HIDDEN BODIES AND MASCULINE MINDS: 
THE CROSS-DRESSING FEMALE WARRIOR 
IN MYTH, LEGEND AND VIDEO GAMES

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Hidden Bodies and Masculine Minds: 
The Cross-Dressing Female Warrior in Myth, Legend and Video Games

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Abstract

This thesis explores the masculine embodiment of female warriors in Norse medieval legend and female figures in video games, by analyzing the practice of cross-dressing. This study focuses on the characters of Hervör from the Icelandic Legendary Saga, *Hervör Saga og Hedreiks* and Samus Aran, from Nintendo's *Metroid*. The purpose of this study is to render a critical analysis of the masculine female as a cultural phenomenon whose identity has transformed through time and mediation, adapting to hegemonic ideals, but never changing beyond recognition. It is argued throughout this research project that the main reason for women to desire to be masculine is because there is a culturally constructed idea that masculinity is inherently superior to femininity.
I dedicate this thesis to my mentor, Marian Polhill.

Without her I would have accomplished very little, and this work would most certainly not exist.

-Shirley
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Hidden Bodies and Masculine Minds:
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Shirley N. McPhaul Castro
Introduction

I was never particularly feminine as a child. I always preferred climbing trees outside with my cousins, to staying indoors playing with Barbie dolls. As a teenager while other girls were learning how to apply make-up and planning their quinceañeros, I was a full-blown tomboy, flaunting rock band t-shirts and ripped jeans, and only asked for a Playstation 2 for my fifteenth birthday. As a young adult I knew children were something I did not want in my life, that I would much rather grow my intellect and understanding of the world than a family. Today, as a woman who has had to learn how to negotiate who she is with family members, multiple partners, friends and the entire world, the topic of female masculinity is one that really hits home for me, because I live it every single day.

This is why medieval stories of warrior women captivate me, and why I always (when given the choice) make female avatars when I play video games, knowing, or at the very least fantasizing, that there are women out there who live with female bodies without being defined by their biological reality. These representations always gave me hope that I too could be like them.

However, as my knowledge grew and my ideas became more sophisticated, I began to notice how some of these women, regardless of their historical context, but especially the ones from medieval legend and the ones being represented in mass media, seem to be brought down by their own narratives. Their stories are not about the experience of being a masculine female, but rather about the negative consequences of not adhering to cultural expectations.

This suspicion comes from the observation that the stories of female warriors, warring being an activity that predominantly men do, seldomly lead them on a path where they can have the same type of glory male heroes receive, or be independent, and freed from what has been constructed as inherently sexual bodies. Medieval female warriors are subdued, sometimes by
"choice," but usually by force, to become wives and mothers, and heroines from pop culture, specially video games, are reduced to sex objects meant to be nothing more than aesthetically pleasing female forms.

These narratives, although widely different and separated by time and space, have common threads that show how the ideological construction of these fictional women are not that different from each other, for they are equally undermined, granted in different ways, but for what this research will argue is a very similar reason. This thesis will explore the masculine embodiment of female warriors in Norse medieval legend and female figures in video games, by analyzing the practice of cross-dressing, specifically trying to answer the question of why women feel compelled to embody traditionally masculine social constructions, behaviors, or personas, while hiding, denying or even re-signifying their female bodies? This study will focus on the characters of Hervör from the Icelandic Legendary Saga, *Hervör Saga og Hedreiks* and Samus Aran, from Nintendo's *Metroid*. By performing a close analysis of the characters and their given contexts, this research project will discuss how on the one hand, Hervör impersonates a male in order to be able to roam masculine spaces and have her behavior accepted, and on the other hand, how Samus' body is hidden so to escape the objectification that comes with owning a female form. The purpose of this study is to render a critical analysis of the masculine female as a cultural phenomenon whose identity has transformed through time and mediation, adapting to hegemonic ideals, but never changing beyond recognition because the underlying ideology that has kept her alive for so long is still part of how we perceive the world today, namely that what is inherently female is subject and inferior to what is inherently male.
For the purpose of this research, a "masculine female" is defined as a biological woman who voluntarily dresses in masculine clothes to perform actions that are considered to go against a woman's nature.

**Cross-dressing**

Cross-dressing is a universal practice found in cultures all around the world from all time periods (Bullough 18). In a binary gender model, cross-dressing simply refers to the act of dressing and performing as a different gender than the one that was assigned at birth. This identification has little to do with sexual preference, but plenty to do with power and status (5). In this sense, it has even been argued that “gender instead is an achieved status rather than an ascribed biological characteristic and is based on task performed and the significance of clothing as well as anatomical and other factors” (5).

The women examined in this research, namely Hervör and Samus both crossdress, but they do it in different contexts, for different reasons and with distinct levels of intention. In the case of Hervör, she lives sometime in the distant past, within a cultural context where the understanding of gender is very different to our own. Why she dresses as a man will be discussed in a chapter further on, but what should be clear is that she purposely impersonates a traditionally masculine construction, while also hiding her biological sex, whereas Samus, a woman who belongs to a distant sci-fi future has no need to hide her sex and is not interested in impersonating a man, but the masculine appearance of her body armor, as well as the gadget that lends her most of her power and masculine appearance, has consequences on how the player perceives her through play.
The Medieval Sources

Most of what we know about the northern past comes from archaeological findings and medieval textual sources (Roesdahl 121). Thanks to inter and multidisciplinary research, scholars are able to put together a reconstruction of the past that entwines medieval texts and archaeological discoveries in religious and in domestic contexts, alongside other sources, such as picture stones, runic inscriptions and contemporary accounts, which are useful to make some sense of history’s big picture.¹

The most important sources that survive are the texts that were written before and during the Middle Ages. The reason for this is not because the archaeological remains are less valuable, but rather because we have enough information collected about and from the period that a contextual reconstruction is possible. Nonetheless these texts must always be treated with suspicion, because the men who wrote them had their own political agendas and religious views.

Regardless, a significant part of our perception of Norse myth and legend has been built on the interpretation of two texts: The Elder Edda and The Prose Edda. The former is a collection of stories written in verse about myth² and legend³ that can be found scattered in several manuscripts and of which the most important one is the Codex Regius. This manuscript is dated to c. 1270, while The Prose Edda is believed to have been produced some time forty years prior, c. 1230. Despite the younger age of the manuscript of the Codex Regius, Snorri Sturluson, the

¹ For more information about archaeological evidence of the Viking Age in a religious context see Price. For more on the picture stones see Herlin Karnell and for an excellent article on the Gotland Stones as part of mortuary practices see: Andrén

² These poems are Völuspá, Hávamál, Vafþrúðnismál, Grimnismál, Skírnismál, Hárbarðsljóð, Hymiskviða, Lokasenna and Prymskviða. The last of the poems, Völtendarkviða and Alvíssmál are particular cases because they do not have to do with the gods directly, but with álfr (elves) and dvergar (dwarves), characters from “lower mythology.” For more information, see Lindow 12-14

³ These poems are, the Helgi Lays (Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, Helgakviða Hjoðvarðssonar, Helgakviða Hundingsbana II), the Niflung cycle (Fá dauða Sínjóta, Grípisspá, Reginsmál, Fáfnismál, Sigdrífumál, Brot af Sigurðarkviðu, Guðrúnarkviða I, Sigurðarkviða hin skamma, Helreið Brynhildar, Dráp Niflunga, Guðrúnarkviða II, Guðrúnarkviða III, Oddrúnargrátr, Atlakviða, Atlamál hin groenlenzku) and the Jórmunrekkr Lays (Guðrúnarhvöt, Hanðismál)
presumed author of *The Prose Edda*, cites the poems on several occasions throughout his work, which indicates that he may have had access to a manuscript with similar if not identical contents (Clunies-Ross *Poetry and Poetics* 8).

Similarly important, but for different reasons, there are the accounts of contemporary historians who travelled to, and collected stories from, Northern Europe such as Tacitus, Saxo Grammaticus and Ibd Fadlan. For this research only Saxo Grammaticus is of interest.

In addition to the mythological material, masculine women such as shield-maidens and valkyries can also be found in the legendary sagas, or *fornaldarsögur*. These are narratives that are presumed to recount events that happened sometime in the distant past before the colonization of Iceland. These stories, believed to have taken place during the “legendary era” sometime before the 9th century, have Germanic and Scandinavian protagonists and are set in what today we know as the Germanic and Scandinavian countries (Tulinius 18). However, the most prominent characteristic of this collection of narratives comprised by twenty-five sagas and eight fragments, is the presence of a different sense of reality, where the supernatural and fantastical merge with a reality very similar to our own. Moreover, the protagonist of the story is usually a man and/or his family and lineage (18).

The distance of time and space between the events that originated these tales in oral tradition, and the form in which we have inherited them, is argued to render them useless as historical texts, but useful as gateways that are reflective of how the past was constructed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland (47). Moreover, the legendary sagas can be divided into two categories: hero legends and adventure tales or Viking romances which are believed to have been a form of aristocratic entertainment for medieval Icelanders (48-52).
Video Games

In the thirty years video games have existed as a global industry many thousands of games have been published, and the industry keeps growing every year, translating in to more and more people venturing into their fictional worlds. In 2017 65% of households in the USA had at least one member who plays video games, and the industry is projected to keep growing over the next five years (The Entertainment Software Association). This suggests that video games are not going anywhere, and are quite possibly the medium of our time. Therefore, understanding representation in video games becomes more and more important, for the medium is like nothing before it.

The field of video game studies officially began in the early 2000s, with the emergence of the first papers, conferences and journals. Twenty years later there is notably more attention being paid to video games in academia than ever before, not just as an independent field of research, but also because of its interdisciplinary possibilities. However, in this time one thing has become clear; researching video games requires a different approach than other types of media, because unlike cinema or literature, video games entail an interactive-ludic aspect that other media are just not capable of integrating to the extent that video games do. In the words of Alexander R. Galloway “If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions” (2). This situation poses a methodological challenge for the analysis of video games, because the traditional tools used for film and literature are not sufficient to understand them. Indeed, Gonzalo Frasca suggested during the advent of video game studies in the early 2000's, that ludology, or the study of "games," offers a more suitable approach to understanding (video games) because “unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation.” This results in
experiences that are more "visceral" and "impactful" than those lived through other media (Penix-Tadsen 4).

