilized Other, just a plain warrior hero with bellicose morals, but as a hero with moral conflicts that may serve as a point of reference for modern audiences. In his figure converge elements of the Natural Man matching the discourse of contemporary masculinities as well as elements related to ethnic identity issues; in the context of post-colonial, multicultural societies, the Norseman turns out particularly appealing to audiences of northern European descent. A further step in this process of cultural appropriation by contemporary fiction is the turn towards the sentimental, a relocation taking place in the late 1990s. The transformation of the Barbarian into a peculiar Sensitive New Man is appreciated in the success of the romance of viking theme. In the last two decades there has been a significant increase of novels of the so-called «hot historical» variety focusing on the Viking as object of feminine erotic desire. The most famous authors of these new Viking narratives, Johanna Lindsey, Catherine Coulter, and Sandra Hill have even become «New York Times Best-Sellers.» The titles of the works are clearly indicative of their approach to the topic; to name just a few, let's consider Johanna Lindsey's *Fires of Winter* (1980) and *Hearts Aflame* (1982), with their sequel *Surrender My Love* (1994), or Heather Graham's *Golden Surrender* (1985), *Lord of the Wolves* (1993), and *The Viking's Woman* (1993); even more suggestive are Robin Gideon's *Viking Ecstasy* (1993), or the ones by Sandra Hill, a true specialist in the genre with two «Viking Series» already published and which include titles as *Beloved Viking* (1994), *Viking's Prize* (1994), *The Reluctant Viking* (1994), *The Bewitched Viking* (1999), *Truly, Madly Viking* (2000), *My Fair Viking* (2002), *The Very Virile Viking* (2003), *A Tale of Two Vikings* (2004), *Wet and Wild* (2004), *Hot and Heavy* (2005) *Rough and Ready* (2006)<sup>7</sup>.

These novels greatly rely on cliché: simple style, simple plot, stock characters and a happy ending; that is, marriage between the Viking and the heroine, as finding a husband seems to be privileged by most popular genres as the great female quest. Another cliché applying to these works is that the

<sup>7</sup> Her last work for this collection, *Down and Dirty*, will be published in October 2007.

authors of romance are consistently women. However, it seems to be the product of a convention of the genre: often authors hide their real identities under female pen-names in order to reinforce the identification with the target audience of female readers<sup>8</sup>. Besides, it should be taken into account that although this is a most profitable kind of literature, the genre is stigmatized by being «popular fiction» and therefore writers, due to cultural prejudices, would not have their real names associated with these products.

As is typical of the sentimental narrative, the narration is built around the love conflict: the impossibility of the union between the hero and the heroine because the Viking is a «Barbarian Other» that shatters the woman's life. The Viking is thus presented as the enemy in two possible ways. If the novel is set in the Middle Ages, the obstacle for the protagonists' love is synchronically delimited, as the characters usually belong to different peoples; the lady is a Saxon, a Celt, or a Frank, and the mutual hostility of their ethnic groups marks their relation as taboo. A second possibility is that the narration is set in the present by means of the rhetorical device of time-travel, and so the conflict complicates diachronically when the professional and self-assertive modern woman falls in love with a chauvinistic, domineering, medieval man. Johanna Lindsey's novel *Until Forever* (1995) provides a good illustration of this point. Here the Viking Thorn comes from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to enlighten Roseleen White's trivial life –she is a medieval history professor– and the heroine learns to love him even if this implies relinquishing her modern woman's principles of emotional independence and gender equality<sup>9</sup>. But, in any case, both the medieval or contemporary protagonist feels both shocked and attracted by the sexy and caring Viking who has come to make her question her values. As we read in this novel, the Viking's appeal is ageless: «By the time his licking turned into kissing, Roseleen was a squirming mass of sensitized nerves that reacted to Thorn's slightest touch. And her perception of medieval man was changed forever.» (181)

The «hot historical» depends on the construction of the «Other» according to the contemporary definition of feminine identity. In this regard, Joan Cohn points out that «romance satisfies –as it feeds– the forbidden desire for male power and unrealistic desire for female love, and it satisfies them both in the gorgeous figure of the hero» (42). Thus, the Norseman of these novels is articulated as the object of desire for both the medieval or modern women protagonist and also for the female reader. This is achieved by draw-

