

**The Literary Reception of Old Norse Myth in Medieval Iceland**

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## Abstract

This thesis addresses the incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in selected *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders) and *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times). Taking as its point of departure the conclusions of Margaret Clunies Ross in *Prolonged Echoes*, according to which Old Norse myth retained its cultural and conceptual relevance in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia even after conversion, this thesis explores the ideological implications of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs as they are used in saga literature. The thesis begins by demonstrating the way in which mythology was used by saga writers to conceive of and configure rulership and power, including coverage of Snorri's historicization of Old Norse myth to produce a typological model of right rulership in *Ynglinga saga*, while the assimilation of Óðinn to the figure of the foster-father is attributed to a focus on the god's associations with battle and heroes. Blanket categorizations of the poets of the *skáldasögur* (sagas of poets) as Odinic figures are revealed to be unwarranted, and non-Odinic material used in the representation of these poets, such as the employment of motifs borrowed from the swan-maiden tale-type in *Gunnlaugs saga*, is shown to be just as important as Odinic material in conceiving of poets in these sagas. In Chapter 4, a less oppositional binary between gods or humans and giants than has hitherto been acknowledged is suggested, and arguments are made in favour of considering giants to be representative of alternative, peripheral, and decentralizing ideologies. The final chapter argues that practitioners of magic are representative of potential social and political disruption and that that disruption is frequently configured in terms of the mythological outsider, such as the dwarf. This thesis concludes that Old Norse myth was of vital cognitive importance in constructing and negotiating social, cultural, and political ideologies from the twelfth century onwards.

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## Introduction

Any study of myth must necessarily confront the problem of definition. Scholars from as diverse a range of fields as comparative religion, the history of religion, anthropology, psychology, and literature have each offered an explanation of what myth is inflected by his or her discipline, and if these attempts at definition have taught us anything at all, it is that there is something about myth that is fundamentally paradoxical: it is both universal and particular.

As Christopher Abram notes in *Myths of the Pagan North*, there is a common perception of myth as ‘a particularly stable form of story’ dealing with ‘universal themes’ and conforming to ‘common patterns’; similarly, Heather O’Donoghue has noted that ‘[m]yths can be understood as narrative responses to the universal human condition: creation, fertility, the struggle for life, and death.’<sup>1</sup> Comparative studies of myth, the most famous of which is Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, have especially emphasized the universal themes and common patterns identifiable in myths from geographically and temporally distinct cultures, and the theories of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century German psychologist C. G. Jung have been instrumental in locating the universality of the themes and patterns of myth in the archetypal patterns and images present in the collective unconscious.<sup>2</sup> In light of these theoretical strands, the myth of Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr ceases to be a myth specific to Old Norse-Icelandic culture and becomes instead a manifestation of a cross-cultural myth about a fight between a god and a monster, to which we could compare the

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 1 and Heather O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 12 vols (London: Macmillan, 1907-15) and C. G. Jung, *Die Archetypen und das Kollektive Unbewusste*, ed. Lilly Jung-Merker and Elisabeth Rief, *Gesammelte Werke*, 9.1 (Zurich: Walter-Verlag, 1976).

Greek myth of Apollo's fight with Python and the ancient Mesopotamian myth of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat.<sup>3</sup>

Even within an individual culture, taking Old Norse-Icelandic culture as our example, we speak of *the* myth of Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr, not *a* myth, and even though this myth is known to us in many different versions, both pictorial and narrative, and with variant endings, we still consider it to be the same myth, which we might describe as being intraculturally universal.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the survival of supposedly universal myths in particular versions is conceptually paradoxical; our access to myth is contingent on its embodiment in one form or another, and there is no way of accessing the 'pure' or 'original' myth unless we engage in the methodologically suspect practice of reconstruction. As Abram writes:

Every myth that we read has been written or recorded in some other way: written, spoken, drawn or acted out by a particular person on a particular day, in a particular place, for a particular reason. In other words, what we talk about when we talk about a myth is often really a version of a myth, a retelling, a text.<sup>5</sup>

No matter how universal a myth might seem, it is necessarily bound by the specific contexts of its individual manifestations, which are subject not only to the prevailing aesthetic principles of the day, but also to the predominant ideological preoccupations of both the individual artist and his social and cultural milieu. With this in mind, the scope for modification of a myth in the act of its representation is potentially limitless, every new artist or writer able to make his or her own mark on a traditional story in both conscious and

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<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), pp. 7-55 (ch. 48), Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ed. Peter K. Marshall (New York: Teubner, 1993), ch. 140, and *Das babylonische Welterschöpfungsepos 'Enūma eliš'*, ed. Thomas R. Kämmerer and Kai A. Metzler, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, 375 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> On the various manifestations of this myth and their relationship to each other, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Þórr's Fishing Expedition', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, trans. Kirsten Williams (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 121-37 and Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 31-50.

<sup>5</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 1.

unconscious ways. In the case of Old Norse myth, with which this study is concerned, the capacity for modification is amplified by the nature of Scandinavian paganism, of which Old Norse myth is presumed to be a part. As John McKinnell notes, there was ‘no central organisation, no tests of faith, no official canon of scriptures’ for Old Norse heathenism, and ‘the whole mythological system was rather fluid’ as a result; speaking of those who composed mythological texts, McKinnell claims that ‘there was no reason why poets should not change the details of the stories they inherited, or even make up new motifs of their own.’<sup>6</sup> In this context, it becomes difficult to determine which myths, motifs, and patterns are universal and which particular, and even more so which myths were central to religious practice and which the addition of an artist engaging creatively with tradition, despite the common assumption that myth and religion are two sides of the same coin, as titles of works like E. O. G. Turville-Petre’s *Myth and Religion of the North* make clear.<sup>7</sup>

The association between myth and religion is perhaps the most contentious issue in determining how myth should be defined, especially because it raises the question of how myth relates to belief and ritual practice.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, it cannot be denied that Old Norse myth originated in forms of Scandinavian paganism and presumably contained aspects of religious belief, but in the absence of any reliable accounts of pagan belief and practice in Scandinavia, it is impossible to ascertain how closely related myth and religion were. O’Donoghue makes the point that we normally encounter myths in the form of stories ‘at a very late stage in the re-telling process: myths collected, ordered, tidied up, perhaps re-told for children’, and the lengthy distance between the accounts of myths we have and the period of their religious

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<sup>6</sup> John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, *Philologia*, 1 (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), pp. 21, 23, and 22 respectively.

<sup>7</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Proponents of the myth-ritualist school, for example, have been especially concerned with the relationship between myth and ritual, the most extreme conferring secondary status on myth and considering it to be merely the script of ritual practice. See, for example, William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, First Series: The Fundamental Institutions (Edinburgh: Black, 1889), Lecture 1.

significance, not to mention their literary form, renders problematic any attempt to use these stories to reconstruct pagan beliefs and practices, though historians of Old Norse-Icelandic religions have no choice but to do this.<sup>9</sup> Particularly problematic is the fact that myths survive regardless of whether they are the basis or companion of religion, as O'Donoghue has demonstrated in her history of Old Norse myth and her study of its influence on English poetry.<sup>10</sup> Religious belief in Old Norse myth does not lie behind A. S. Byatt's pairing of the story of the end of the gods with the experiences of an evacuee during the Second World War in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*, nor Joanne Harris's decision to write an account of Old Norse myth from the perspective of Loki and two novels for children imagining the post-Ragnarok world; by the same token, a myth may not necessarily have had anything to do with pagan religions beyond incorporating gods as characters even at the time when those religions were observed.<sup>11</sup> If myth can have a life independent of religion, its religious associations cannot be taken as an essential element of its being, but only as an element contingent on other factors.

Despite the unquantifiable link between myth and religion, the idea of myths as stories about the gods is perhaps the conception that comes most immediately to mind. For Old Norse myth, we think of stories involving Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyja that take place in a realm belonging to the gods, but the content limitations this imposes on myth excludes from consideration stories not about the gods with an equal claim to the label 'myth'. Although O'Donoghue suggests that myths 'can be most easily defined as *stories about the gods*' in her introductory discussion of myth in *From Asgard to Valhalla*, for example, she also notes that many of the most celebrated myths in the Greek and Roman traditions do not have gods as

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<sup>9</sup> O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla* and Heather O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), Joanne M. Harris, *The Gospel of Loki* (London: Gollancz, 2014), and Joanne Harris, *Runemarks* (London: Doubleday, 2007) and *Runelight* (London: Doubleday, 2011).

their protagonists, leading her to question whether myths must necessarily be ‘*sacred* stories’.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Robert A. Segal is not so rigid as to propose that the characters of myths must always be gods or near-gods, as theorists from the field of religion have often been, although his insistence ‘that the main figures be personalities – divine, human, or even animal’ is so unexclusive as to be virtually useless in determining how myth is different from other narrative forms.<sup>13</sup> One of the crucial issues here is the nature of the relationship between myth and legend, another type of traditional story showing similarities with myth. It could be argued that traditional stories involving human kings and heroes as protagonists, such as the Roman story of Aeneas, should properly be termed legends and the category ‘myth’ be reserved for stories about the gods; indeed, the human/god distinction is a significant element of William Bascom’s attempt to define the two types of story, a task made all the more difficult when folktales are also thrown into the mix.<sup>14</sup> However, if myths are to be defined as stories about the gods and legends as stories about human kings and heroes, how are we to categorize stories about human kings and heroes in which the gods appear and intervene?