This interaction of the player with the game is called “game play,” and it consists of movement orchestrated through the controller (extradiegetic) and expressed within the virtual game-space (diegetic). These movements have limitations defined by the game's digital code and are homologous to the "rules" in a board game, defining how the game is played, which usually determines the game's genre. All the programmable aspects of a video game can be considered as part of its “rules,” so that even map delimitations and positioning of the interface can be said to fall within this parameter. Moreover, the tools offered by the game for the player to properly interact with its environment and perform her role within the game-space in order to succeed at her goals are called “game mechanics.” Thus, the game-player interaction can be defined in terms of normative rules and performative mechanics (Sicart). For example, in a game of Monopoly, the rules, the board, the figures and the cards are part of the "gameplay"; meanwhile what is written on the cards and how they are used, would be homologous to the "game mechanics." Therefore, as Jesper Juul argues in his book Half-Real, video games, designed to be engaging, interactive and fun (like their table-top predecessors) are first and foremost games, but, because these rules need to be expressed graphically in some sort of environment, it is also said that video games are executed in visual fictional worlds (6).

A game's fictional world and the narratives that are born from within it are expressed by using graphics, sound, text, cut-scenes, the game title, box, manual and even the rules themselves (Juul 1260). Cut-scenes are particularly important when playing a narrative driven video game because these cinematic interventions are designed to tell important or climactic parts of the story, and usually are turning points that need to happen in order for the game to progress.
However, they are also widely criticized because they are non-game elements inside a video game where, even though momentarily, the player is stripped of all control, and they also interrupt the flow of the game (Juul). A better strategy for storytelling in video games is "showing without telling," for which visual design and game mechanics are ideal.

Challenges

It is important to keep in mind that because of the nature of this project, and the primary texts that it will examine, there are a number of limitations; the premise of this research is to analyze and compare materials that are widely different and that stand in opposite sides of history. These are very different characters with very different historical backgrounds, and they enter culture to play very different roles. On the one hand there are the shield-maidens whose stories somehow survived the passage of time, and were rescued from oral tradition, myth and legend. Their “aura” as characters from a distant past draw them as rare artifacts in our collective memory. On the other hand, there are women in video games, characters that, very much like their medium, are constantly changing according to trends and whatever is most popular in our capitalist context. They “live” in fictional worlds, and yet come across as strong, passionate and extremely representative of our ideas and conflicts with gender. It is not the intention of this project to suggest that these materials can be (or should be) read as homologous works. They are not. That being said, I agree with Old Norse scholar and popular culture expert Carol Clover when she says that the literary fantasy, if collective, “has much to tell about the underlying tensions of the society that produced it” and that “when the subject is one such as woman, which the 'legitimate' sources treat only scantily, the literary fantasy takes on a special importance” (Clover *Maiden Warriors* 36). Therefore, because there is always some truth to every legend, it
is productive to analyze them as distant relatives, and wonder: how much do they resemble each other? How are they different? And why?
Chapter 1 - Discourse of the Body and the Myth of the Inferior Female

Both material and discursive, the human body is charged with meaning. The way we move, the way we stand, the color of our eyes and skin, what we wear, even what our bodies can and can't do, means something within a given cultural context. The exploration and questioning of this assigned significance, particularly of the female body, is examined by Judith Butler whose main argument in her canonical text *Gender Trouble*, is precisely that the discourse assigned to the female body is constructed, rather than inherent to its nature. In her own words (quoted from a conference, see reference in the bibliography),

"to say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment. The appearance of gender is often mistaken as a sign of internal or inherent truth. Gender is prompted by obligatory norms that we materialize in our daily life, or we fail to materialize in our daily life, or we materialize in ways that we weren’t exactly supposed to do. But those obligatory norms demand that we become one gender on another, usually within a strictly binary frame. The reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with this norm, this obligation, this exercise of power." (37: 07 – 37:47)

Butler constructs her ideas on Michel Foucault's genealogical critique that science is not an inescapable truth, but rather a historically constructed discourse. Both Butler and Foucault argue for the construction (and deconstruction) of discourse around the human body, and the change of the perception of the body according to reigning ideologies, so that our perception changes according to the hegemonic ideals by which society operates. The recognition of this relationship highlights "the real material consequences of discursive regimes," essentially meaning that there are real-life consequences to purely ideological matters (Bucholtz and Hall
181). For example, the spaces that men and women are traditionally allowed to inhabit, have a clear relationship with the anatomical positioning of their reproductive organs, an observable fact that originated theories and discourses about the human body, mind, and soul. These discourses are perpetuated through discursive iteration constructed over time, and can be (have been) disproven, but the ideological threads are so tightly interwoven and deeply embedded in the way we perceive the world, that they still manifest in the material world through language and semiotics (182).

**Semiotics of gender**

Like the discourses of the body, through history every culture has had its own ideas surrounding sex, gender and how it is signified. Traditionally, these ideas have been tightly associated with biological observations of the human body and sexual difference which in the past were intricately related to survival (Van Buren 215). However, in the 20th century, linguistics and psychoanalysis aided in constructing a rhetoric around the semiotics of gender, where these concepts "develop out of biology, unconscious feelings, and social patterning, and are not given, natural, and [or] irrevocable" (216-218).4

Moreover, the idea that gender is indeed constructed by a combination of the individual and the culture in which she or he develops, means that individuals have the capacity to choose how to enact their gender (e.g. male vs female) in spite of their biological body. In this sense, there is an important difference between biological sex and gender, where the former refers to the capabilities of one's biological body, and the latter is simply a sign that classifies individuals

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4 Saussure stated that there is no "natural" connection between words (signifiers) and concepts (signifieds) and that rather these two together form what he called a "sign," and that these signs conform language in a way that is comparable to a system of writing. Later, C.S. Pierce argued for the importance of the interpreter of the sign. To him, the signifier's relationship to the signified does not exist without the mind of the interpreter. Lastly, Freud and Lacan build upon these ideas through psychoanalysis and the dynamics between the conscious and the unconscious self, so that signs acquire meanings that transcend human consciousness (qtd. van Buren 216-218)
in identity categories, of which not long ago there were only two: masculine and feminine; however, in the advent of the post-feminist and queer movement, it is argued that there are many more. The construction of these "new genders" comes from the idea that a binary understanding of heteronormative gender invisibilizes and vilifies any other possibilities available to human nature. Nonetheless, for the sake of pragmatism (and my sanity), this thesis will acknowledge the traditional binary division of gender, but will also consider it as a spectrum, where masculinity and femininity are in opposition, and where a "neutral" ground is possible. In this case, gender "neutrality" refers to androgyny and gender ambiguity rather than the absence of gender which is, in my opinion, impossible.

But then, what does it mean to be “masculine” or “feminine”? What does it mean to be a "man" or a "woman"? Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in her work *The Second Sex* that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." She takes the idea conjured by Jean-Paul Sartre that what we perceive of ourselves and others depends on the "gaze" of the observer and is constructed by the he (or she) who observes. Beauvoir takes this idea and argues that women (the "Other") are constructed by men (the observer), which ultimately means that men are the ones who define what it means to be a woman. She argues that it is not the inherent condition of having a female body, but rather the meaning assigned to it that gives the female sex a negative connotation; menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, lactation, and all bodily functions inherent to the female body mean nothing on their own. However, in the hivemind of an androcentric society they can come to adopt a negative connotation, or be interpreted as a burden or disadvantage, as the reigning ideology deems them as alien and "Other."

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5 Gender can also be further divided into gender identity and gender perception. The former being how individuals identify themselves, and the latter how they are perceived by others.
In this sense, what is "feminine" or "womanly" are concepts and actions that are associated to all those things that a man can't be/do because his body simply can't. This, however, did not stop men in ancient times to take the abstract essence behind reproduction, and attribute it to themselves by using logical arguments built around a supposed inherent superiority of the male body/mind vs the inferior female, where even though females embody reproduction through pregnancy, it is the material introduced by the male that grants the true essence of life.

**The myth of the inferior feminine**

The desire to impersonate a member of the opposite sex can be directed to a simple cause: until very recently, being born a woman meant an important social disadvantage: women were not allowed (or at the very least was/is frowned upon) to pursue endeavors outside of their roles as wives and/or mothers. Moreover, until a little more than a century ago, women were not allowed to vote or participate in politics in any shape or form, which is truly outstanding to think about, that for whatever reason, out of over two thousand years of history, women have been citizens of some countries for only over a hundred years. In some other countries they are still not allowed to vote and are not only subordinated to men, but are reduced to their property.

In western culture, the transmission of the idea that females are inferior to males comes from the hands of medieval scribes and clergymen, who not only wrote their own ideas about sex and sexual difference based on their own cultural, historical and religious beliefs, but also rediscovered the Greeks and their own works on such topics. The two most important Greek thinkers regarding the "nature of women" were Aristotle and Galen.

Aristotle believed to have had scientific evidence of female inferiority, claiming that women were physically, intellectually and morally inferior to men. He argued that males are naturally dominant over females because their superiority could be observed in nature, where
male specimens were undeniably larger and stronger than their female counterparts. Aristotle also contended for the superior importance of the male's apportion in reproduction, for he believed that the key to life was in semen, and that the female was merely a vessel, only providing the material on which semen could act upon (Bullough 46).

Galen, who argued for a more egalitarian view of human reproduction than Aristotle, thought that women where imperfect compared to men because of their physiology, specifically because their body temperature is colder than men's. Galen used this reasoning to explain why women's reproductive organs are inside their abdominal cavity, while men's are outside. This "inverted" view of the human body was popular in ancient times and the Middle Ages. Consequently, men and women were not considered absolute opposites, but isomorphic analogous forms of the same system, where male is superior to female. Therefore, there was only one sex, and females were the inferior version of it (Clover 11).

This naturalistic and undoubtedly misogynistic rhetoric justified centuries of female oppression: Saint Jerome, who was known for his support of women, going so far as befriending them and teaching them the Gospel, limited his guidance to virgins and widows, for only in this de-sexualized context could women be regarded as spiritual companions and not sexual objects. He argued that as "long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man." Moreover, from the 7th Century on and the writing of Isodore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the description of the female anatomy, her flaws, and most arguments that pointed at her being lesser than a man, were all correlated to procreation (Bullough 48).

