

THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF LOVESICKNESS AND
THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROJECT'S EXPANSION
IN MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPE

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The aim of this article is to analyze the social patterns of lovesickness in thirteenth century Iceland and Norway. I approach feelings from an anthropological perspective and understand them as emotional concepts that shed light not on the inner state of the individual, but rather on the social context in which one is integrated. Special attention is paid to the relationship between love and grief in Völsunga saga, Tristrams saga, and the Strengleikar. In these sources, most of the concepts for grief, pain, and sorrow are associated with love affairs, and can be the result of infatuation, of the impossibility for the sweethearts to stay together, or of the beloved's death. This affection is also understood as an illness whose only remedy lies in the loved person. The emphasis placed on the conjugal relationship runs parallel to historical changes in kinship structure and marriage rules. Thus, emotional concepts and literary expressions of love could react against social practices and pave the way for the insertion of Christian laws. However, the Christian marriage model was not totally opposed to secular interests, as the economic and political gains of marriages were still crucial in both medieval literature and law.

Introduction

No more let life divide what death can join together.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

The conception of lovesickness in medieval medicine is closely related to the theories of Galen. However, the expression of love as an illness can also be found in romances, where the sweethearts of the story suffer the grief of their mutual love. Indeed, these literary

overcome; Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 84.

106. Charles Lindholm "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19, no. 1 (2006): 5–21, at 16. See also Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*.

107. See Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Process of State-Formation in Medieval Iceland," *Viator* 40 (2009): 151–70.