In the case of Old Norse myth, there are stories not only about gods and humans that demand consideration, but also stories concerning a whole host of mythological beings, including giants, elves, dwarfs, and *valkyrjur* (choosers of the slain). To think of myths as simply stories about the gods in this context marginalizes the roles played in these stories by mythological beings distinct from gods and privileges a deicentric perspective that ultimately explicates only one aspect of myth as a phenomenon. Regardless of the religious functions these other beings may or may not have had in forms of Scandinavian paganism, their

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<sup>12</sup> O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, pp. 1 and 2.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions, 111 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, in *Virgil*, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 63 and 64, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999-2000), I, pp. 261-597 and II, pp. 1-367 and William Bascom, ‘The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965), 3-20 (pp. 4-5).

conceptual significance in the mythological texts that have come down to us is plain to see and must be considered on an equal footing with the conceptual significance of the gods if we are to understand Old Norse myth in all of its complexity. Giants, in particular, feature prominently in Old Norse-Icelandic literature; sometimes functioning as the opponents of the gods (not always without cause, as in the case of Óðinn's unprovoked goading of the giant Hrungrnir in ch. 17 of Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*), sometimes as the gods' uneasy bedfellows (Þórr is particularly disgruntled when a giantess must be called upon to launch the funeral boat of Baldr in ch. 49 of Snorri's *Gylfaginning*), the giants occupy as central a position as the gods in Old Norse myth and should be examined on their own terms, as well as in terms of their relationship with the gods (the roles of giants in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders) and the *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times) are discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis).<sup>15</sup> Dwarfs, too, appear in a number of our extant Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts (*Alvíssmál*, for instance) and are often presented as exceptionally accomplished smiths (see, for example, ch. 35 of *Skáldskaparmál*), a representation also found in some of the *fornaldarsögur*, as we shall see in Chapter 5; admittedly, their status in Old Norse myth is not as great as that of the giants, at least as far as can be ascertained from our extant texts, but they deserve to be accommodated in any categorization of stories as myths.<sup>16</sup> If an answer can be found at all to the conceptual objections that can be raised against the focus on gods as the protagonists of myths or the delineation of different types of traditional story, it must come from widening the parameters of myth to allow stories with no discernible relation to religion and its gods within its remit.

In the final chapter of his survey and critique of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of myth, Eric Csapo argues that '[t]he most significant result of the critical

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<sup>15</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 1; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>16</sup> *Alvíssmál*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Íslenzk fornrit*, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 1, pp. 438-43; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

convergence of structuralism, Marxism, and liberation-oriented cultural studies has been a general coalescence of the concept of myth with the concept of ideology', and the definition of myth Csapo provides in his introduction takes full account of the ideological turn in the study of myth:<sup>17</sup>

Myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance...<sup>18</sup>

He elaborates on the second part of this definition in the final chapter of his book, arguing that a myth is 'anything which is told, received, and transmitted in the conviction of its social importance.'<sup>19</sup> The benefit of associating myth with ideology is the broader concept of myth such association allows, enabling us to incorporate modern myths alongside older ones under the same label. The relationship between myth and religion is still accommodated by this extension, but rather than being an essential characteristic of myth, religion is relevant only as a subcategory of ideology, which allows within its sphere stories containing aspects of both religious *and* secular belief. In this way, such myths as those of twentieth-century France examined by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* can be considered alongside stories about the gods, other mythological beings, and their intervention in the lives of humans.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this wider relationship between myth and ideology does not exclude from consideration accounts of myths once related to religions written or depicted after the demise of those religions and allows us to accommodate the changing significations of myths over time in both host and foreign cultures.

The social aspects of myth are especially pronounced in Csapo's definition, and he associates its social importance with the concept of belief, stating that a myth is a story that is

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 278.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

communicated and received ‘in the *conviction* of its social importance’ (my emphasis).<sup>21</sup> That a collective believes in the social importance of myth is essential to its sense of itself *as* a collective; shared myths allow the expression of shared beliefs, codes, and aspirations, though not necessarily in overt ways, and it is in believing in the social importance of these myths that their ability to represent aspects of a unifying worldview can be marshalled in the interests of cohesion: belief in the social importance of the shared myths of a collective constitutes belief in the social importance of the values and goals communicated by those myths, which in turn reinforces the social importance of the collective itself. Although the social importance of older mythologies, such as Judaeo-Christian mythology, was originally conceived of in religious terms, the religious associations of myths, whatever their nature and degree, ultimately prove less important than the ideological imperative of community, evidenced by the surviving social utility of myths originating in the context of religion when that religion is no longer practised or as dominant. The story of the Nativity, for example, retains its social significance in the largely secular United Kingdom as the primary myth of Christmas in a form somewhat detached from its religious import and its position in the grand narrative of Christianity.<sup>22</sup> While Christians still acknowledge the significance of the Nativity as the story of God’s incarnation and the necessary precursor of salvation, for many others it has become nothing more than the annual re-enactment of itself by successive groups of primary school children for their families, a rite of passage inducting the young into a collective to whom the celebration of Christmas is important not as a religious festival, but as a moment of family unity. The ideological role of myth is thus greater than its ties to religion and can be considered a distinctive element of myth as a narrative mode; indeed, the Freudian psychologist Jacob A. Arlow has noted the status of myth as ‘a particular kind of communal

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<sup>21</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 278.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 1-2 and Luke 2.

experience’, ‘a special form of shared fantasy’ which ‘serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of certain common needs.’<sup>23</sup>

It might be argued that myth is not the only form of narrative with an ideological role to play in the mobilization or maintenance of group cohesion, for certain novels and short stories can also become ideologically important to groups within society. The recent popular resurgence of dystopian literature in the field of Young Adult fiction, for example, with such works as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy and James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* series being so popular as to warrant film adaptations, suggests that a large group of youngsters on the cusp of maturity recognizes the social importance of ideological models of rebellion and resistance, and it is particularly significant that these stories have gained prominence in the United Kingdom at a time when distrust of authority has been fuelled by sex-abuse scandals and police cover-ups.<sup>24</sup> Where the ideological role of myth differs from that of other narrative forms, however, is in the intangible origins of myth. It has already been said that we only have access to myths in embodied forms; the sources of myths are always, to use Jacques Derrida’s words, ‘des ombres ou des virtualités insaisissables, inactualisables et d’abord inexistantes’ (shadows or virtualities, elusive, unactualizable, and non-existent from the first).<sup>25</sup> Because the sources of myths are irretrievable, they belong to no single author; instead, they remain, so to speak, in the public domain and belong generally to a social collective, whether that be humanity as a whole or, as is more likely, a nation, a region, a kinship group. Arguably, it is this sense of collective ownership, implied by Csapo in his insistence that a myth ‘is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob A. Arlow, ‘Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology’, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 9 (1961), 371-93 (p. 375).

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic, 2008), *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic, 2009), and *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic, 2010) and James Dashner, *The Maze Runner* (New York: Delacorte, 2009), *The Scorch Trials* (New York: Delacorte, 2010), *The Death Cure* (New York: Delacorte, 2011), and *The Kill Order* (New York: Delacorte, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines’, in *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), pp. 409-28 (p. 419).

sense of this [its social] importance', that especially distinguishes myth from other narrative forms: myths belong to all and can be told by all for all time.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, a novel or short story is subject to concepts of copyright and intellectual property that ascribe private ownership and forbid by law their replication in both style and substance; certainly, popular novels and short stories can become part of the collective consciousness, but these works remain unalienable aspects of their identified authors in a way in which myths do not. The benefit of authorlessness from an ideological perspective is that social, cultural, and political suppositions can become contextually detached, allowing aspects of ideology to pass from one generation to another without examination and to be presented as self-evidently true for all at all times.

It remains now for me to bring this section of the Introduction to a close with my own definition of myth. I should make clear at the outset that the definition I propose is a modification of the definition provided by Csapo, which does not adequately address the distinction between myth as substance and narrative as vehicle or the particularities of a myth's manifested forms: a myth is a socially important story perceived to belong both to social collectives and to humans generally, which is told, received, and transmitted as such in adumbration of ideological beliefs, whether religious or secular, and whose existence is considered to be independent of its individual manifestations, even though this existence is fundamentally intangible. As this definition and its indebtedness to Csapo's own definition make apparent, I consider function and reception to be the determining factors in deciding which stories are myths and which are not; identifying essential criteria supposedly integral to myth as a narrative form is too problematic to be especially useful, particularly since its excesses can lead to isolating criteria so general as to be true of most narrative forms, as is

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<sup>26</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 9.

Segal's argument that the characters of a myth must be 'personalities'.<sup>27</sup> It is my general feeling that much of what we think about myth as a narrative form derives from our perceptions of and attitudes towards certain traditional stories belonging to older, foreign, and religious cultures, rather than from any essential qualities inherent in the various manifestations of the stories we consider to be myths.

### *Old Norse Myth in Saga Narrative*

In this thesis, the reception of Old Norse myth in medieval Iceland is explored through analysis of the mythological patterns, characters, and motifs incorporated in selected *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. As such, my interest lies not in reconstructing 'pure' or 'original' forms of myths on the basis of our extant Old Norse-Icelandic texts, nor do I intend to explore how Old Norse myth relates to religion, belief, or ritual; instead, the focus of my study is on the narrative representation of myths in the sagas and the functions of mythological discourses in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. The definition of myth provided in the previous section underpins my analysis of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas, and it is my contention that Old Norse myth survived in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia even after conversion to Christianity because of its fitness for ideological expression. Of course, as the sources of myths are 'insaisissables, inactualisables et d'abord inexistantes', it is difficult to say with any certainty what exactly is surviving and being recycled in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and the more cleverly or rigorously these sources have been reworked in our textual witnesses, the harder it is to identify and strip away the additions and alterations of successive writers and imagine what

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<sup>27</sup> Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 5.

these sources once were.<sup>28</sup> My approach to this problem has been to focus exclusively on mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in their specific intratextual contexts, without assuming that all surviving manifestations of a pattern, character, or motif necessarily perform the same function or bear any simple relation to the first appearance of that pattern, character, or motif in an unrecoverable ‘pure’ or ‘original’ form. When I refer to mythological patterns, characters, and motifs incorporated in the sagas, I do not refer to specific instances of direct borrowing from identifiable or recoverable texts or sources; rather, what is being recycled in later texts is the knowledge of Old Norse myth accumulated by individual writers in the course of their social and cultural interactions, a mental store of composite narratives, characters, and motifs assimilated from multiple oral and written versions akin to the ‘myth-kitty’ famously criticized by the twentieth-century poet Philip Larkin, but without its pejorative sense.<sup>29</sup> As there is no way of gaining access to the ‘myth-kitty’ of medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians other than through examining our extant texts, I have been forced to infer the mental store of individual saga writers and their reasons for selecting specific elements of that store for incorporation in their works from the works themselves, and in this regard, I have conceded to circularity. In the absence of other sources, we have no choice but to infer the circumstances of a text’s composition from the text itself and apply the product of our inferences to the text; at the very least, it is safer to recover usage on the basis of an individual text than it is to reconstruct the non-existent sources of that text, sources that have been lost to us through the quintessentially human drive of generation.