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6 Thomas Laqueur discusses this thoroughly in his book *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. 
This discourse also permeates to the mental capabilities of women, which according to these men, were impaired due to their nature; throughout the Middle Ages, men like Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that woman's place is as the subject of men. He believed that men and women had specific roles to play within God's plan, men's role being active and women's passive. Therefore, "For good order would have been wanting in the human family, if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because naturally in man the discretion of reason predominates" (qtd in Bullough 47). This idea of the superiority of man and its relationship to power vis a vis an inferior and weak femininity supports a view that holiness is achieved by suppressing femininity and gaining spiritual manliness, which appears to be part of the religious ideology of the authors from early Christian sources such as the author of the Gospel of Thomas, to Augustine and Ambrose (Hotchkiss) with the effects of these erroneous theories enduring much longer.

When the historical evidence is gathered, and the diverse theories reviewed, it seems like the ideological differences between male and female come from a naturalistic perspective that favors clear and observable biological differences between the sexes. These differences correlate females to the corporeal and males to the ideal, since females embody material reproduction through their own bodies, while males' intervention was thought to contribute with the intangible, but essential, soul.

These ideas, which seemingly come from ancient times, echo, for example, in our understanding of Norse mythology. Scholar Margaret Clunies-Ross writes in her book *Prolonged Echoes* that the Norse myths seem to indicate a similar understanding of the world. She argues that throughout the very few myths that survive a trope of nature vs civilization can be outlined,
as well as the idea of proto-creation, where males create life without the interference of a female deity, or even a female body (Clunies-Ross 144).

This ideological usurping of the female role in reproduction, and the reduction of their interference as merely the providers of biological material, aids the misogynistic construction of a raison d'être for the female sex, especially when topics about the body and bodily functions are taboo, and women are first and foremost defined by their female bodies and its reproductive capabilities.

Ultimately, it seems like a hegemonic historical discourse of misogyny is behind notions of what makes a "man," or a "woman," and the construction of what is "masculine" and "feminine." These ideas are tightly associated to cultural expectations, and vary depending on cultural aspects and time periods. However, in general, it seems like both masculinity and femininity are tightly associated to very different types of symbols, masculinity generally being regarded as representative of "superior strength, domination and conscious activity," while femininity traditionally has had opposite attributes, such as "inferior inward, strange otherness, unconscious mental life and something defective" (van Buren 227). How can women, then, participate actively in an androcentric society where they are shunned simply because of the perceived nature of their bodies? A possible answer to this question is essentially by becoming a man.
Chapter 2 - Embodying Masculinity; Men in Female Bodies.

Women who transgress their feminine gender for a masculine one are quite common in Norse myth and legend. These women, far beyond being oddities to be reckoned with or monsters to be feared, are believed to have been the means by which the men who wrote them, and the audiences who consumed them, expressed their values, preoccupations, desires and anxieties (Friðriksdóttir 11). At the same time, no matter how brave or courageous these women proved to be, the narratives that remember them only show them one of two fates, either marriage, where they must subordinate themselves to their husband, and thus the "status quo,“ or an untimely death. The following chapter examines masculine female figures in Norse Legend, paying special attention to Hervör, a woman who's deemed as "evil" by the narrative until she takes on the name of Hervard and "becomes" male by impersonating a man in order to obtain what was rightfully hers and lead the life she wanted, but whose fate is to return to her "natural" state of being as a female by becoming a wife and bearing children.

The Norse Female Warrior

Women from Norse myth and legend are part of a cultural context that is far removed from anything we know today. Some of them have their existence rooted in pagan belief systems and have arrived to us in a syncretic form, surviving the passage of time by pure luck. What we know of these women is based on so little material information that the only hard truth we have is that we don’t know much about them at all. Female figures such as the goddesses, she-trolls, giantesses, Valkyries and even shield-maidens, are quite frequent by name, but with a few exceptions, their stories go untold. Because of this, most of what it is written about the legendary women and female deities is sustained mostly on interpretations and historically biased
assumptions, making it clear that what was truly believed about these women during the time their stories were part of live culture has been lost forever.

**Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Maiden Kings**

The popular knowledge that circulates today about Norse female warriors, as is the case in most (if not all) contemporary reconstructions, are mostly based on 19th century revival of the material, rather than medieval texts. This is clear when looking at the iconology present in video games, where valkyries are particularly popular; modern valkyries wear winged helmets, or horned helmets, both iconic creations for Richard Wagner’s operas, and they have wings or ride winged horses, wield spears as weapons and dress in full armor.

The medieval *valkyrja*, even though described in some eddic poems as indeed riding horses to battle, are mostly found within the mythological corpus as Odin's maidens. The Old Norse word *Valkyrja* literally means "chooser of the dead," making allusion to the psychopomp function of these figures in Old Norse belief systems. Their primary function was to gather the souls of warriors who had fallen in battle and bring them to Valhalla, where they'd feast with Odin until Ragnarok (the judgement of the Gods, i.e. the end of the world) and they'd fight alongside him and the rest of the Aesir. Nonetheless, through the 19th century revival, valkyries were essentially removed from their religious function and became another representation of the female warrior, known as shield-maidens.

According to Saxo Grammaticus, in Denmark there were once women who dressed in full armor and fought with and alongside men. He wrote:

> There were once women among the Danes who dressed themselves to look like men, and devoted almost every instant of their lives to the pursuit of war, that they might not suffer their valour to be unstrung or dulled by the infection of luxury. For
they abhorred all dainty living, and used to harden their minds and bodies with toil and endurance. They put away all the softness and light mindedness of women, and inured their womanish spirit to masculine ruthlessness. They sought, moreover, so zealously to be skilled in warfare, that they might have been thought to have unsexed themselves. Those especially, who had either force of character or tall and comely persons, used to enter on this kind of life. These women, therefore (just as if they had forgotten their natural estate, and preferred sternness to soft words), offered war rather than kisses, and would rather taste blood than busses, and went about the business of arms more than that of amours. They devoted those hands to the lance which they should rather have applied to the loom. They assailed men with their spears whom they could have melted with their looks, they thought of death and not of dalliance. (152)

In Book VII of his *The Danish History*, it seems like Saxo interprets the tales of these shield-maidens as strange occurrences that he does not comprehend. The most striking lines at the very end "These women, therefore (just as if they had forgotten their natural estate, and preferred sternness to soft words), (...) They assailed men with their spears whom they could have melted with their looks, they thought of death and not of dalliance" seem to suggest that a man like Saxo regarded women's natural place as inherent to her sexual and domestic role. This is, of course, not surprising.

Lastly, the maiden kings were popular in indigenous romances, and their motif appears in several legendary sagas. Maiden-kings are (as the name suggests) young unmarried women who, for one reason or another, are declared kings. They are usually described as young, noble, cruel, and in early iterations, armed. The motif usually has a young woman who is ruler of her own
kingdom, is unmarried and treats all her suitors badly. Then, a hero comes and finds a way to outwit her and wins her hand in marriage, leaving no choice but for the young woman to abandon her masculine ways and subdue to her new husband (Friðriksdóttir 107).

**The medieval attitudes towards female crossdressing.**

When it comes to women crossdressers in medieval Europe, the tales of crossdressing saints seem to suggest that they were tolerated for as long as their activities did not disrupt the status quo. However, when it did, the authorities took the matter in their own hands, which meant bad news for the transgressive female. The most famous example of such a case is the fate of Joan of Arc, a young French woman who lived in the 15th century, and claimed she had visions of the archangel Michael, Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, urging her to support King Charles VII and fight to liberate France from the English, who eventually captured her and burned her at the stake. According to historical records, Joan was executed in part because of her crossdressing; in the legal complaints filed against her, it is stated not only that she wore men’s clothes, but that she had also cut her hair, wore spurs, armor (breastplate), and carried weapons (Barret 158). She was asked to stop this behavior and swore an oath to do so, but then retracted and resumed the practice. When asked why she had broken her word, she simply explained that it was more convenient and lawful to wear those garments because she lived among men (158). Joan was not sentenced to death exclusively because of her masculine ways, but the transgression was bad enough that it accounted for two out of the twelve charges made against her (Bullough 57).

Of course, not every woman who wielded a weapon actively tried to overthrow Kings, but rather just to protect her body from sexual violence and perhaps seek a better social stance. For this reason, a female who actively tried to impersonate a man was not considered particularly
abnormal because there was an understanding of the desire to do so. This, however, does not mean that it was actively permitted or encouraged, just that the desire was understood as normal (67). Moreover, one of the most sought after characteristics of women during the Middle Ages, other than her physical beauty, was a masculine mind (67).

Women in the Middle Ages cross-dressed mainly for two reasons: in order to preserve their virginity and become closer to God (57). There are rare accounts of women dressing up as men in order to gain some kind of social advantage, or who actively sought masculine power through the embodiment of masculinity. The two most popular examples are Joan of Arc, and the legend of Pope Joan. Moreover, Pope Joan found power without actively pursuing it, since she became pope in her quest to be closer to God. However, it is worth nothing that, in her case, it was her pregnant female body that ultimately betrayed her and caused her demise (56).

**Warrior Women in Medieval Scandinavia**

In Scandinavia, however, the situation seems to have been different than the rest of continental Europe, for according to both Grágas, the Icelandic law code, and the Norwegian *Gulathing Law*, crossdressing for both men and women was forbidden and punishable by lesser outlawry (Norrman 377). Regardless, the stories of shield-maidens, Valkyries and Maiden-Kings are an important part of Scandinavian cultural tradition, hinting at the possibility that gender was indeed more complex in medieval Scandinavia than we think.

In light of our conception of gender, it can be difficult, although certainly not impossible, to imagine a world where treating women as property was the norm; a time and place in our history when half of the world’s population could not participate in politics or education. However, for Scandinavian women the situation was somewhat different. In the northern regions of Europe, women could inherit, manage their property along side with their children’s and
become traders. They could even take part in politics and bear arms (Clover “Maiden Warrior” 38).

Carol Clover argues in "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons" that women were allowed to assume the role of a male if she was an only child, and there was no one else to inherit the family's wealth, uphold the family's honor, or to execute a blood feud for a relative’s death (Clover 47-48). There are plenty of examples of this in Norse legend; Hervör herself is quite possibly the most notable one, but there is also Skady, from Old Norse myth.