<sup>8</sup> Often, these books include a short biography of the authors in their back covers where they are consistently presented as happy wives and mothers as well as successful professional writers.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Holt's novel *Who Is Afraid of Beowulf?* (1988) also presents the adventures of History lecturer Hildy Frederiksen who, in the company of a Viking war-band, arrives in 20th century Scotland. However, here the stress falls on parody and there are no sentimental or erotic elements.

ing on the identification character-reader across times –that is, by appealing to what in the novels is presented as the eternal feminine that joins both females, and by assuming that women of all ages have to face the same kind of problems with men, that is, the eternal masculine. The rhetorics of the genre require that the narrator voices the female character's perception of the conflict, as it sides with the heroine in her quest to win the love of the Viking. Heather Graham's text *The Viking's Woman* (1990) offers a very representative instance of how the fascination with the dangerous Other becomes central to the economy of the narration. At this point on the story Rhiannon, King Alfred's niece and a brave and independent woman, refuses marrying the Viking Eric, to whom she has been offered as a «peace bride»; but in spite of her reluctance, the woman's resistance is progressively won over by the Viking's sex-appeal:

She tried to scream, to deny, to disappear in the very air. With swift-rising horror she brought her gaze back to his eyes and was startled by the hard mockery and unrelenting pride within them. There was a strange and savage beauty about the man . . . It was in the animal-like grace of his movement as he came towards her . . . Trickle of flame danced down the length of her spine as she felt his touch, bold and hard upon her . . . as she felt his eyes, daggers that ripped into her, and pinned her soul as his body pinned her form.  
 «What shall I do first?» he inquired. «Beat you or rape you?»  
 «Let me go –»  
 . . . His breath warmed her lips and entered into her. She was filled with his scent, curiously clean and strikingly masculine and as alarming as his touch. (177)

The heroine's subjective perspective on this situation of abuse of power is built around a positive evaluation of the Viking's masculinity in traditional lines. His «strange and savage beauty,» «animal-like grace,» and «strikingly masculine» and «alarming scent» are perceived by the female as threatening yet enticing, and even his «hard mockery and unrelenting pride» contribute to seduce her.

The maxim seems to be that loving a Viking is always risky and painful because, although the heroine sees in him the perfect embodiment of protective masculinity, in the first place she must gain his love to be protected from him. She should employ her womanly charms in the process that I would define as the «taming of the Barbarian,» in which the male protagonist is civilized and transformed into an integrated member of his society by the agency of sentimentalization. This is in fact the position voiced by Kate Ryan from the on-line bookclub «Romantic Times,» the self-proclaimed «definitive women's fiction guide»:

If these warriors were so monstrous, why do they appeal to us gentle romance readers? Because Viking heroes are the epitome of the alpha male!



As much as we proclaim a desire for independence, we do indeed fantasize about being dominated by a fierce barbarian (the right one anyway!). Alan Alda may be an OK mate in the 20th century, but he wouldn't make a very good protector in the ninth or tenth century. Women love the fantasy of domesticating the barbarian; there really is nothing like «taming» a wild beast. Just ask any romance reader—she knows how it should be done! No matter how fierce these warriors, there weren't many women who could resist the charms of these Scandinavian heroes. For like Odin (Viking God of War, Wisdom and Poetry) they had the mind and body of a warrior but the heart of a poet.

Importantly, the Viking must never lose his good looks and physical magnetism, as the difference between the romance and the «hot historical» lies on the attention paid to the sexual encounters of the protagonists through the narrative. However, sex is regarded as secondary to the emotional commitment to the Viking, which demands that women renounce their independence. In turn the man should, paradoxically, give up the activities that define his «Vikingness»; that is, he must forsake sailing away from home and fighting battles, in order to be happily «tamed» into marriage and caring fatherhood.

A very good example is that of Sandra Hill's *The Very Virile Viking* (2003). Here the gorgeous Viking Magnus Ericsson travels in time with his nine children to 21<sup>st</sup> century California; there he seduces a contemporary woman, Angela Abruzzi, whose life seems to be pointless since she divorced: her professional career does not satisfy her, and her real vocation, running her family's vineyard and winery, the Blue Dragon, is thwarted by financial difficulties. She falls in love with Magnus in spite of her modern woman's principles. The following scene takes place during one of their arguments on account on the Viking's overprotective ways, as he risked his own life to defend the Abruzzis' lands:

Angela glared at Magnus, who gazed back at her with utter innocence...  
 «I love the Blue Dragon, but I never wanted you to put your life on the line.»  
 «Some times a man must be a man.»  
 She rolled her eyes. Is there such as thing as an adorable male chauvinist? (293).