Our understanding of Old Norse myth is indebted to Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* and the eddic poetry preserved in the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4<sup>10</sup>) and a handful of other manuscripts. Snorri’s *Edda* is generally considered to have been written in c. 1225 and

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines’, p. 419.

<sup>29</sup> D. J. Enright (ed.), *Poets of the 1950’s: An Anthology of New English Verse* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd, 1955), p. 78.

comprises three main parts known as *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*, and *Háttatal*, the first of which begins with a prologue.<sup>30</sup> In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri provides an overview of Old Norse myth arranged chronologically from Creation to Ragnarøk (Doom of the Gods), in which three manifestations of the god Óðinn named Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði tell stories about the Old Norse gods in response to the questions of a Swedish king called Gylfi. This section of the *Edda* functions as a necessary prelude to *Skáldskaparmál*, a manual exemplifying poetic language and the standard kennings and *heiti* (synonyms) employed in skaldic poetry, occasionally interspersed with accounts of myths and legends not provided in *Gylfaginning*, such as the myth of Þórr's fight with the giant Hrungnir (ch. 17) and the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (Slayer of Fáfnir; chs 40-41). Since many of the kennings and *heiti* recorded in *Skáldskaparmál* are mythological in origin and depend upon knowledge of myths for their interpretation, the account of the myths provided in *Gylfaginning* is an essential first step towards the deciphering of skaldic poetry. *Háttatal*, the final part of the *Edda*, is a guide to the various forms of *dróttkvætt*, the most common metre used in skaldic poetry, and a repository of verses employing these metrical forms composed specifically for inclusion in *Háttatal*.

The Codex Regius was compiled somewhere in Iceland in the 1270s and contains twenty-nine poems, some of which are prosimetrical, and two short pieces of prose.<sup>31</sup> The first eleven poems are considered to be mythological in character and the remainder heroic, a distinction that appears to be indicated in the manuscript itself by the large initial inked in red that begins *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*.<sup>32</sup> The first of the mythological poems is *Völuspá*, in which a *völva* (prophetess) provides an allusive account of Old Norse myth from Creation to

<sup>30</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007); all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>31</sup> For discussion of the Codex Regius as a manuscript, see *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, I, pp. 19-23.

<sup>32</sup> *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 247-58; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text. For the red initial, see *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, p. 246.

the end of the world and its aftermath; as a poem in which a linear chronology is imposed on Old Norse myth, it is significant not only as an account of the myths, but also as a text that helps us to understand the relations between them.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent mythological poems, such as *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, take the form of wisdom dialogues, while others narrate stories about the exploits of the gods, including the story of Skírnir's coercive seduction of the giantess Gerðr on behalf of Freyr in *Skírnismál* and an account of the theft and reclamation of Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir in *Þrymskviða*.<sup>34</sup> Most of the heroic poems are concerned with the story of the legendary hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and his wife Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, detailing Sigurðr's heroic maturation and the tragic history of Guðrún and her family following Sigurðr's death, but the sequence is disrupted in the Codex Regius by a lacuna of eight missing leaves. Other eddic poems preserved elsewhere, such as *Grottasöngur*, are similar in theme and style to the poems of the Codex Regius and are generally included in editions alongside these poems.<sup>35</sup>

In the absence of other records, scholars of Old Norse myth are forced to rely on Snorri's *Edda* and eddic poetry for access to the mythological traditions of Iceland and Scandinavia; historians of religion, too, must depend on these texts in reconstructing pagan beliefs and practices. Consequently, the general approach to the *Edda* and eddic poetry has been to treat them as 'sources' of Old Norse myth, and a dedicated section outlining these sources is almost obligatory in studies of the mythological traditions of Iceland and Scandinavia.<sup>36</sup> When we treat Snorri's *Edda* and eddic poetry as sources of Old Norse myth, however, it is easy to forget their status as autonomous texts. Attention is so focused on

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<sup>33</sup> *Völuspá*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, I, pp. 291-307; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>34</sup> *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, and *Þrymskviða*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, I, pp. 356-66, 367-79, 380-88, and 422-27 respectively; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

<sup>35</sup> *Grottasöngur*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 431-36; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>36</sup> In Turville-Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North*, for example, the first chapter is devoted to 'The Sources', and the opening chapter of Abram's *Myths of the Pagan North* similarly discusses 'The Sources of Norse Mythology'. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, ch. 1 and Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, ch. 1.

recuperating and reconstructing the original forms and meanings of the myths narrated or referred to in these texts that the particularities of their representation are easily overlooked. Given the focus of my study on the aesthetic and ideological principles governing the incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas, it would be critically inconsistent to ignore the aesthetic and ideological principles governing the manifestation of myths in Snorri's *Edda* and eddic poetry and employ them without qualification as standards against which to measure the mythological content integrated in saga narrative. As a text composed in the thirteenth century, for instance, but preserved in no manuscript earlier than the fourteenth century, Snorri's *Edda* must be considered as a reconstruction and smoothing of mythological traditions by a Christian writer whose thirteenth-century Christian worldview would have influenced his work.<sup>37</sup> Snorri's presentation of a threefold Óðinn in *Gylfaginning*, for example, has been attributed to his desire to present the god in terms of a mock-Trinity, and Snorri's division of the elves into 'ljósálfar' (light-elves) and 'dökkálfar' (dark-elves) in ch. 17 of *Gylfaginning* has been influenced by traditions concerning good and bad angels.<sup>38</sup> As such, Snorri's *Edda* is unreliable as a guide to pagan beliefs and practices, and his account of Old Norse myth should be viewed as a thirteenth-century understanding of the mythological traditions of Iceland and Scandinavia.

The issue of dating is even more problematic in the case of eddic poetry, most of which is preserved in the late-thirteenth-century Codex Regius, but is at the same time believed to be older than its manuscript contexts or at least to contain poetry older than other

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<sup>37</sup> On the manuscript context of Snorri's *Edda*, see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. xxviii-xxxii.

<sup>38</sup> Rory McTurk, 'Fooling Gylfi: Who Tricks Who?', *Alvíssmál*, 3 (1994), 3-18 (p. 11) and Anne Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi*, Skrifter utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-akademi i Oslo, II. Hist.-filos. klasse, ny serie, 4 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), pp. 22-26 and 35-38.

parts of its extant versions.<sup>39</sup> In the versions of *Völuspá* preserved in the Codex Regius and Hauksbók, for example, a list of dwarf names traditionally referred to as *Dvergatal* by scholars is incorporated in the texts of the poem (vv. 10-16). It is believed that this list was not originally part of *Völuspá*, but it is impossible to determine the transmission history of the poem, what stage of that history the Codex Regius and Hauksbók versions represent, and at what point *Dvergatal* came to be interpolated in *Völuspá*.<sup>40</sup> As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued, all we can say with any certainty of the eddic poetry preserved in the Codex Regius is that it had a thirteenth-century audience, and it is therefore in its thirteenth-century context that I make use of the eddic poetry from this manuscript in this study.<sup>41</sup> In the case of both eddic poetry and Snorri's *Edda*, then, we have a body of Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts with a central role in thirteenth-century literate culture, which means they were current at the same time that sagas were being written.<sup>42</sup> As a result, I use these texts not as sources of something older than themselves also represented in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, but as contemporary examples of mythological texts in which patterns, characters, and motifs similar to or different from those employed in the sagas are also used.

Although other types of saga are considered in this thesis, its focus is primarily on the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. This is partly for practical reasons of time and word limit, but also to engage with recent developments in saga scholarship that have contributed to the reassessment of the two types of saga. Historically, the *fornaldarsögur* were thought to have been written later than the *Íslendingasögur*, predominantly in the fourteenth and

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<sup>39</sup> Terry Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture, 31 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 82-100 (pp. 93-95).

<sup>40</sup> Ursula Dronke (ed. and trans.), *The Poetic Edda*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1969-2011), II: *Mythological Poems*, pp. 38, 67-68, and 122 and Judy Quinn, 'Editing the Edda: The Case of *Völuspá*', *Scripta Islandica*, 51 (2000), 69-92 (p. 76).

<sup>41</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "'Gerðit hon...sem konor aðrar": Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry', in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 117-35 (p. 118).

<sup>42</sup> On the traditional dating of the sagas, see Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988), pp. 21-24.

fifteenth centuries, and were considered to be unforgivably inferior to the ‘classical’ *Íslendingasögur* composed primarily in the thirteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Today, many scholars believe that the *fornaldarsögur* are much earlier than was previously thought, in some cases being composed contemporaneously with the *Íslendingasögur* and having circulated in oral forms before being committed to manuscript.<sup>44</sup> As a result of the dismissive attitudes of earlier scholars towards the *fornaldarsögur*, these sagas were for a long time neglected by saga scholarship, which was dominated by the study of the *Íslendingasögur*; only recently have scholars begun to view the *fornaldarsögur* more favourably, and my selection of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* as the primary texts for my study is intended to contribute to the current critical interest in the *fornaldarsögur*.