According to the Prose Edda, Skady was the daughter of Thiazzi, a giant who stole the Goddess Idunn and her golden apples, and later was murdered by the Aesir. Upon hearing about this, Skady walked into Asgard wearing armor and wielding a sword to ask for compensation for her father's’ death. The gods in turn offered her to choose a husband from among them. The fact that the gods were willing to comply with Skady's demands of compensation suggests at the legitimacy of her role as what Clover calls a "functional son" (Clover 39). However, in Skady's story, as is the case in most of the tales about masculine women, at the end these figures have only two fates: marriage, and thus the adoption of feminine gender roles, or death. Even Skady's deal with the gods was not a completely fair one, since even though they offered her a husband, she has to choose by looking only at his feet. This condition to the agreement has as a consequence that she chose the one with the most beautiful feet, thinking it was Baldur, the most beautiful of the Gods. However, she inadvertently chose Njord instead. One of the versions of this story says that Skady, being a giantess from the mountains could not handle living by the sea, and Njord, an entity of the ocean could not live in Skady’s mountains, which had as a result their separation, thus making the god's deal unfruitful.
Another theme that seems to also be part of the stories of masculine women in Scandinavia, is the use of men's clothes and activities to protect a young woman's chastity, as is the case with Alfhild and Lagerda, both described by Saxo Grammaticus in *The Danish History*. Alfhild is the daughter of the king of the Goths, who gifted his daughter two snakes to protect her and her virginity. The hero Alf heard about the maiden guarded by the deadly beasts, and decided to take on the challenge. He managed to kill the snakes and technically win Alfhild's hand in marriage. However, Alfhild's mother was not so sure about her daughter's suitor, and convinced Alfhild to deny Alf his price. "Thus Alfhild was lead to despise the young Dane; whereupon she exchanged woman's for man's attire, and no longer the most modest of maidens, began the life of a warlike rover" (151). Saxo continues to explain that she joined other women who dressed like men, and came across another group of "rovers" who turned her into their captain "for her beauty and [her] deeds beyond the valor of women." Eventually she came face-to-face with Alf once again, who "took hold of her eagerly, and made her change her man's apparel for a woman's; and afterwards begot in her a daughter, Gurid." Even though there is no explicit mention of the use of violence against Alfhild, the language suggests that there was. Similar to Alfhild, is Lagerda who also dressed in man clothes to protect her chastity and shielded herself from wooers with wild animals. According to legend, she's encountered by Ragnar Shaggy-Breeks in Norway who is taken by her beauty and her fighting skills. She "had the courage of a man and fought in front among the bravest with her hair loose over her shoulders [and] all marveled at her matchless deeds, for her locks flying down her back betrayed that she was a woman" (189). Ragnar, deeply impressed by Ladgerda, looked for her and "claimed he had gained the victory by the might of one woman." He learned that unlike the other women who were with her, she was of noble birth and started wooing her by messages.
However, Ladgerda was not interested, but she feigned to be, making Ragnar think his advances where working and having him set sail to where she was living. As a matter of protection, she had a dog and a bear guard her home, but both animals were killed by Ragnar, when he went looking for her, "Thus he had the maiden as the prize of the peril he had overcome."

From a literary perspective, both these women share traits of the shield-maiden and the maiden-king. However, both these stories seem to culminate in unspoken violence against the young women, as if their masculinity is something that needs to be tamed and subdued. These types of stories that nowadays can come across as crude and misogynistic have their written origin in a time and place when the construction of power had a lot to do with the individual’s disposition, and when being born male did not guarantee being deemed as strong. Or at least that is what the medieval stories suggest (Clover 13). This because the way medieval northerners perceived the bodily differences between men and women was not related to our modern conception of gender, but to their own ideas of power.

The "Power Fantasy"

It has been argued that characters who undertake powerful roles in fiction and fantasy function as escapist devices to carry out "power fantasies." These fantasies are supposed to be a way for the audience to channel their desires for power and control that cannot be addressed in real life. This concept is particularly true for video games, but a similar rhetoric has been suggested by Carolyne Larrington and Johanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir in relation to Icelandic medieval literature, where a subversive reading of stories about powerful females could have been interpreted by medieval women as power fantasies, or at the very least as "a female imaginary space where women are independent from men and are successful at filling public male roles" (Friðriksdóttir 133). However, this might have been true for figures such as maiden
kings, but not valkyries or shield-maidens, for as Friðriksdóttir points out, these figures are too
dangerous, and their fates should be read as warnings because "there is no scope to imagine a
world in which women could move so freely or successfully perform male roles, and these
unruly women are evoked for the purpose of being stigmatized" (132). In other words, valkyries
and shield-maidens are too masculine to be acceptable as female role models in any shape or
form, not because of their masculinity per se, but because it's being performed by a female body.
The best example of this is Hervör, who through her story exemplifies one of the many meanings
behind a female taking on a male persona.

**Hervör and Hervard**

*Hervör Saga og Heidreks* or *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, survives in three
different redactions; R (Regius), H (Hauksbók) and U (Uppsala). Jefferey Scott Love argues in
his book *The Reception of Hervarar Saga ok Heidreks from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth
Century* that “the difference [...] can be read in terms of how their compilers wished to present
the saga material to their audiences” (2). According to Love, manuscripts of the R redaction
were stripped of their pagan content, while manuscripts from the H redaction abbreviate large
portions of the saga, while expanding others, and copies of the U manuscript have explicit
descriptions of violence (2). However, the saga was well known and widely read for
entertainment and a historical text, used at times to “further (the) political agendas” of those who
read it (Tulinius 274).

It is worth noting that the saga survives in one of these variants in over thirty
manuscripts, out of which nine contain only this saga (Love 44). This is significant because
surviving manuscripts show that it was rare for a codex to contain only one saga, suggesting that
the story of *Hervör Saga og Heidreks* was popular enough to “warrant its own volumes” (45).
This study will reference Christopher Tolkien’s Old Norse transcription and English translation of the saga, which is a compilation of the main narratives mentioned above. The saga follows the life and genealogy of Hervör’s family, and the sword Týrfing, a powerful cursed item that is passed down from generation to generation (Tolkien 28).

Hervör’s part in the saga is relatively short, but truly paramount to the narrative as a whole. Hervör was the daughter of Angantýr, a berserker who died in battle before she was born, and whose story is told in the first part of the Saga. The first thing the narrator tells his audience about Hervör is how she was born a beautiful girl, “strong as a man,” who preferred to learn how to wield weapons than to do embroidery, which was a skill girls learned from a young age in medieval Scandinavia (29). In other words, the narrator seems to suggest that Hervör had a natural predisposition for violence, which is not strange at all since her father was a berserker. The second thing the audience learns about Hervör is that "she did more often harm than good," and apparently was a rampant killer, since as soon as she was told not to harm anyone, she ran away into the woods and killed men “for her gain” (10).

Even so, at no point does the narrative speak of any kind of punishment for Hervör's conduct, other than her being locked into the earl's house, which is arguably done to protect people from Hervör, rather than an actual punishment. Thus, her violent nature was clearly frowned upon (one can't go through life just killing strangers), but not necessarily weird, unnatural or unexpected. This on its own is quite interesting, because since verbalizing her behavior has no consequence in the narrative, it suggests that it is only being mentioned to characterize Hervör.

Moreover, it is precisely her "bad behavior" that rewards her with knowledge about her parentage, since the story narrates how one day, one of the slaves who she tormented, out of
sheer spite, told her that her grandfather had been lying to her about her lineage, and that her father had been nothing but a thrall. He tells her

   You only wish to do evil, Hervör, and evil is to be expected from you; the jarl forbids everyone to speak to you of your parentage, because he is ashamed that you should know of it - for the basest serf lay with his daughter, and you are their child. (10)

This infuriated Hervör who hurried to the jarl for answers. He told her that the slave had lied, that her father was highly regarded among heroes and that he had been murdered and buried on the island of Sámsey.

Falling immediately for the call of adventure, Hervör decides to go look for her father's grave, for he surely had treasures that rightfully belonged to her as his only heir (11). For this, Hervör tells her grandfather that “I will wrap swiftly/ around my hair/ a linen headgear” which can be interpreted as either she saying that she will dress as a man, or that she’ll “cast away her woman’s attire” (Tolkien 11). Either way, it is clearly suggested that she will adopt male dress in order to go on this adventure. In addition, she asks her mother to “equip me in all ways,/ wisest of women,/ as you would your son!” The narrative does not mention any kind of rebuke or resistance from neither the earl or her mother. Hervör just said these things, took "the gears and weapons of a man" and left alone (12).

Later she joined a band of vikings7, and at this point of the story, even though it is only implied by her choice of changing her name to "Hervard," a man's name, it can be assumed that she had to impersonate a man in order to join the vikings. It's worth noting that while she's with the vikings, and later in the court of king Gudmund, the narrator calls her only by this name,

7 "Viking" is simply a word for "pirate."
which suggests that adopting this masculine name changes the way she is perceived by others.\textsuperscript{8}

The suggestion of a shift in her persona after changing her name is further hinted by the text itself, for it explicitly says "Litlu sítar \textit{pessi} Hervarór forræði liðsins" (15) (A short while after, this Hervard became captain of the band), the use of the determinative pronoun \textit{pessi} seems to suggest that the female born Hervör would have not been able to accomplish this, and it was possible only for the masculine Hervard.

Under this name, she commanded the crew to sail to Sâmsey, the island where her father’s burial mound laid. However, once there the vikings refused to disembark; they said evil creatures roamed the island by night and day. Unfazed by their claims, she took a boat and rowed to shore at sunset. There, a man greeted her and warned her to turn back, but she did not listen. She went into the island looking for her father’s grave and once she found it, she invoked her father’s spirit and asked him for one thing: Týrfing the legendary sword crafted by dwarves that Angantýr had wielded. After a conversation where Angantýr insists on not giving her the sword because “no woman I know …would dare in her hand to hold this sword” (17), and where Hervör's gender is mentioned a handful of times in the shape of Angantýr calling her “daughter” and, most notably, “maiden.” Finally, Hervör takes the sword and leaves.