The Viking thus is molded on the traditional masculine role of protector of the family and their property. Magnus's quest would be educating his viking children in the frame of American consumerism and being able to fulfill his Californian lover's expectations: marriage, having one more child with her, and staying at home with his new family forever. This big family, interestingly, provides an idealized contrast to contemporary nuclear ones also in its multicultural nature: two parents belonging to different historical periods, nine

viking children and one more Californian-Viking baby, plus one great-grandmother of Italian descent, all of them happily living together in the vineyards of Napa Valley. To a certain extent, this text is but an idyllic and at the same time parodic revision of *Falcon Crest*, one of the most popular television series.

Both the sense of parody and intertextuality are relevant in a more recent novels which relies on the success these viking romances have enjoyed in the last decade. In Jackie Rose's *I'm a Viking and I Protest* (2004), a contemporary American man of Norse origin, Karl Gustavsen, founds an anti-defamation league and sues romance writer Rose Jacobson for presenting Vikings as sexy rapists in her works; that is, for just writing the kind of novels analyzed above. As can be appreciated, the name of the writer character is a pun on the name of the author of this text, a strategy that underlines the comic interaction between literature and reality. From language to plot, this novel makes fun of all the conventions of the «hot historical.» To begin with, Karl denounces Rose's unfair presentation of the Viking in her best-seller *Ravished by Ragnar* (significantly published by Orgazm Books), and he does it within the context of the politically correct:

«A rape contest!» he exclaimed «And because they are talking about our ancestors, they can get away with it. What if she had written about two Black men or Hispanics or Jews holding a rape contest?» Having originally phrased that mentally as «Black men or Jews or Hispanics,» he had hastily re-cast it into alphabetical order to avoid implying that he had singled any one group out for the dishonour. (3)

This novel problematizes its gender politics: it is the male protagonist who deplores the practice of constructing Viking sexuality in aggressive terms, and not only because it renders all Norsemen as potential sexual abusers, but mainly because it creates a myth of sexual excellence about them to which Karl is not sure he could respond. Thus, the love conflict certainly appears, although not when the Viking tries to kidnap and seduce the resistant lady, but when the lady tries to seduce the modern Viking in order to avoid being sued by him. To continue with the parody, the relationship between the protagonists evolves into a crazy battle of the sexes with many erotic episodes that ludicrously rewrite the typical scenes of the Viking romance, particularly when Karl finds out a magical medieval runestone that enhances his sexual skills. But finally –we cannot forget this is a romance that stands up to the formulae of the genre– the heroine falls in love with her enemy. In one of the most comic passages of the novel an infatuated Rose, just to please Karl, even takes into consideration changing the title of her next novel, *Enslaved by Eric*, into *Liberated by Leif, Equal to Olaf*, or *Engaged-In-A-Full-Consensual-Relationship with Torvald*. In the end, of course, Karl and Rose get happily married as her prospective next novel, finally entitled *Seized by Swen*, advances successfully.

As this analysis shows, the turn-of-the-millennium revisiting of such a well-established image of masculinity as the Viking in popular genres has changed this icon significantly. It has undergone a process of transformation from Noble Savage and racial and nationalist icon to object of feminine desire, a makeover which updates the archetype to modern standards. However, although initially this seems to challenge the conventions of romance, its transgression is just superficial as it is operated within the limits of the traditional definition of gender roles. No longer a maverick raider and threatening «Other,» but a Family Man and integrated member of the community, the new Viking of these novels has become a defender of conservative values as long as issues as male authority and the father's function as breadwinner and protector of family and property are not questioned. The Viking is never molded on alternative roles which, as for example the Nurturing Father or the Feminist Man, can offer new possibilities for the definition of gender relations in postmodern societies; as a sentimental hero the Viking of romance, despite its pretended modernity, represents a backlash to the contemporary discourses of masculinity as well as to that of feminism.

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