As their name suggests, the *Íslendingasögur* detail the lives of Icelanders and are primarily set in Iceland. These sagas have repeatedly been praised for their naturalistic and objective representation of Icelandic society, offering as they do accounts of family histories, regional feuds, and legal disputes, many of which have some connection to historical persons and events.<sup>45</sup> It is common for the *Íslendingasögur* to begin with genealogical information and to recount the exploits of the ancestors of their protagonists in Norway before the settlement of Iceland (c. 870-930); the action of most of the *Íslendingasögur* takes place during the Settlement period and the decades of the Icelandic Commonwealth preceding

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<sup>43</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon remarks in the prologue to his edition of *Sturlunga saga* that the *fornaldarsögur* ‘are the lowest and most miserable productions of Icelandic pens.’ *Sturlunga saga: including the ‘Íslendinga saga’ of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works*, ed. Guðbrand Vigfússon, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), I, p. cxcvi. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 22-24 and Gottskálk Jensson, ‘Were the Earliest *fornaldarsögur* Written in Latin?’, in *Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2009), pp. 79-91 (p. 80).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Gottskálk Jensson, ‘Were the Earliest *fornaldarsögur* Written in Latin?’. Torfi H. Tulinius surveys the arguments in favour of an earlier dating, but he sticks at the second half of the thirteenth century because attempts to date the *fornaldarsögur* are ‘stymied’; he does, however, accommodate the ‘slow emergence’ of the genre. Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik, The Viking Collection, 13 (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), pp. 46-63 (p. 55).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 207-08.

Iceland's conversion to Christianity in 999 or 1000, though the events of some of these sagas also cross over into the period following the conversion.

By contrast, the action of the *fornaldarsögur* takes place primarily in Norway before the settlement of Iceland, sometimes long before it, but the protagonists of these sagas also travel to more exotic lands, some of which are real, such as Russia, while others, such as Risaland (Giant-land), are fictional. A characteristic frequently noted as one of the defining elements of the *fornaldarsögur* is their extensive employment of mythological and legendary content, not only in terms of the appearance of gods, giants, trolls, elves, and dwarfs, but also of the wholesale recasting of myths and legends, as we find, for example, in *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*; indeed, the mythological and legendary character of the *fornaldarsögur* is often presented as the most significant distinction between these sagas and the realistic *Íslendingasögur*, as it is in Abram's description of the genre:<sup>46</sup>

The *fornaldar sögur* are populated by fire-breathing dragons, semi-human heroes, trolls and monsters and kings with magic swords: they are a world away from the predominantly realistic representation of Icelandic society that we find in the *Íslendinga sögur*.<sup>47</sup>

It is perhaps unfair to select for critique a description intended for a non-specialist audience, which necessarily simplifies and homogenizes complex concepts and ideas, but there is reason to object to the practice of presenting such clear-cut distinctions between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. The distinction drawn by Abram between the two types of saga is founded on the incorporation of mythological and legendary content in the *fornaldarsögur*, the dragons, trolls, and magic swords he identifies, and the contrast he delineates with 'the predominantly realistic representation of Icelandic society' in the

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<sup>46</sup> *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), iv, pp. 319-44; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>47</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 23-24.

*Íslendingasögur* suggests a fundamental distinction between fantasy and realism. The key word here, however, is the adverb ‘predominantly’, the implication being that not all the *Íslendingasögur* offer realistic representations of Icelandic society and that the common distinction drawn between these sagas and the *fornaldarsögur* is therefore not absolute; indeed, Margaret Clunies Ross has offered an important qualification to earlier views of the realism and objectivity of the *Íslendingasögur* as a narrative mode, rightly arguing that more careful examination of these sagas reveals that they are ‘much more partial and accommodating to non-realistic elements than many earlier scholars have allowed.’<sup>48</sup> Sticking with Abram’s ‘fire-breathing dragons, semi-human heroes, trolls and monsters and kings with magic swords’, we might note that Björn Hítðelakappi (Champion of Hítðalr) kills a dragon, though not a fire-breathing one, in the company of King Knútr Sveinsson in ch. 5 of *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, Kveldúlfr Bjálfason is said to be a ‘hamrammr’ (shape-changer) in ch. 1 of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Bárðr Snæfellsáss (God of Snæfell) is descended from trolls and giants in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (ch. 1), Grettir Ásmundarson defeats the monstrous revenant Glámr in ch. 35 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and Miðfjarðar-Skeggi in *Kormáks saga* (chs 9-11) possesses an enchanted sword once owned by the legendary King Hrólfr kraki (Pole).<sup>49</sup> Given the presence of mythological and legendary content in these and other *Íslendingasögur*, we should be careful in drawing the lines between these sagas and the *fornaldarsögur*; as I demonstrate in the course of this study, mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs are as much a part of the *Íslendingasögur* as

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<sup>48</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 3 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), pp. 109-211, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslensk fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), pp. 99-172, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), pp. 1-290, and *Kormáks saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslensk fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 201-302; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

they are of the *fornaldarsögur*, and there are as many similarities as differences between the treatment of these patterns, characters, and motifs in the two genres.

Among the more important studies of Old Norse myth to date are Turville-Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North*, McKinnell's *Both One and Many* and *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, and Jens Peter Schjødt's *Initiation between Two Worlds*, and this study has benefited in varying degrees from each of them.<sup>50</sup> Turville-Petre's work of 1964 provides a broad survey of the mythological traditions of Iceland and Scandinavia and is an excellent reference guide on the subject of Old Norse myth in which a series of chapters are dedicated to specific mythological figures and aspects of pagan worship. It suffers, however, from the way in which Turville-Petre assumes that mythological texts necessarily relate to religious belief and practice, and it has to be said that he does not always provide detailed analysis of the material he considers, though this owes partly to the broad scope of his study.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, there are a number of oversights in terms of the mythological beings covered by his chapters, not least of which is the absence of a chapter on giants; admittedly, giants are covered in the chapter on Þórr in a section entitled 'Thór and the Giants', but as the subtitle suggests, they are examined in relation to their adversary Þórr, which is certainly not the only way in which giants were conceived of in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.<sup>52</sup>

McKinnell's understanding of the Old Norse mythological system as being particularly fluid in *Both One and Many* accords best with my own opinions on the nature of Old Norse myth; his analysis of the variation discernible in the mythological traditions of Iceland and Scandinavia, such as those relating to the god Loki and the poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, has shown the importance of paying attention to the particularities of individual

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<sup>50</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, McKinnell, *Both One and Many* and *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), and Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. Victor Hansen, The Viking Collection, 17 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, ch. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 76-80.

representations of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs, and it is in this vein that my own study continues.<sup>53</sup> *Meeting the Other* has been distinctly less useful to me, for while McKinnell restates his earlier opinions relating to the fluidity and variation evident in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, he proceeds to use this fluidity and variation to reconstruct the ‘original’ forms of a series of narratives; these reconstructions are intriguing, but they are nothing more than hypothetical, being evidenced in their entirety by no extant witnesses and therefore precluding the possibility of conclusive proof.<sup>54</sup>

Since Schjødt examines Old Norse myth from the perspective of a historian of religion, *Initiation between Two Worlds* is not especially relevant to my purposes here, my concern being the incorporation of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas, rather than reconstruction of pagan beliefs and practices. His study is interesting insofar as it demonstrates how common initiatory patterns are in our extant Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, but I am not so sure that the patterns he finds necessarily provide evidence of pagan initiation rites; they might just as easily reflect traditional narrative patterns with no relation to ritual practice.

The most significant contribution to the study of Old Norse myth in recent times, however, and the one that has proved most useful to me, has been the landmark examination of Old Norse myth by Clunies Ross in her two-volume *Prolonged Echoes*.<sup>55</sup> Heavily influenced by the work of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clunies Ross provides a structuralist interpretation of Old Norse myth and demonstrates the way in which mythological patterns of thought formed an integral element of medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian society’s conceptions of themselves.

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<sup>53</sup> McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 20-26 and chs 2 and 4 respectively.

<sup>54</sup> McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, pp. 19, 25, and 34.

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, The Viking Collection, 7 and 10, 2 vols (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994-98).

As is to be expected from a work influenced by structuralism, the belief that individual myths must be considered in relation to the mythological system as a whole is central to her thesis:

Above all, individual myths need to be considered in the context of the whole complex of myths that a society gives expression to at any particular time, if the richness of their meanings is to be perceived. Even in the case of Old Norse myth, where the context of use is often only dimly perceptible, myths cannot be considered on their own or out of a more general context in which they are part, and a most central part, of early Scandinavian society's view of itself in the world.<sup>56</sup>

Clunies Ross is right to stress the importance of considering individual myths in the light of the mythological system as a whole; a giant appearing in one myth, for example, cannot be properly understood without comparing it to giants appearing in other myths. Her approach proves especially fruitful in the first volume of her study, in which she examines the wider structures operative in what she calls the 'Old Norse mythic world', a world Clunies Ross reconstructs on the basis of our extant Old Norse-Icelandic texts.<sup>57</sup> In the second volume of her study, she expertly demonstrates the employment of conceptual patterns central in the 'Old Norse mythic world' in a small selection of medieval Icelandic texts, concluding that Old Norse myth provided deeply embedded cognitive frameworks whose significance transcended religious conversion and which were 'very good to think with and good to use as schemas for the representation of the major concerns of human life.'<sup>58</sup> In line with the conclusions of Clunies Ross, this study takes the view that mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs incorporated in saga narrative is proof of the continued relevance of the concepts and themes mediated by Old Norse myth to medieval Northern society.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, II, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, p. 191.

<sup>59</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, II, ch. 8.

It may be objected, however, that the incorporation of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in saga narratives composed in medieval Christian Iceland does not necessarily prove that they were incorporated because they retained their cognitive utility and demonstrates instead a concerted antiquarianism, the preservation of old stories and literary devices simply because they were old. Indeed, O'Donoghue has countered the suggestion that Snorri composed the *Edda* because Old Norse myth 'somehow 'spoke' to the historical condition of thirteenth-century Iceland' and argues that 'it is at least as likely that Snorri acted for antiquarian reasons'.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, the antiquarian interests of Snorri cannot be denied; the incorporation of verses from eddic poems, such as *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*, in *Gylfaginning*, not to mention Snorri's collection of the skaldic poetry recorded in *Skáldskaparmál* to exemplify traditional poetic devices, is indicative of a desire to preserve that which is old, and his upbringing at the centre of learning at Oddi would doubtlessly have steeped him in the antiquarianism of scholars and historians from an early age.<sup>61</sup> The case for purely antiquarian reasons for the preservation of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas, however, is much more difficult to make. For a scholarly work like Snorri's *Edda*, which provides a comprehensive overview of Old Norse myth with a view to explicating the mythological kennings and references in skaldic poetry, it is relatively easy to admit the author's antiquarianism, but for the sagas, in which mythological and legendary content is not the primary concern of their authors, but is instead woven into fictional narratives, some of which have a historical basis, it is much harder to establish antiquarian motives. The sheer fact of its often seamless incorporation in saga narratives about non-mythological subjects suggests its important cognitive role in medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian society's conceptions of themselves, and there is evidence to support this conjecture from the field of cognitive psychology.