She arrives at the shore at dawn to discover that her crew and her ship are gone, probably frightened by the lightning and the fire coming from the island while she spoke with her father. The cowardice of the vikings heavily contrasts with Hervör's bravery, which speaks greatly of her character. But, why was she not afraid? An explanation could be that she was on a legitimate quest to retrieve the heirloom that belonged to her, in which case, her cause was honorable. A

\textsuperscript{8} Tolkien's English translation continues to call her Hervör, but the Old Norse version refers to her by her female pronoun \textit{hon} (her) rather than her name.
second interpretation is that she being an "evil" woman, as vile as any creature walking on Sámsey, there was no reason for her to be afraid.

The saga then explains how nothing else is said about her travels until she goes to visit King Gudmund. At this point she still calls herself Hervard and dresses in men's clothes, and once again the narrative highlights this fact by saying "hon neindisk þá enn Hervárðr ok lét sem væri ein Kempa. Þessi Hervárðr var þar einkanliga vel tekinn" (20) (she still called herself Hervard and behaved like any warrior. This Hervard was received extremely well). This mild insistence suggests, just like before, that Hervör would have not been welcomed in these spaces, had the people around her known she was a female.

It also seems to be suggested that "behaving like a warrior" meant behaving like a brute, for Hervör's true identity was discovered by king Gudmundr when Hervard helped him to win a chess match. However, as this happened, one of the king’s courtiers took the sword Týrfing, drew it and marveled at the blade’s beauty, but when Hervard saw the sword unsheathed, she rushed to the blade and beheaded the man who held it. After doing this, she left at once. The King’s men tried to decide whether they should pursue her or not, but then the King told them not to bother, “for your vengeance on this man (...) will seem smaller than you now think because it is my guess that he is a woman.” Apparently, Hervard's wise advice in the game of chess betrayed her disguise, and the King was able to conclude that this warrior was, in fact, a female. The employment of her "wise counsel" as a strategy to characterize her as wise is not far fetched when, according to Friðriksdóttir, the principal characteristics of royal women in the förnaldarsögur is that they were beautiful/promising and wise. She suggests that this was such a

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9 Why is her ability in chess and not the slaying of the courtier what gives Hervör away? Hervör kills the man because the blade is cursed so that a man must die everytime it is unsheathed (Tolkien ix).
common theme in the sagas, it is possible that medieval audiences valued these characteristics in women (26).

After the chess incident, the saga tells that Hervör raided with vikings for a while, but eventually got bored and returned to her foster father and “settled down to fine work with her hands. Many tales were then told of her beauty.” This remark of Hervör working with her hands means that she re-adopted her feminine gender roles, which re-establishes the "status quo" and everything was back to normal (Friðriksdóttir 30). Moreover, after a while, Höfund, the son of king Gudmund, asked his father to find him a bride, to which the king immediately recommended Hervör, for “this match (...) was thought to be the best and most illustrious of any that he knew of.” They paid jarl Bjarmar a visit, he agreed to the marriage and Hervör did not refuse, so she married Höfund, and bore his two sons, bringing to an end her days as a viking and shield-maiden.

**General Discussion and Conclusions**

What is truly fascinating about Hervör, is how her masculine behavior is "evil" for as long as she's supposed to be fulfilling a female role. The moment she's transformed into Hervard she becomes extraordinary, brave and accepted. The price of this, however, is to deny her femininity, which includes feminine activities such as embroidering or "giving wise counsel."

However, by renouncing her femininity, Hervör did not only fulfill her duty as "functional son," but she also walked into a forsaken land, coming face-to-face with horrors and was unshaken by them. She would have simply not been able to do this had she entered Sámsey as a woman, in the same manner that Skady was welcomed by the Aesir into Asgard because she was dressed in man's clothes. This in contrast with the treatment received by other women who enter male spaces in Norse myth, such as Gullveig, who is received by the gods with spears and
is even killed three times, possibly for possessing magical knowledge exclusive to women and unknown to the Aesir.¹⁰

This leads me to suspect that women who embody power in female bodies are often characterized as evil. The narrative in *Hervör Saga og Heidreks* makes this clear by Hervör's characterization *vis à vis* that of Hervard. The same can be said of other tales in Norse Legend, such as the case with the *Völsunga Saga*’s Brynhild who holds so much power that her character is a force to be reckoned with; she is a valkyrie, a shield-maiden and the daughter of a King. Her story is terribly tragic, and by the end of it, she makes sure to get revenge and restore her honor by the Dragon Slayer's death, which is shortly followed by her own. There could not be any other kind of fate for this sort of women. They were too extraordinary, powerful and dangerous.

Characters like Hervör, however, were easier to tame. Even though the narrative literally calls Hervör *ills* (evil, bad), it also characterizes her as wild and unruly, beautiful and deadly, a combination that is necessary to be part of the shield-maiden club; a deadly woman with an ugly body would probably be more akin with a monster than a respectable warrior, and even through Hervör is also a *viking* (Old Norse word for pirate and piracy), in the story she ultimately goes on to marry a king. Moreover, legendary women in Icelandic medieval literature were feared, respected and desired by heroic men, not just because they were beautiful, but because of their masculine traits (Mundal 10).

By looking at shield maidens in general, it seems like the trope, far from being constructed as something for women to fantasize about, it was more of a thing for men. Hervör, Brynhild and even Skady are sad exceptions of masculine women who were returned to their

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¹⁰ I have argued this elsewhere. See McPhaul in Bibliography.
feminine gender roles by a willful marriage.\footnote{Note, however, that Hervör had been informed by her father about her future and it is arguable that this knowledge made her want to fulfill it. Brynhild was deceived into marrying the wrong man and Skady's marriage was a sham. Out of these three, Hervör was the only one who had an "ok" outcome, the other two did not.} Other stories, such as the ones found in Saxo Grammaticus of Alfhild and Laegerda suggest that these characters were meant to pose a challenge to the hero: he was supposed to take them by force and tame them into their feminine gender roles. Of course, not reverting into femininity meant death, as was the case with Brynhild.

This chapter has considered what kind of women and under what special circumstances females embody male personas in Norse medieval legend, and it has been argued that cross-dressing and gender impersonation were necessary in order for women to protect their bodies from men or to exert a role other than the one they were assigned at birth. This, however, does not stop narrators and onlookers from passing harsh judgment on these women, calling them "evil" or simply disapproving of their actions. Moreover, all of this can't be decontextualized from its historical and cultural background, where it must be acknowledged that it seems that whatever ideas existed behind gender roles in medieval Scandinavia did not matter much when it was time to uphold more "important" cultural and social values, such as family honor and power dynamics.

Nowadays the concept of female cross dressing or "masculine female" is very different to what has been discussed thus far. The changing times have dictated that it is acceptable for women to dress in masculine clothing and to perform in masculine spaces.\footnote{But it still isn't accepted for men to wear feminine clothing, and it is still frowned upon when men choose to be "stay at home dads," which serves to exemplify how femininity is still viewed as inferior in the eyes of an androcentric society.} However, following the definition proposed at the beginning of this thesis, where a "masculine female' is defined as a biological woman who voluntarily dresses in masculine clothes to perform acts that are...
considered to go against a woman's nature," it is possible to trace similarities between masculine women from legend and masculine women from contemporary media.

Chapter 3 - Samus Aran and the Fallacy of Female Empowerment.

As one of the first females to appear as a leading character in a video game, Samus Aran will forever hold a special place in video game history. Moreover, her games are still being made over thirty years after her first appearance in 1986, with the latest one, Metroid: Samus Returns released for the Nintendo 3DS in 2017, and her next title Metroid Prime 4 just announced for the Nintendo Switch and due to be released later this year (2018).

In spite of a few "mishaps," which will be discussed later on, over all, Samus Aran has been praised as a symbol of female empowerment because she's independent, capable and strong. However, it only takes a closer look to see that her strength comes from her heightened masculinity, clearly embodied by the Power Suit, rather than her inherent value as a female, which is in turn undermined and objectified by turning her body into part of the game's reward system. This chapter will briefly evaluate some points made by feminist media critics regarding the representation of female characters in video games and how visual semiotics influence how characters are "read" in visual media. This is explained in order to explore the disconnect between Samus Aran as a masculine female character when she inadvertently performs as male while wearing her staple Power Suit, vis à vis the feminine persona presented when her female form is visible.

The Representation of Female Characters in Visual Media

As a piece of changing media, Samus Aran's character is truly fascinating, but in order to understand how and why she is so, it is necessary to discuss first the broader context of visual
media in which her persona exists and how it relates to the context of this research. The question of how women are represented in media, particularly in video games, has been known to be a controversial topic to say the least. The video game industry has been long criticized for their overly sexualized representation of women and their lack of diversity when it comes to female lead characters. The most vocal critic and one of the few advocates for a feminist look into video game analysis and criticism has been Anita Sarkeesian, who through her YouTube mini series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* strongly criticized several tropes video games use in their representation of women. Beginning with the damsel in distress, Sarkeesian makes a few interesting points about representation in her videos. However, what made Sarkeesian “internet famous” was the backlash she received from *Gamergate*, an organization/movement that, under the disguise of advocating for ethics in video game journalism, went as far as sending death and rape threats to Sarkeesian and other women in the video game industry who advocate for feminist approaches to representations, such as video game designers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu.¹³

In her 1991 New York Times article titled *Hers; The Smurfette Principle*, Katha Pollit criticizes what she calls the "Smurfette Principle," where a lone female character joins a group of boys/men, and whereas each one of the male characters have distinct personalities and traits, the girl character is stereotypical and her predominant characteristic within her group of friends is her "femaleness." In Pollit's opinion the existence of this trope shows that "[t]he message is clear. Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals,

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¹³ For more on Sarkeesian and the backlash she received, see Jenkins, and for more on GamerGate, see Parkin in the bibliography. It is also worth noting that in the past few years the representation of women in games has changed for the better, which is both an excellent sign that the industry has considered the voices of their consumers, and a suggestion that characterization and storytelling in video games is becoming more sophisticated. Nonetheless, there is still room for improvement.
girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys." This interpretation of female representation in visual media is still prevalent to a certain degree, as exemplified by the cinematic universe of both DC and Marvel with the characters of Wonder Woman in Justice League and Black Widow in the Avengers, and even more recent representations, such as the character of eleven in Netflix's *Stranger Things*. In this sense, certain types of mass media represent girls and women as a subset of "man," where the "femaleness" of women is what sets her apart from the men. Never mind her character, goals, aspirations and dreams. The first and foremost differentiator amongst all other characters is her sex/gender and how this one trait makes her different than her peers. As a consequence, these characters represent caricatures, tropes and stereotypes, not people, which is not inherently a negative thing on its own, but the lack of a wide range of different representations is an issue.

Similar to the *Smurfette Principle*, there is the *Ms. Male Character* described by Anita Sarkeesian in her web series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Sarkeesian points out at how some female characters are represented as a copy of their male counterparts, defining the term as "a female version of an already established or default male character. Ms. Male characters are defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection and occasionally promotional materials" (3:18). Sarkeesian explains that this practice is part of the tradition of visual storytelling video games inherited from other media, such as animation and comics, and that they are particularly common in games targeted to young and general audiences. For example, games where anthropomorphic creatures or objects are used as main characters use a series of "feminized gender signifiers" in order to communicate to the audience that a character is female. Pacman and Ms. Pacman are a great example of this, since there is absolutely nothing inherent to Pacman (other than his name, although it is arguable that
the -man suffix is just meant to underline his quality as a humanoid character, rather than his sex/gender) that identifies Pacman as male. Therefore, it's reasonable to think that Pacman, as appears in-game, is gender neutral. However, by adding a pink bow, pink lips and eyelashes (makeup), the same character becomes definitely female, and her counterpart is now clearly male. In other words, in order to be considered "male" a video game character just needs to not have any "feminized gender signifiers." This implies that female characters cannot be gender neutral without being confusing for the player.

For example, in the past years the independent game scene has released a few video games with gender-neutral characters, and the sex/gender of these characters is recognized in-game by the use of male/female pronouns rather than obvious visual queues. However, when observed, the absence of female characteristics makes it impossible to identify the character's sex. Such is the case with Night in the Woods' Mae and Beatrix (Fig. 1).

At first glance it is clear that the design of Beatrix (the Alligator) and Mae (the Cat) do not suggest any kind of femaleness because they lack any feminized gender signifiers. There are no long eyelashes, no pink ribbons, no secondary sexual characteristics. As a matter of fact, both girls (yes, they are girls) look a lot more like boys. In Beatrix's case, her black dress could be telling of her gender, but Mae's pose and and clothes are clearly masculine, or at the very least gender neutral. It must be stated that these characters belong to a game that is in nature experimental, and therefore can afford to take these risks with character design. However, the reception of these characters by some fans suggests
that female characters are somehow lacking without their feminine markers, thus artists have taken upon themselves to "fix" the design by making them more akin with the character's gender.

In the first example of fan-art (Fig. 2) Beatrix and Mae are both decidedly female. Their pose is the same as the original art, but their clothes are tightly fitted so that breasts and hips are made visible. In the second example (Fig. 3) the colors where toned as pastels and make-up was added in the form of long eyelashes and eyeshadow. These additions and changes to the original art shift the gender of the characters into female and suggest the impossibility of portraying a feminine character without these markers and her being understood as a female at first sight.

This idea that there is an impossibility for women to be anything other than the specific female is explored by Monique Witting in her essay *The Mark of Gender* where she suggests that there is a disconnect between language and the concrete world of "physical or social reality."

Witting looks at the English language and argues that the users of language consider symbols and abstraction as not belonging to the "real." She argues that "There is on one side the real, the referent, and on the other side language. It is as though the relation to language were a relation of function only and not one of transformation" (77).
language females interlocutors need to make their sex known as they speak, very much as it is necessary to show feminine markers in female characters, whereas male ones don't have to because their sex and gender is already implied in the language;¹⁴

Sex, under the name of gender permeates the whole body of language and forces every locutor, if he belongs to the oppressed sex, to proclaim it in her speech, that is, to appear in language under her proper physical form and not under the abstract form, which every male locutor has the unquestioned right to use. The abstract form, the general, the universal, this is what the so-called male gender means, for the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves. (79-80)

Witting is, of course, referring specifically to the English language in her essay, but her idea is clearly visible in the semiotic language used in video game character design, where the female characters must present a signifier that tells them apart from the male characters, whereas all a character needs in order to look masculine is to not be marked as female. This suggests that it is impossible to look at a female character or body as gender neutral; even androgynous characters, such as Moira from Blizzard's Overwatch is wearing an armor that make her breasts clearly

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¹⁴ This is in contrast with languages like Spanish and French, where adjectives and sometimes nouns decline according to gender.
The female body (and thus a feminine nature) is inescapable, unless the body is purposely hidden, and by either chance or intention takes on the appearance of male.

The problem with this is, however, that the purpose of visual and narrative design is to convey information to the player by having her interact with the environment and show her rather than tell her what the game and story are about. Therefore, if a character's sex/gender is an important part of the narrative, design-wise it makes no sense to make a female character not look female, unless it's part of the game's aesthetic, as is the case with Night in the Woods, or there is a legitimate reason brought on by the narrative for the character's appearance and choice of wardrobe to not show her gender. Moreover, sometimes a female character's sexually charged body is purposely shown for no other reason than to showcase it. This is true for all visual media, not just video games, and there is nothing inherently wrong with the existence of these types of representations; the problem arises when these images are the only ones that there are, which sometimes means that competent female characters are reduced to sexual objects to please the eye, rather than explore the possibilities of a female experience in a male-dominated space.

**The Masculine Female as Sexualized object.**

Most of the work written about female representation in video games focuses on sexualization and objectification of the female body, and features popular Lara Croft, who appeared for the first time in 1996 as the lead character of the widely successful franchise Tomb Raider. According to the lore, Lara Croft is a young English woman from a rich family who is an archaeologist/adventurer, she is skilled in fighting and weaponry, and is also in optimal physical shape. Now, none of these things make Lara or the Tomb Raider narrative particularly unique, but the combination of circumstances surrounding its release definitely contributed to the franchise’s success.
Tomb Raider was a breakthrough game back in 1996, due to its 3D graphics and third-person game play. As of genre, it could be said that all Tomb Raider games are 3D action/adventure puzzle/platformers where the player plays as Lara the whole time, shoots at enemies, explores the environment and solves puzzles in order to progress the game. The amount of freedom of movement that Tomb Raider allowed its players set the bar for 3D adventure games thereafter, but Lara's appearance had a similar effect on how lead female characters were represented in video games for at least the next decade (Kennedy).

Lara's body is the main topic of many articles and critical pieces because of the way she is represented in-game through the clothes that she wears. In the first Tomb Raider Lara's proportions are clearly unrealistic and skewed, her polygonal body exaggerates her female features, such as breasts, hips and waist which are covered by a blue top and khaki shorts (Fig. 5). In essence, for today's standards Lara Croft is not much different to any other action/adventure protagonist in video games; she is tough, confident and skilled, and she set the standard for female action heroes in video games: Lara was born at a time when female characters in leading roles were a rare occurrence, and when a 30% of games featured female characters (if any) exclusively as damsels in distress or sexual objects, Lara's appearance as a video game heroine with agency had such an impact, Janz and Martis called the standard she was setting as the "Lara Phenomenon," which refers to female characters that, even though highly
sexualized, are "capable." (147). However, this perspective is widely contested by arguing that this sexualization shows that video games are mainly targeted to heterosexual male players. Moreover, a 2016 study, which analyzed female character sexualization over time conducted by Lynch, suggests that the presence of over sexualized characters peaked between 1995 and the early 2000's, but began decreasing after 2006, pointing at a decrease possibly due to growing interest from women to play games. (Lynch 13) This may also explain why Lara had a "reboot," or "do-over," in 2013, which totally reinvented her as a character. The new Lara looks more like a "real" woman today than any other previous version; there are no exaggerated proportions in her body, and she looks (and behaves) more like a person than ever before (Fig. 6).

But, how does Samus fit into this? Well, Samus is an interesting research subject precisely because the lack of attention she has received in comparison with Lara is telling of the point this chapter wants to make; unlike Lara, whose representation always showed her as having "too much body," Samus never had this issue because, even through present at some points of the game, during play her feminine body disappears within the masculine Power Suit.

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15 In 2006 Tomb Raider has a "narrative reboot," where Lara's origin story was skewed, but her appearance was not. Samus has had a similar treatment with newer games re-telling her story a little bit differently, but without much change.
16 with the sole exception of Other M.
The curious case of Samus Aran

Samus Aran was born in 1986, when the original *Metroid* was released in Japan for the Nintendo Famicom. The narrative surrounding Samus' adult life as a bounty hunter is told out of chronological order through eleven games, while her childhood and beginnings are narrated in two Japanese Manga. Her story takes place sometime in the future and begins in the colony planet K-2L, when Samus was just a child. The space pirates, lead by Ridley, attacked her planet and exterminated the entire population, only leaving 3-year-old Samus alive. The little girl was rescued by the Chozo, an alien bird-like race who took her back to their native planet, Zebes. There, they had no choice but to infuse her with their DNA so that she could survive the planet's harsh atmosphere. The Chozo looked after Samus, raised her and trained her as a warrior. Once she was older, she joined the Galactic Federation and served for a while until she had "differences" with her superiors and abandoned the Federation to become a freelance bounty hunter, traveling the universe on her own terms, but still being hired by the Federation from time to time.

Cross-dressing in Space: The Power Suit

According to the *Metroid* lore, the Power Suit is a weapon designed and created by the Chozo that Samus can wear because she was infused with their DNA as a child. The armor seems to be both cybernetic and biological, so that it materializes on Samus at will without her

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The manga have never been officially released in the US. The images and references I use here are from an unofficial translation available online.
having to take it off piece-by-piece.\textsuperscript{18} The armor itself can be upgraded into different versions, each version adds a new ability to Samus' arsenal throughout the game, making one thing clear: without the Power Suit, there would be no \textit{Metroid}. The staple orange and alien-looking armor is not only what keeps Samus alive in outer space's hostile environments and what allows her to defend herself against enemies, it is also what ultimately gives Samus agency and power, which is in turn transferred to the player through the action of play.