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<sup>60</sup> O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, '*Skáldskaparmál*': *Snorri Sturluson's 'ars poetica' and Medieval Theories of Language*, The Viking Collection, 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), p. 9.

In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner examines the narrative mode of thought, which he distinguishes from what he calls the ‘paradigmatic’ mode.<sup>62</sup> Both modes provide ‘distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality’, and while the two are complementary, they are nonetheless ‘irreducible to one another.’<sup>63</sup> Bruner associates the paradigmatic mode with the logical and scientific (‘logico-scientific’ is his alternative descriptor for this mode) and argues that ‘[i]t employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized, and related one to the other to form a system.’<sup>64</sup> By contrast, the narrative mode ‘deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that marks their course’ and ‘strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place’; applying the narrative mode imaginatively produces ‘good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily “true”) historical accounts’, while applying the paradigmatic mode imaginatively ‘leads to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument, and empirical discovery guided by reasoned hypothesis.’<sup>65</sup> On the basis of these distinctions, we might assign the universal aspects of myth, the mental structures common to all humans and therefore discernible in the stories they tell, to the paradigmatic mode of thought and the particularities of representations of myths, both culturally specific manifestations of myths and representations by individual artists within a specific culture, to the narrative mode.

Bruner is heavily influenced by the work of twentieth-century American philosopher Nelson Goodman. According to Goodman in his *Ways of Worldmaking*, ‘[t]he overwhelming case against perception without conception, the pure given, absolute immediacy, the innocent eye, substance as substratum, has been so fully and frequently set forth – by Berkeley, Kant,

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<sup>62</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), ch. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, p. 13.

Cassirer, Gombrich, Bruner, and many others – as to need no restatement’, and the world we inhabit is therefore the product of our minds.<sup>66</sup> In Goodman’s view, our conception of the world is dependent on ‘worlds already on hand’, and this corresponds with Michael Tomasello’s work on the cultural origins of human cognition, in which he writes:

modern children encounter and interact with their physical and social worlds almost totally through the mediating lenses of preexisting cultural artifacts, which embody something of the inventors’ and users’ intentional relations to the world when using them.<sup>67</sup>

Each successive generation, then, defines itself in relation to the generations that have preceded it, utilizing and incorporating the cultural and ideological constructs of their forebears in constructing their own. As well as admitting the role of the Sciences in constructing conceptual worlds, Goodman demonstrates that these worlds can also be created by artists in the composition of their works, and in the case of writers engaging in this cognitive procedure, the act of world-making can be considered a fundamental process of the narrative mode of thought delineated by Bruner.<sup>68</sup> With this in mind, the incorporation of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in saga narrative can be considered as being an example of the world-making processes of medieval Icelandic writers; by using the mythological conceptual worlds they inherited, saga authors actively incorporated those worlds in worlds of their own making and therefore employed Old Norse myth for its cognitive utility in conceiving of medieval Iceland and its inhabitants.

In this study, I demonstrate the cognitive utility of Old Norse myth in constructing the conceptual worlds of the sagas and facilitating expression of the ideological preoccupations of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. In this way, I build on the work of Clunies Ross by

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<sup>66</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Harvester Studies in Philosophy, 5 (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 6 and Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 202.

<sup>68</sup> Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

providing a broad analysis of the incorporation of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *formaldarsögur* to complement her selective analysis of a handful of texts in the second volume of *Prolonged Echoes*.<sup>69</sup> As significant as the work of Clunies Ross has been in the study of Old Norse myth, it does have its limitations. Particularly problematic is her construction of a hypothetical ‘Old Norse mythic world’ from the collation of mythological references and episodes from a variety of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, among which there are differences of detail and purpose. By reconstructing an ‘Old Norse mythic world’ in this way, the particular contexts of individual representations of myths can easily disappear in pursuit of a totalizing system, and Clunies Ross’s insistence that individual myths must be considered in the context of the whole mythological system of which they are part, however valid, runs the risk of prioritizing general trends over specific representations if it is not balanced by detailed consideration of the differences between versions of myths, as well as their similarities.<sup>70</sup> Throughout this study, I deliberately avoid assuming that all representations of a myth or mythological patterns, characters, and motifs must necessarily reflect the wider structures and patterns of an ‘Old Norse mythic world’, at all times considering such content in the context of the narrative in which it is incorporated and the specific aesthetic and ideological principles that have influenced its representation. There were no doubt conceptual circumscriptions that might, for example, predispose writers to use Óðinn as a participant in a wisdom contest or Þórr as a traveller into Jötunheimar, but these mythological paradigms could be and were adapted for distinctive aesthetic and ideological purposes.

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<sup>69</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, II.

<sup>70</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, p. 14.

### *Organization of this Study*

Chapters are arranged thematically in this study to demonstrate both the range of the mythological and legendary content present in the sagas and the various aesthetic and ideological principles governing its selection and adaptation. The first chapter examines the representation of the pagan past in saga narrative and the tendency of saga authors to euhemerize and historicize Old Norse myth to recuperate the ancestry of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. Óðinn occupies a central role in these strategies of recuperation as the progenitor of royal houses in medieval Europe and Scandinavia and the unsettling repository of pagan stories and forms an integral part of a typological model of right rulership presented by Snorri in the Prologue to his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*.<sup>71</sup> As we shall see in the course of Chapter 1, the thematic importance of landownership, fertility, and the right to rule is prominent in representations of paganism in the sagas, particularly in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Víga-Glúms saga*, and demonstrates the way in which Old Norse myth was essential to medieval Icelanders in conceiving of the Settlement period and the various power structures dominant in society.<sup>72</sup>

Chapter 2 focuses on the associations between Óðinn, heroes, and nobility in the *fornaldarsögur* and begins with a detailed analysis of Óðinn's appearances in *Völsunga saga*, in which the god is repeatedly instrumental in the heroic and dynastic success of the Völsungar.<sup>73</sup> The author of *Völsunga saga* employs the multifaceted god to communicate an ideological perspective relating to the structure of society, according to which both noble

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<sup>71</sup> *Ynglinga saga*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit, 26-28, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1941-51), i, pp. 9-83; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>72</sup> *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslensk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), pp. 95-133 and *Víga-Glúms saga*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslensk fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), pp. 1-98; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

<sup>73</sup> *Völsunga saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, i, pp. 107-218; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

birth and heroic accomplishment are prerequisite for dynastic supremacy, and in doing so makes use of the many roles the god occupies in eddic poetry. In the remaining *fornaldarsögur* in which Óðinn appears, his functions are largely circumscribed to those relating to battle and heroic instruction, and the chapter considers the way in which this circumscription reduces the god to a traditional figure of folklore, whose sphere of operation indicates an interest in appropriate forms of conduct and behaviour and the proper application of aristocratic power.

In Chapter 3, Odinic themes and motifs employed in the depiction of poets in the *skáldasögur* (sagas of poets) are attributed to the desire to aggrandize the lives of skaldic poets by presenting them as Odinic figures and thereby elevate indigenous poetic culture by means of its mythological resonance. At the same time, the tendency of previous scholars to exaggerate the Odinic status of some poets whose lives are recounted in the *skáldasögur* is resisted, with detailed commentary afforded to the non-Odinic mythological content discernible in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Kormáks saga*.<sup>74</sup> The heroicization of poets is also demonstrated through comparing poetic exchanges between rival poets to the heroic flyting and the eddic wisdom dialogues in which Óðinn participates, as well as through exploring the parallels between poet-beloved and hero-*valkyrja* relationships.

The fourth chapter of this study is devoted to the representation of giants in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* and explores their signification of alternative and decentralizing ideological perspectives. Genealogical descent from the giants (in chs 1-3 of *Orkneyinga saga*, for example) appears to have been a commonplace for protagonists and heroes whose behaviour is decidedly antisocial, though not always negatively so, while the depiction of lands belonging to giants (such as Þórisdalr in ch. 61 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*) was evidently an opportunity to imagine other worlds, other social

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<sup>74</sup> *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 49-107; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

structures, with which their own could be compared and contrasted.<sup>75</sup> As will become apparent in the course of this chapter, a wide range of giants are portrayed in the sagas, including the monstrous giants in chs 5 and 6 of *Qrvar-Odds saga* and Dofri the mountain-dwelling foster-father in ch. 1 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, and we should not be tempted, therefore, to interpret all giants in the sagas homogeneously.<sup>76</sup>

Chapter 5 focuses on the representation of magical practices and practitioners in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. Conceptual similarities between the representation of magic and its practitioners in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts and the *Íslendingasögur*, such as the association of sorcery with ethnic otherness, are discussed in this chapter, as is the tendency of the authors of the *fornaldarsögur* to conceive of sorcerers and *vødur* in mythological terms, these figures often being presented as comparable in status to minor mythological races, such as trolls and dwarfs. In both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, the operation of magic is frequently representative of disruptive forces in society, including antisocial foreigners, invading armies from abroad, and the exogamous bride not assimilated to the tribe of her husband, and the ideological significance of magic as a multivalent signifier of social and political anxieties is explored in the course of this chapter.

Throughout this study, the employment of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in post-conversion texts is repeatedly shown to be a highly self-conscious phenomenon subject to the aesthetic and ideological preoccupations of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. It may be difficult to ascertain the origins of much of this mythological and legendary content and its possible relations to pagan belief and practice, but its incorporation in Old Norse-Icelandic texts from the twelfth century onwards is of greater

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<sup>75</sup> *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslensk fornrit, 34 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), pp. 1-300; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>76</sup> *Qrvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 199-363; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

interest to the scholar of literature, demonstrating as it does not only the interpretative ingenuity of medieval Icelandic writers, but also the extent to which the world of medieval Icelanders was indebted to the mythological and legendary worlds of their ancestors.

## Chapter 1

### Incorporating the Pagan Past: Chieftains, Kings, and Patriarchs

In converting pagans to Christianity, the Church was forced to account for the existence of pagan gods and incorporate the pagan past in its theology. Harsher assessments of the pagan gods cast them as demons whose powers were diabolical rather than divine, and those who worshipped these gods were either duped into serving the devil or complicit in his treachery. Euhemeristic interpretations, on the other hand, were not so damning and provided a real-world origin for the deities worshipped by pagans, who were said to be historical humans with such exceptional gifts that they were elevated to godhead after their deaths.<sup>77</sup> In the Old English homily *De falsis diis*, for example, which was translated into Old Norse-Icelandic as *Um þat hvaðan otrú hófst*, preserved in the thirteenth-century Hauksbók, the Anglo-Saxon cleric Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955-1010) writes that heathens ‘fengon to wurðianne mislice entas and men him to godum, þa þe mihtige wæron on woruldlicum geþincðum, and egefulle on life, þeah þe hy leofodon fullice’ (took to worshipping various giants and men as gods, those who were mighty in worldly matters, and awe-inspiring in life, though they lived shamefully; ll. 100-03); among the giants and men adopted as gods, Ælfric notes Jove and Mercury, whom he identifies with Þórr and Óðinn respectively (ll. 141-43).<sup>78</sup> For the Christian converts of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, whose most illustrious ancestors were pagans, euhemeristic interpretations were preferable to demonological theories, reducing as they did the culpability of their forefathers; it was less blameworthy to have mistakenly worshipped extraordinary humans than it was to have embraced the agents of

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<sup>77</sup> Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 41 (1969), 1-29 (pp. 4-5).

<sup>78</sup> Ælfric, *De falsis diis*, in *Ælfric’s ‘De falsis diis’: A Source-analogue Study with Editions and Translations*, ed. and trans. Diane Elizabeth Szurszewski (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 181-206.

Satan. Descendants could retain a certain degree of pride in the achievements of their ancestors, provided that they acknowledged the limitations necessarily entailed in their ignorance of God.

Representations of pagans and their worship in the sagas, all of which are post-conversion texts, were influenced by both the demonological and euhemeristic interpretations adopted by the Church in its attempt to interpret the pagan past. One of the most elaborate euhemeristic accounts of the pagan gods in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is to be found in the early chapters of Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, the opening saga of his compilation of *konungasögur* known as *Heimskringla*.<sup>79</sup> In *Ynglinga saga*, the gods are presented as humans possessed of remarkable abilities, and the mythological patterns, characters, and motifs Snorri uses for his characterization of these highly accomplished individuals suggest an interest in the ideology of rulership. As we shall see in the first section of this chapter, Snorri employs Óðinn, Njörðr, and Freyr in formulating a model of rulership, suggesting that mythological and legendary traditions were for him a means of exploring contemporary constructions of power and sovereignty. Similar concerns motivate the depiction of powerful pagans and their worship in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Víga-Glúms saga*. In both of these sagas, worship of Freyr is apparently essential to the establishment of secular and religious authority in pre-Christian Iceland, and traditions associating Freyr with the themes of landownership and fertility are brought to bear on the portrayal of authority in these narratives.

Mythological patterns, characters, and motifs evidently also had a role to play in examining the position of Christianity and the Church in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, particularly in relation to the dependence of Christianity's success on monarchical power. In *Þorvalds þáttur tásalda*, for example, the potentially destabilizing threat posed to centralizing Christian monarchy by recalcitrant pagans is configured in terms of the threat posed to the

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<sup>79</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

gods by giants living in peripheral locations, while in a number of *þættir* involving either King Óláfr Tryggvason (c. 960s-1000) or King Óláfr Haraldsson (c. 995-1030) and a pagan or demonic storyteller, such as *Norna-Gests þáttur* and *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, stories of the pagan past are incorporated in the narrative to explore not only the nature of religious conversion and its aftermath, but also the missionary role of Christian kings.<sup>80</sup> We may infer from these examples that representations of pagans and their religious practices in the sagas offered the means not only to explore the pagan history of Iceland and Scandinavia, as *Hrafnkels saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* would suggest, but also to conceive of and interrogate the relationship between paganism and Christianity and its connection to contemporary power structures, such as chieftaincy and monarchy. In the course of this chapter, the role of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in representations of the pagan past in a selection of texts will be examined in detail, and a case will be made for the cognitive utility of mythological traditions in interrogating the ideology of rulership.

#### *Euhemerizing the Gods in Snorri's Prologue to the 'Edda' and 'Ynglinga saga'*

In both his Prologue to the *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri provides a euhemeristic account of the pagan gods.<sup>81</sup> The gods are presented as exceptionally gifted humans, and the mythological patterns, characters, and motifs Snorri selects for his depiction of the gods are restricted to the exceptional abilities traditionally ascribed to Óðinn, such as his magical repertoire, and traditions concerned with rulership, including those related to war, conquest,

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<sup>80</sup> *Þorvalds þáttur tásalda*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 117-26 and *Norna-Gests þáttur* and *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, I, pp. 305-35 and II, pp. 135-41 respectively; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text..

<sup>81</sup> On the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda*, see Anthony Faulkes, 'Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, The University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 4 (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 283-314 and Cyril de Pins, 'The Fantastical Theology of Snorri Sturluson: A Reading of the Prologue of *Snorra Edda*', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> August, 2006*, ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick, 2 vols (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), II, pp. 769-78.

peace, and prosperity. Indeed, Snorri's incorporation of mythological traditions in the opening chapters of *Ynglinga saga* advances a typological model of right rulership, according to which the turbulence of imperial foundation must at last be succeeded by the comforts of political stability.

According to Snorri in his Prologue to the *Edda* (chs 1-2), the reconciliation between God and mankind in the aftermath of the Flood was short-lived. Eventually, mankind became more concerned with its own wealth and glory and neglected obedience to God, just as Adam and Eve had done previously. In the absence of faithful men and women to pass on knowledge of God to future generations, the name of God was forgotten, but because God had granted them *speki* (wisdom; ch. 1), they were still able to understand the things of earth and sky. The longevity and ordered working of natural phenomena and the heavenly bodies led mankind to conclude that some 'stjórnari' (controller; ch. 1) must be responsible for their regulation, but their understanding of these matters were only partial because of their ignorance of God.

Later in the Prologue (chs 4 and 9-11), Snorri's presentation of what is essentially a theory of natural religion is combined with a euhemeristic account of the pagan gods of Iceland and Scandinavia.<sup>82</sup> The descent of Óðinn is traced back to Tror, the son of King Munon or Mennon and Troan, the daughter of King Priam of Troy. Snorri identifies Tror with Þórr, and the location of the Æsir's origins in the royal house of the legendary city of Troy provides the first indication that the Æsir were not gods, but exceptional humans descended from a heroic classical dynasty. Consequently, Óðinn is described as 'ágætr maðr af speki ok allri atgervi' (a man renowned for wisdom and all accomplishments; ch. 9), and his possession of 'speki', the same earthly understanding said to have been granted to mankind by God earlier in the Prologue, identifies Óðinn as one of the very men whose

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<sup>82</sup> On the theory of natural religion and its influence on the representation of pagans and paganism in the sagas, see Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen'.

knowledge of the world is limited by ignorance of God. One of Óðinn's accomplishments was the gift of prophecy, and using this gift he discerned that his name would be remembered in the northern part of the world. He left his home in Tyrkland with his people and many treasures and began to establish his empire in the north. He gave to his sons East Saxony, Westphalia, the land of the Franks, and Reiðgotaland, and from these sons are descended the royal houses of Europe and Scandinavia, making Óðinn the progenitor of the major heroic and princely dynasties of the medieval world. Eventually, Óðinn settled in Sweden and founded his kingdom on the principles of his native Troy, after which he gave Norway to his son Sæmingr and made his son Yngvi king of Sweden. It is said that during the journey such glory was told about them 'svá at þeir þóttu líkari goðum en mǫnnum' (that they seemed more like gods than men; ch. 10).

The account of the gods in *Ynglinga saga* is very similar to the one Snorri provides in the Prologue to his *Edda*, and again, Óðinn is presented as a mighty conqueror. According to ch. 2 of the saga, 'Óðinn var hermaðr mikill ok mjök víðföfull ok eignaðisk mǫrg ríki' (Óðinn was a mighty warrior and very widely-travelled and had conquered many kingdoms). He was so 'sigrsæll' (victorious) that he won every battle, and his men believed they would have victory if he laid his hands upon them before battle. Moreover, Óðinn dedicated to himself 'alla vǫpndauða menn' (all men killed by weapons; ch. 9). Óðinn's association with battle and warfare is well-attested elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and his roles as god of battle and chooser of the slain in our surviving mythological texts have clearly provided Snorri with the foundation for his depiction of the euhemerized Óðinn as a conqueror and military leader in the Prologue to his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*. In ch. 20 of *Gylfaginning*, for example, it is said that all those who fall in battle are taken to Valhöll to become Óðinn's 'óskasynir' (adopted sons), forming an elite band of warriors called the *einherjar* (peerless warriors) who fight by day and feast by night perpetually until Ragnarök,

when they will aid the gods in their battle against the giants (chs 38-41). It is unsurprising, then, that Óðinn becomes the patron of great heroes in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, not only in eddic poetry and prose, where he functions as Sinfjötli's psychopomp in the prose *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, Sigurðr's teacher in *Reginismál*, and the sponsor (indirectly through his *valkyrjur*) of Helgi Hundingsbani and Helgi Hjörvarðsson in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, but also in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, most notably as the patron of Hadingus (Book 1) and Starcatherus (Book 6).<sup>83</sup> Snorri's decision to concentrate on Óðinn's prowess as a war-leader and founder of kingdoms in his euhemerized accounts of Óðinn in both the Prologue to his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* suggests that the associations between Óðinn, battle, and the hero provided the most appropriate lens through which to focalize a euhemeristic interpretation of the one-eyed god, no doubt owing to the necessary historicization effected in having mythological figures fight battles in the recognizably human world.