Moreover, the Suit itself becomes an even more important part of the game and the player's immersive experience in the \textit{Metroid Prime} series because of these games' first person view, which is meant to put the player in Samus' shoes. She even gets to see a glimpse of Samus' face through her reflection on the helmet's visor as the game unfolds. Moreover, the first person view in the \textit{Metroid Prime} series adds a sense of embodiment through the UI (User Interface), where the player sees what Samus can see through the visor (Fig.9).

This is not to say that by "wearing" Samus' helmet the player "becomes" Samus, but rather that Samus as a character dissolves in the background, she disappears and becomes irrelevant to the gameplay, and therefore the player. The player

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure8.png}
\caption{Concept art for Nintendo's \textit{Metroid}. The Power Suit.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{18} This is shown to the player at the beginning of \textit{Metroid: Other M}
does not care about Samus’ morals, ideals, hopes or dreams, all the player cares about is playing and beating the game, and in order to do this all the player really needs is the Power Suit. In this practical sense, as the player engages with the game, Samus is not the player's avatar, the Power Suit is; while wearing the Power Suit, that is all Samus is. The player consciously knows that there is a person inside the suit and that that person is female, but Metroid games are characterized by having little to no dialogue, and it is not until Metroid: Other M (2010) that Samus is given a voice, meaning that for over a decade players were diving into deep space, destroying aliens and visiting strange planets through a quiet and concealed Samus. It is arguable that for the player, she's just a ghost, a name of someone who is supposed to be there, but isn't, and only becomes truly visible when the Power Suit dissolves and the player gets to see her wearing the Zero Suit.

Figure 9. Screen shot of UI (User Interface). Metroid Prime 3.

Underneath the Power Suit, Samus wears the Zero Suit, a light-blue catsuit that allows her female body to be visible. The suit was first introduced in 2004, with the GameBoy Advance game Metroid: Zero Mission, where Samus had no choice but to navigate the planet Zebes
wearing only the Zero Suit after the Power Suit was destroyed. The suit is visible in other games as well, most notably in *Metroid: Other M*. When showed in her Zero Suit, Samus is portrayed from angles that accentuate her female body, this in contrast with the powerful poses she’s usually represented in while wearing the Power Suit. It’s also worth mentioning that in *Metroid: Other M*, she is portrayed as wearing high heels while not wearing the Power Suit (Fig.10)

**Samus Aran is not a “Woman.”**

However true that in the Fictional World of *Metroid* Samus is not trying to impersonate a man, the activities that she embarks on, the small details that the games offer about who she is and her famous Power Suit, are evidence enough to identify her as a masculine female, and to a certain extent a crossdresser. When taking into account the earlier discussion about character design, it is easy to see how the Power Suit un-genders Samus. Even though the Suit's design has changed over time to emphasize her female curves, the sheer size of the suit (according to Nintendo, Samus measures 6’3 and weighs 190 pounds) makes her nothing short than an intimidating giant. When depicted wearing the suit, Samus is always portrayed in power poses, with her body taking as much space as possible. The orange color of the Power Suit has no particular gendered connotation, and when the player looks at her in-game movements, nothing indicates that the person wearing the armor is a female.
The team of designers who created *Metroid* back in the 80's were completely aware of this: originally, the main character for their 2D side-scrolling adventure was going to be male, but during the development process one of the producers thought it would be fun if they revealed Samus to be a female at the end of the game. This decision worked great as a marketing stunt, because no one expected this "badass" alien-looking humanoid to be a girl, so that the "reveal" at the end of a game was a surprise for the unexpecting player.\(^{19}\)

It is also worth mentioning that Samus was inspired by Sigourney Weaver's character in the movie *Aliens*, which was released just a few months before *Metroid* in 1986.\(^{20}\) Samus also was a great addition to Nintendo's team of characters, where there were only a handful of major characters, such as Mario and Link,\(^{21}\) making Samus a perfect addition as the missing main character female representative. In this sense it is arguable that Samus was, or even could still be, Nintendo's Smurfette.\(^{22}\)

However, the way that Samus' gender is "revealed" is not without controversy because of how it was accomplished in-game. In short, the reveal is triggered once the player arrives at the end of the game, and how it's presented depends on how fast the player is able to get there. There

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\(^{19}\) I have a thing or two to say about this, because the "gender reveal" is a trope that undermines women's capabilities and competencies, as if it was utterly surprising and impossible for a beautiful woman to be other than attractive. As if it was impossible for a woman who is too much bod[y to also have a competent mind. I personally find it offensive, but sadly I don't have the time to explore this in this research.


\(^{21}\) The Legend of Zelda for the Famicom was released in February 1986, just nine months before *Metroid*.

\(^{22}\) Within franchises belonging to Nintendo, there are other female characters who have grown in importance throughout the years, such as Princess Peach and Princess Zelda (both of them also happen to be Smurftettes for at least part of their history). However, in the over 30 years that Nintendo has been making games, Samus is still the only female character who has her own franchise, rather than being a secondary character, as is the case with the other two.
are a total of five endings in the original *Metroid*: the “worst” endings shows Samus in her Power suit facing away from the player, while the “best” ending, the one the player gets when she beats the game in the shortest amount of time, shows Samus facing the player while wearing what one can only assume is a bikini or her underwear. This was received with excitement and surprise from the players, but can also be read as a gimmick that capitalizes in assumptions people make about women, and as a terribly objectifying way to "reward" the player by showing her Samus' female body. Another time Samus’ sex was used in this sort of exploitative way, was in *Super Metroid*, when every time Samus is killed a short video sequence is shown, where she’s frozen in mid air, her Power suit disintegrates and a silhouette of her naked body is shown for a few seconds on screen, and again in *Metroid: Samus Returns*, where the player gets to see Samus in different versions of her outfit according to how fast the player finished the game.

In short, Samus' female body is a reward for the player, and that is the only thing it is good for. Without the Chozo DNA she would not be able to use the Power Suit, so even that comes from an outside source, which happens to be male.\(^{23}\)

Without the maleness of her Power Suit, Samus is nothing but a dainty blonde whose main characterizing features are too feminine for it to make sense that she is the one wearing the Power Suit. This disconnect between how Samus is characterized in *Other M* and through environmental design in previous games is telling of once given a female body and a voice, Samus became a woman by being characterized as one, whereas before she was a man, just because there was nothing specific about her that made her feminine (other than her objectified body when uncovered).

\(^{23}\) All the Chozo appear to be male with only one known exception: the Chozo Searcher, of whom only a statue remains (*Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*)
Samus is portrayed as an extraordinary woman without showing any truly extraordinary character traits other than the fact that she's a competent human being in a female body. The "heroism" that she conveys is constructed from the perceived bravery assumed she must have in order to accept the dangerous missions that she is assigned. Also, nothing about her experiences are particularly "female," which is interesting in contrast with the medieval tales, because as misogynistic as they were, at least they hold traces of what it meant to be a woman in their own context, whereas Samus is blanc, her experience as a female is unimportant to the narrative and the game experience. But again, Samus does not speak, therefore technically, the player constructs her through the experience of play only through what she can see her perform, environmental storytelling and design. Until *Metroid Other M* was released, that is.

**Metroid: Other M; Samus is a Woman After All.**

According to video game reviewers, *Metroid Other M* is deemed as above average, with a score of 8.5/10. (Cowan) However, it only takes a google search to find out that, even though the game has good reviews, some players seem to have hated the game mostly because of the way it portrays Samus' character. The interest this research has on these remarks is not so much whether they are true or not, for those are subjective opinions and such a qualitative analysis falls outside the scope of this thesis, but rather how Samus' voice in *Other M* characterizes her as "feminine" in contrast to the "masculine" demeanor she portrays by only wearing the Power Suit, and how this characterization is dissonant to everything the players know or have assumed about her through the prior games.

*Other M* is the first *Metroid* game where Samus has any kind of dialogue, so that player can for the first time see the world through her eyes, rather than just through the visor of the
Power Suit. In *Other M* Samus' internal monologue carries the story, and her relationship with other characters also have consequences in how the game is played.

*Other M* is also the only game where Samus is treated as something other than an action hero. The game begins by giving the player no choice but to subordinate to Adam Malkovich, a member of the Galactic Federation who used to be Samus' superior. He instructs her to not use her weapons unless he authorizes it, which is reasonable to an extent, but when we consider that there are over a decade of games before this one where Samus has never showed any kind of subservience, it suddenly characterizes her as someone willing to follow orders, which goes against the strong willed persona that had been built by her silence in previous games.

Moreover, *Other M* is also full of flashbacks to when Samus was part of the Galactic Federation. In these flashbacks, she's shown as the only female in her squad, her hair is short and she is portrayed as angry, and even desperate to prove herself worthy of her position, as if she has something to prove.

The male characters are also very condescending towards her; at the beginning of the game, there is an explosion, and Anthony Higgins, one of the squad members and Samus' friend, feels the need to shield Samus from the explosion, which makes no sense because she is wearing the Power Suit and is, quite possibly, better protected than he is. He also calls Samus "Princess," which is terribly condescending. However, this is revealing of how women in powerful positions...
are often verbally undermined by their male peers, in the same manner that fictional shield-maidens were by their narrators.

This is telling of what appears to be a trend; the assumption that the female mind and body are weaker than men's, even when they demonstrate the contrary. Which is also hinted by the narrative of *Other M* when Samus breaks down when fighting Ridley. As she's trying to compose herself, and fails, the power suit begins to fail as well. The fear triggered by what can only be described as a PTSD reaction has as a consequence the malfunctioning of her suit, which fades away, leaving her wearing only the zero suit, having her female figure exposed. She later composes herself, "mans up" and destroys Ridley, but later in the game her Power Suit malfunctions a second time when, after being rescued by Adam, she breaks down once again. Both of these instances show Samus losing the composure she's so well known for throughout the series, showing a more human side of her, a side that is also unmistakably and undeniably, female from a traditional perspective, since being male of female could be seen as polyvalent in itself. In the same way that Hervör becomes Hervard when wearing male clothes, Samus becomes the Bounty Hunter when she wears the power suit; similar to how the narrative characterizes Hervör as “evil” once her sex is revealed, Samus is represented as “incompetent” or “fragile.”