Despite the similarities between Snorri's two euhemerized accounts of the gods, the account in *Ynglinga saga* is more extensive and contains an elaborate outline of Óðinn's exceptional abilities not present in the Prologue to the *Edda*. We are told in ch. 6, for example, that 'Óðinn var gofgastr af qllum, ok af honum námu þeir allar íþróttirnar, því at hann kunni fyrst allar ok þó flestar' (Óðinn was the most noble of them all, and from him they [the temple-priests] learned all accomplishments, because he knew all and even most of them first). He spoke 'hendingum' (in rhyme), and the art of poetry had its beginning in Óðinn and his temple-priests, who were called 'ljóðasmiðir' (verse-smiths). Óðinn's possession of these abilities has its source in pervasive mythological traditions relating to Óðinn's wisdom and esoteric knowledge and his position as god of wisdom, which are

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<sup>83</sup> *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, *Reginismál*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 284-85, 296-302, 259-69, and 270-83 respectively and Saxo Grammaticus, 'Gesta Danorum': 'The History of the Danes', ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015); all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

central to the eddic conception of the god. Many of the eddic poems, for example, take the form of wisdom dialogues in which Óðinn is a participant, either as the opponent of a supernatural antagonist in a contest of wisdom or the interrogator in a verbal exchange in which he must force his opponent to disclose the full extent of his or her knowledge. In *Völuspá*, for example, Óðinn questions a *völva* (prophetess) on the origins of the world and its destruction at Ragnarøk, while in *Baldurs draumar*, he resurrects a dead *völva* to question her about the circumstances of the death of Baldr, the first portent of the doom of the gods.<sup>84</sup> Óðinn's interest in Ragnarøk is often at the heart of these dialogue poems and can be seen as his primary concern also in *Vafþrúðnismál*, in which Óðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir wager their heads on their wisdom (v. 19). Further associations between Óðinn and wisdom derive from his relationship with Mímir, the sagacious guardian of a well at the roots of Yggdrasill that bestows wisdom on those who drink from it. The *völva* in *Völuspá* refers to Óðinn's sacrifice of an eye in exchange for a draught from the well of Mímir (v. 28) and his consultation with the head of Mímir at the onset of Ragnarøk (v. 45), myths also included in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (chs 15 and 51 respectively; cf. Óðinn's consultation of the head of Mímir in chs 4 and 7 of *Ynglinga saga*). Óðinn's association with poetry derives from his recuperation of the mead of poetry, accounts of which are provided in *Hávamál* (vv. 13-14, 104-10, and, perhaps, 140) and Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (chs 657-58), and poets often include Odinic references in skaldic poetry (see Chapter 3).<sup>85</sup> The most elusive of myths concerning Óðinn and his pursuit of wisdom, however, appears in vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*, in which Óðinn recalls his hanging from the world-tree for nine nights, sacrificing himself to himself to gain knowledge of the runes.

<sup>84</sup> *Baldurs draumar*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 446-48; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>85</sup> *Hávamál*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 322-55; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

In *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn's wisdom is predominantly magical, whereas the nature of Óðinn's 'speki' and 'atgervi' in the Prologue to the *Edda* remains unspecified, although we may be intended to infer something of the magical from his gift of prophecy. In chs 6 and 7 of *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri provides an extensive account of Óðinn's magical repertoire. Not only is Óðinn able to discover the location of hidden treasure, but he is also a shape-shifter and a practitioner of *seiðr* (an unmanly form of magic and a practice largely restricted to priestesses for this very reason), and he knows many charms and incantations, including spells capable of blunting weapons in battle, making his enemies blind or deaf, and resurrecting the dead (compare *Hávamál*, vv. 146-63, in which Óðinn enumerates eighteen spells with similar effects).<sup>86</sup> It is important to note that most of Óðinn's magical abilities presented by Snorri are related specifically to battle and conquest, and it is likely that Snorri's intent in doing so was in part to emphasize Óðinn's position as a mighty warrior, already advanced by the incorporation of mythological traditions concerned with Óðinn and battle. The emphasis on Óðinn's magical repertoire, together with his supreme knowledge of all accomplishments and his poetic talent, can be seen as part of Snorri's project of presenting the gods as exceptionally accomplished humans; any man can be accomplished, but magical, sagacious, and poetic accomplishments are what distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary. Thomas A. DuBois has noted that practitioners of magic seem to have been highly specialized religious professionals (largely peripatetic) in the Viking Age, and it may be that the detailing of Óðinn's magical distinction is reflective of an earlier real-world attitude to the magically gifted and is therefore presented as the primary marker of Óðinn's excellence in *Ynglinga saga*.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> On *seiðr*, see Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 5 (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers; Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1935).

<sup>87</sup> Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), ch. 6.

Snorri's incorporation of mythological material in *Ynglinga saga* goes beyond the simple collocation of Óðinn with his traditional mythological attributes. Following his introduction and description of Óðinn (chs 2-3), Snorri provides an account of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir (ch. 4), notable for the absence of the more obscure details provided about this war in *Vǫluspá* (reference to this war is also made in ch. 657 of *Skáldskaparmál*). There is no reference to the mysterious attempted killing of Gullveig (v. 21), for example, nor to Heiðr's teaching of magic to women (v. 22) or Óðinn's throwing of a spear over the host on the battlefield (v. 24), and it is likely that the omission of these details is intended to strip the narrative of some of its more arcane elements in order for the myth to be historicized. Snorri's account of the war is limited to the following, after which the exchange of hostages is recounted (ch. 4):

Óðinn fór með her á hendur Vǫnum, en þeir urðu vel við ok vǫrðu land sitt, ok höfðu ýmsir sigr. Herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða. En er þat leiddisk hvárumtveggjum, lögðu þeir milli sín sættarstefnu ok gerðu frið ok seldusk gíslar.

(Óðinn went with his army against the Vanir, but they stood against him well and defended their land, and each in turn had victory. Both armies harried each other's land and caused harm. And when both of them became tired of it, they arranged a peace-meeting between them and established peace and exchanged hostages.)

The battle between the Æsir and the Vanir is presented as a tribal war or feud in which two equally formidable forces attempt to conquer and subdue. Given the emphasis Snorri has placed previously on Óðinn's prowess as a warrior and military leader, particularly the statement that Óðinn won every battle, it is clear that the Vanir represent a class of humans different from those the Æsir have encountered before; indeed, the Vanir are depicted as humans exceptional in a way similar to the Æsir, as suggested by their ability to sustain a stalemate against an army led by a seasoned conqueror and practitioner of battle-magic. Essentially, Snorri historicizes the war between the Æsir and the Vanir and presents it as a

land dispute between two powers with equal claims to possession owing to their superior abilities. Since *Ynglinga saga* is the first saga in a compilation of *konungasögur* detailing disputes between kings and earls for possession of Norway, Snorri's historicization of the myth transforms it into a typological paradigm rooting Norway's history of contested possession narrated in the sagas following *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla* in the genealogical links of kings and earls with the first movers, the exceptionally gifted humans who were so accomplished they managed to convince people that they were gods.

Particularly distinctive in *Ynglinga saga* is the considerable attention Snorri pays to the appointment of priests and the institution of sacrifice, and it is possible that Snorri's decision to focus on the religious observances of the Æsir and the Vanir is not only an attempt to confront Scandinavia's pagan past, but also the second stage in his advancement of a model of right rulership begun with his incorporation of an account of the Æsir-Vanir war. After his account of Óðinn's strictures relating to burial customs, Snorri relates the following about the Æsir chieftain's instructions regarding sacrifice (ch. 8):

Þá skyldi blóta í móti vetri til árs, en at miðjum vetri blóta til gróðrar, it þriðja at sumri, þat var sigrblót. Um alla Svíþjóð guldu men Óðni skatt, penning fyrir nef hvert, en hann skyldi verja land þeira fyrir ófriði ok blóta þeim til árs.

(They should sacrifice near to winter for prosperity, and in the middle of winter sacrifice for crops, and the third at summer, that was the sacrifice for victory. Throughout the whole of Sweden, men gave tribute to Óðinn, money for every nose, and he would protect their land from war and sacrifice for them for prosperity.)

It should be noted that sacrifices are performed for three main reasons: (a) to ensure prosperity; (b) for a good crop; and (c) to achieve victory. Moreover, Óðinn promises to sacrifice for prosperity and defend the land from war in return for tribute. Óðinn's association with battle and his position as the supreme warrior have already been discussed, and it is therefore unsurprising that one of the purposes of sacrifice is to ensure victory and that Óðinn

promises to defend the land from war. Significantly, however, Óðinn does not seem to be able to grant prosperity; rather, he promises only to perform sacrifices for others to ensure prosperity. Snorri's incorporation of an account of the Æsir-Vanir war is particularly appropriate in this light, allowing him as it does to introduce the two figures besides Óðinn who dominate his euhemerized depiction of the gods in *Ynglinga saga*: Njǫrðr and Freyr.

Both Njǫrðr and Freyr are members of the Vanir race, and their association with peace, prosperity, and fertility is well-attested elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Njǫrðr, for example, has been linked to the fertility cult of Nerthus described in Tacitus's *Germania* and married the giantess Skaði in what could be interpreted as a version of the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage or liaison of the sky god and the earth goddess to ensure the fruitfulness of the land (see, for example, ch. 656 of *Skáldskaparmál*).<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Njǫrðr's son Freyr married or enjoyed a sexual relationship with the giantess Gerðr, which has also been interpreted as a version of the *hieros gamos* (see ch. 37 of *Gylfaginning* and the eddic poem *Skírnismál* respectively).<sup>89</sup> According to Snorri's description of Freyr in ch. 24 of *Gylfaginning*, he 'ræðr fyrir regni ok skini sólar ok þar með ávexti jarðar, ok á hann er gott at heita til árs ok friðar' (rules over rain and the shining of the sun and therefore the produce of the earth, and it is good to pray to him for prosperity and peace), and a toast is drunk to Njǫrðr and his son Freyr 'til árs ok friðar' (for prosperity and peace) in ch. 14 of Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, Adam of Bremen notes in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* that Fricco, who can be identified with Freyr, apportions peace and pleasure to men, and that his idol in the temple at Uppsala features a large phallus, indicative

<sup>88</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 162-65 and 171-72.