Based on these observations, which go against everything players thought they knew about Samus based on previous games, reviewers wrote things such as

This is also the first game in which Samus has been given a voice, albeit a squeaky and annoying one that makes it tough to take her seriously. Change is not inherently bad, but the overabundance of story in *Other M* is a negative step away from *Metroid* tradition.
Things become a lot more interesting once Samus shuts her big yap (...) (McShea)

And

This is the first game in the franchise that's really attempted to humanize Samus and surround her with a supporting cast, but for the most part it does so flatly and without much gravity. Samus' voiceover is painfully dull at times, and the game introduces some frailty in her character that struck me as out of place for someone who's exterminated entire planets' worth of awful monsters (Shoemaker)

Ultimately, Samus' characterization in *Other M* is uncomfortable because she's portrayed as a woman. Her experience throughout the game, seen from her perspective as it had never seen before, tells the player a very different story than he or she could have imagined before because by only looking from the outside it was easy to assume her personality to match the Power Suit.

At least in the case of Samus, a figure that has existed for essentially the entire history of video game culture as we know it, the perception that she is somehow empowered because of her masculinity is skewed. Any empowerment Samus has as a female character is only visible in *Other M*, since in all the other games she's nothing more than an avatar.

Like Lara Croft, and many others after her, the character traits that Samus possessed for which she's admired have nothing to do with her as a woman, but the feminine traits that she does have are perceived as negative. In the case of Lara it is her body, with Samus it's her personality as portrayed in *Other M*.

The idea that female characters in video games are empowered must be reconsidered.
Conclusions

In the introduction of this thesis a general question pertaining masculine women was raised "why women feel compelled to embody masculine behaviors, or personas, while hiding or denying their female bodies?" and it was argued throughout this research project that the main reason for women to desire to be masculine is because there is a culturally constructed idea that masculinity is inherently superior than femininity. Chapter two and three discussed medieval and contemporary fictional characters in order to showcase how these women's narratives and construction (purposely or not) portray them as strong because of their masculinity, whereas their femininity is repressed, represented as "evil," or simply not present at all. This last chapter will focus on drawing comparisons and conclusions.

Medieval Narratives and Video Game Spaces Represent a Masculine World-View

Even though there is historical evidence of female scribes, it is safe to say that most narrators/writers from medieval times were men. Similarly, today most of the people who make video games are men. As such, it is no surprise that they would much rather tell stories they find interesting or relevant, where the main characters are men or at the very least are relatable to males. Stories about experiences exclusive to the female body such as menstruation, childbirth or miscarriage are rare or non-existent, and tales about female characters living cultural female experiences are rare as well in both medieval texts and video games.

Unless written by women (or at the very least with the help of women), narratives from the medieval period and video games show only one interpretative cultural perspective; a male one. This is not to mean that this "vision" was the ONLY one available at the time, or that today this is the ONLY way in which games are made. It means that, more often than not, the general production material that is out there was created by men for a "universal audience," which
includes males, but excludes exclusive female experiences. This is why essays such as Hélène Ciroux' *The Laugh of the Medusa* invite women to write, because no one will do it for them; it has seldom been done in the past, and because women are outside of the scope of what is universal, only females are able to verbalize what it is like to have a female experience, whereas I'd go as far as suggesting that women have a very accurate idea of what it is like to be men because most of the materials we are exposed to tell us all about that experience. Is it all masculine representation or a certain masculine representation which has been privileged, and not man as fragile, man as beta, man as gay, man as black, or the masculine trans, man as non-traditionally handsome, man as physically-challenged, among others. At the same time, women can be masculinistic and sometimes reproduce misogynistic and sexist conceptions, both towards women and men, as has been many times pointed out by feminists, and men can be very feminine as well. An example of feminine writing for Cixous is James Joyce’s prose.

Therefore, the story of Hervör cannot be said to represent a "female experience" in its entirety. Nonetheless, it could be illustrative of the hoops women had to go through just to perform any action that fell outside of their place in society. Hervör is characterized as a strong willed woman who does what she wants, and who at the end chooses to put aside her life as a viking simply because she became bored. What I find the most important about her story is precisely that at all times her actions were her own choice, which is possibly more telling of the privileges of her social status than her gender, but she is still one of the very few shieldmaidens (that I am aware of) who was able to successfully navigate her life independently without her story ending in what can be interpreted as sexual violence, or her untimely death. In contrast, Lagerda and Alfhild did not have that luxury, arguably because they were not as good as Hervör at hiding their true identities, suggesting that the only reason Hervör succeeded was because she
was only found out by King Gudmund, who ultimately sent his son to ask for her hand in marriage.

On the other hand, Samus must uncover her body to be present as a character. The Power Suit, representative of her masculinity not only hides her femininity, but her entire being, making it so that, in order for the player to even remember she is there, it is necessary for the Power Suit to disappear and unveil her true character, which according to *Other M* is unequivocally female. The reaction this characterization generated in the players who had met Samus in previous *Metroid* games was mentioned here only briefly, but it warrants a closer look so to inquire whether their reaction is due to her feminine portrayal causing a dissonance in a previously assumed personality, or an incompatibility between her femininity and the spaces she explores within her masculine role as a bounty hunter.

It is worth noting that video games as a creative field, and industry, and even a hobby, are considered (have been constructed) as male space, as demonstrated by Gamergate and the constant harassment women endure in online game-related spaces. These spaces, unless entered in their terms, are hostile towards women, as Anita Sarkeesian’s experience demonstrates, when her feminist criticism of video games resulted in her receiving death threats. This reminds me of the violence with which Gullveig is received by the Aesir as she entered Asgard wielding feminine power, or at the very least magic unknown to the Aesir.

In medieval tales masculine women are undermined by calling them evil and essentially disobedient, as the narrator does with Hervör, or Saxo when he tells his readers about the shield-maidens. In video games the familiar male spaces that these narratives explore undermine women by infantilizing them, as the men in *Metroid: Other M* do with Samus, by essentially trying to protect her, not just from the environment, but also from herself, which is exactly what
Adam does when he orders Samus not to use her weapons. The woman is a killing machine who has proved herself in past games as being competent. She knows what she's doing, but since this game portrays her as a man's idea of a woman, rather than just the Power Suit, she needs to be supervised.

It seems clear to me that these stories clearly show how a higher value is assigned to masculinity over femininity. In medieval stories of masculine women, representing masculinity in a female body was an issue that had to do with power dynamics, where narratives undermined these women to be evil, defeated or killed in spite of their positive masculine traits because in a society where power is unbalanced, the oppressor doesn't want to tell the oppressed she is as good as he is. Nonetheless, this masculinity was still highly valued, since heroes preferred masculine women to mother their children.

In Video Games most female action heroes are masculine and violent, their nature as action heroes makes them inherently so (no one expects a hyper-feminine character to be an action hero). However, this masculinity is accompanied by an over sexualized body whose purpose is twofold: capture the attention of a target audience, and compensate for the lack of feminine character traits designers would be able to explore in a different type of game genre (other than action/adventure). Even in a character like Samus, which according to her creators, they were actively trying not to make into an objectified sexual being (Harris), it is easy to see how her design changed over time to make it more and more clear that she is a woman. First by exposing her body, and later by showing her character.

Nowadays, gender does not seem to matter. At at least not in Video Games.

After evaluating the medieval texts, it seems that even through sex and gender were constructed differently than what they are today, they also represented important categories with
semiotic functions for social interactions. In this sense, the sex and gender of a medieval character immediately characterises them according to the social expectations, unless the narrator explicitly says otherwise. In the case of Hervör, the narrator insisted multiple times in the "evilness" of the shield-maiden, and this "evil" was suggested to be inherent to her nature, which was masculine in contrast to what was expected of young women in Medieval Scandinavia.

In the case of Samus, until *Metroid: Other M*, her biological sex never characterized her as a "woman," her actions, and most predominantly, her silence, characterized her as masculine, which was widely accepted because of context in which her fictional world is executed, namely a distant sci-fi future. Moreover, from a game standpoint, a question that requires attention is: does Samus' gender or sex matter? In short, the straight-up answer is no.

Unlike the female warriors of legend whose gender transgression was being constantly reminded to the audience in the form of calling her evil, or dressed in man's clothes, or saying she had a bad disposition, in video games such as *Metroid*, where there is little to no attention to direct character development, the protagonists' gender is of no consequence to either the gameplay or the narrative. Samus could be a man and it would make no difference, whereas in Hervör is Heidrek’s mother, and in order to fulfill this role she needs to be female. Samus, however, doesn't fulfill any kind of feminine roll in-game, nor she have any special abilities inherent to her female body, nor does the fact that she is a girl matter much to the narrative itself. Moreover, nothing about what Samus experiences is remotely relatable to a "feminine" experience, not even her relationship with the baby Metroid she encounters in *Metroid II: Return of Samus* (1991) and the recent remake *Metroid: Samus Returns* (2017). With the exception of

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24 I have decided NOT to include the baby Metroid in this discussion for two reasons; 1. I don't have access to all the games necessary to play in order to make the Baby a meaningful part of the discussion and 2. It seems to me, based
*Metroid Other M*, none of Samus' enemies or allies call attention to the fact that she is a woman. Samus could be male, and it would make no difference. Samus' body is a reward for the player, the player's avatar is not Samus' female body; it's the Power Suit (Grimes 6). It has been argued that an important change that has occurred throughout the Metroid games is that Samus' body is no longer a reward, but rather that the player gets to see Samus in the Zero suit more often responds to players’ desire to see Samus as a human being, rather than just her Power Suit (Roberts 23).

This project has so many possibilities for expansion this thesis seems like only a small part of what can and should be discussed. The incorporation of more examples from Medieval myth and legend, such as Freyja, Brynhild, and from video games, such as Princess Zelda and a proper section about Lara Croft, can greatly enrich and broaden the discussion. Also, as the writing process unfolded, it became clear to me that it would have been relevant to include women who exercise power inherent to their female nature, such as witches and other magical women in myth, legend and video games in order to construct a comparison between magic wielders and warriors, for it seems to me that they exercise power differently, and it is also represented very differently, especially in popular culture (for example, the evil witches represented by Disney in their classical movies). This research would have also benefited from the analysis of women from Greek and Roman legend as well as other games I did not even mention, such as Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* and Nintendo's *Bayonetta*.

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...on secondary sources that Samus' relationship with the baby is born out of empathy, rather than some "motherly instinct," since it has been argued that the baby reminds Samus of herself when she was an orphaned child and sole survivor in her own home planet.
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