<sup>89</sup> Ursula Dronke, 'Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*', in *English and Medieval Studies: Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 250-68 and Stephen Mitchell, 'Fyr Scírnis as Mythological Model: *frið at kaupar*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 98 (1983), 108-22.

<sup>90</sup> *Hákonar saga góða*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 1, pp. 150-97.

of Freyr's association with (perhaps specifically sexual) fertility.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, that Freyr was the chief god of the Swedes and his name means 'lord' may suggest that the god was associated with rulership, as does his role as the dynastic progenitor of the Ynglingar.<sup>92</sup>

Further evidence of the association between Njǫrðr and Freyr and fertility could be presented, but the evidence briefly outlined here is sufficient to demonstrate their connections with prosperity and fruitfulness elsewhere. In this respect, the practice of sacrificing for prosperity and a good crop can be aligned with Njǫrðr and Freyr, and it would seem, therefore, that Snorri's categorization of the purposes of sacrifice corresponds to the traditional attributes ascribed to the three dominant figures, Óðinn, Njǫrðr, and Freyr, in his account of the gods by mythological tradition. After the death of Óðinn, Snorri focuses even further on the fertility attributes of Njǫrðr and Freyr. In the days of Njǫrðr, for example, there was 'friðr allgóðr ok alls konar ár svá mikit, at Svíar trúðu því, at Njǫrðr réði fyrir ári ok fyrir fésælu manna' (very good peace and such great prosperity of all kinds that the Swedes believed because of this that Njǫrðr had power over prosperity and over the wellbeing of men; ch. 9). Similarly, Freyr's reign after the death of his father is a time of prosperity and in his days began the peace of Fróði (ch. 10). Just as the Swedes credited Njǫrðr with power over prosperity and wellbeing, so too do they credit Freyr, and as a result, Freyr is worshipped by them more than any other 'god'. The transition from the warmongering days of Óðinn to the peace and plenty of Njǫrðr and Freyr can be seen as Snorri's attempt to formulate a model of right rulership prescribing the proper manner in which to establish a kingdom. First, the man who would be king must conquer and subdue the territories he desires, signified by Snorri's depiction of a battle-hardened Óðinn, but afterwards, war must give way to the peace and plenty of political stability, embodied by the figures of Njǫrðr and Freyr.

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<sup>91</sup> Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hanover: Hahn, 1917), ch. 26.

<sup>92</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 169.

In producing his model of right rulership, Snorri limits the primary gods included in the early chapters of *Ynglinga saga* to the three deities associated elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature with themes specifically relating to concepts of sovereign leadership: war, conquest, peace, and prosperity. In this respect, it is notable that Þórr is conspicuously absent from chs 2-10 of the saga, being mentioned only in a list of the twelve temple priests in ch. 5 and as a source of names in ch. 7. His marginalized role in Snorri's account of the euhemerized gods cannot be attributed to Snorri's lack of interest in the god, for Þórr occupies a prominent role in Snorri's *Edda* (see, for example, chs 44-48 of *Gylfaginning* and chs 17 and 18 of *Skáldskaparmál*), and the minimal presence of Þórr must therefore be by design. If, as I have argued, Snorri's interest in *Ynglinga saga* is in the ideology of rulership, the marginalized role of Þórr can be ascribed to the god's non-aristocratic associations, of which there is evidence in the eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*.<sup>93</sup> In v. 24 of the poem, Óðinn, disguised as the ferryman Hárbarðr, who refuses to transport Þórr across an inlet and exchanges insults with him, claims that "...Óðinn á jarla/þá er í val falla,/en Þórr á þræla kyn..." ("...Óðinn has the earls who fall in battle, while Þórr has the breed of peasants..."). If the evidence of *Hárbarðsljóð* is indicative of a wider association between Þórr and the lower classes, a more dominant role for the god in Snorri's formulation of a model of rulership in *Ynglinga saga* would have been inappropriate, and his focus on Óðinn, Njörðr, and Freyr in constructing that model, these gods being connected to rulership elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, can be seen as continuing in the vein of established tradition.

In his presentation of the euhemerized and historicized gods, Snorri incorporates mythological characters and themes not as curiosity, but as typology. Three gods with connections to rulership, peace, and fertility are prioritized above other gods, and their prominence in the first saga of *Heimskringla* can be considered as an attempt to formulate a

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<sup>93</sup> *Hárbarðsljóð*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 389-98; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

model of right rulership against which the kings whose lives are narrated in subsequent sagas of the compilation can be measured: the war and conquest of imperial foundation must be succeeded by the peace and prosperity of political stability. In this way, mythological traditions are carefully appropriated in Snorri's depiction of the pagan past in *Ynglinga saga* to construct an ideological model for the present, one which roots the history of Norway's contested possession narrated in *Heimskringla* in the genealogical links between the present and the past and gives warning to the future rulers of medieval Scandinavia.

### *Chieftains of Freyr*

Mythological patterns, characters, and motifs incorporated in depictions of the pagan past are employed to examine the concept of rulership elsewhere in saga literature. Two of the most detailed examinations of the relationship between the individual pagan and his god in the *Íslendingasögur* explore precisely this concept, and in both cases, the protagonists are chieftains. In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Víga-Glúms saga* respectively, Hrafnkell Freysgoði (*Goði* of Freyr) and Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson worship Freyr, who, in both instances, is associated with prosperity and fertility in a manner reminiscent of Snorri's characterization of Freyr in *Ynglinga saga*. It is fair to say that devotion to Freyr is presented in *Hrafnkels saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* in a particularly negative light, and in *Víga-Glúms saga*, even a change in religious allegiance is narrated.

In ch. 2 of *Hrafnkels saga*, Hrafnkell's land-taking is associated very much with his devotion to Freyr, and his settlement of the land at Aðalból is followed by a relatively detailed account of Hrafnkell's efforts in establishing himself as the leader of a localized cult of Freyr:

En þá er Hrafnkell hafði land numit á Aðalbóli, þá efldi hann blót mikil. Hrafnkell lét gera hof mikit. Hrafnkell elskaði eigi annat goð meir en Frey, ok honum gaf hann alla ína beztu gripi sína hálfu við sik. Hrafnkell byggði allan dalinn ok gaf mönnum land, en vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim. Við þetta var lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Freysgoði, ok var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, en mennt vel.

(And when Hrafnkell had taken the land at Aðalból, then he held great sacrifices. Hrafnkell had a great temple built. Hrafnkell loved no other god more than Freyr, and to him he gave half of all his best livestock. Hrafnkell settled the whole valley and gave people land, but he wanted to be their superior and took the *goðorð* over them. Because of this, his name was lengthened, and he was called Freysgoði, and he was a very unfair man, but well accomplished.)

This description of Hrafnkell's establishment of both secular and religious authority is of particular importance, as it introduces many of the central concerns of the saga: land-taking; devotion to the gods, specifically, Freyr; the right to rule; and the nature of chieftainship. That the sacrifices held by Hrafnkell follow immediately his taking of the land at Aðalból suggests that their purpose is to thank the gods for his land-taking, perhaps even to ensure his prosperity on the land at Aðalból (compare the practice of sacrifice to ensure prosperity in ch. 8 of *Ynglinga saga*). The establishment of his temple and dedication of his livestock to Freyr are immediately succeeded by narration of Hrafnkell's settling of the whole valley and securing of the *goðorð*, the suggestion being that Hrafnkell's religious observances, the description of which is bookended by his land-taking and settlement of the whole valley, are directly responsible for his success as a settler. The presentation of Hrafnkell's land-taking draws on the same associations between Freyr, rulership, prosperity, and fertility found elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, as considered in the discussion of *Ynglinga saga*, and shares with Snorri's model of right rulership in *Ynglinga saga* the idea that instituting sacrifice and religious observances are prerequisite for the establishment of political stability.

Arguably, the association between Freyr and the land is introduced in the very first chapter of the saga, which deals with the settlement of Hrafnkell's father Hallfreðr, who moves his farm to a place called Geitdalr. One night, a man appears to Hallfreðr in a dream

and advises him to move his household again, claiming that his ‘heill’ (luck) lies elsewhere. Hallfreðr does this, and on the same day as his departure, a landslide destroys the site of his original settlement along with a boar and a goat left behind.<sup>94</sup> Although there is no explicit identification of the man in the dream with Freyr, we are perhaps to infer this from his collocation with the themes of land-taking and settlement, an inference which becomes more credible retrospectively with the emphasis placed on the connection between Hrafnkell’s devotion to Freyr and his material and social success. Moreover, the curious abandonment of the boar and the goat may be a subtle nod towards the practice of animal sacrifice, the animals being left behind as an offering to the man in the dream in recompense for his warning and fulfilling a similar function to Hrafnkell’s sacrifices after his land-taking.<sup>95</sup> Since Hrafnkell dedicates half of his best livestock to Freyr, it is not fanciful to assume that Hrafnkell’s father may have engaged in the same practice and that the animals are similarly emblematic of Hallfreðr’s devotion to Freyr.<sup>96</sup> Either way, both Hallfreðr and Hrafnkell are successful in taking and settling land because they have received supernatural sanction, and it seems therefore that the author of *Hrafnkels saga* conceived of the pagan gods, or at least Freyr, as being instrumental in the division of land, demonstrating the intimate connection between settlement history and pagan religious practices.

At the heart of *Hrafnkels saga* is Hrafnkell’s horse Freyfaxi, whom Hrafnkell loves more than any of his other possessions and dedicates half of to Freyr (ch. 3). Hrafnkell swears

<sup>94</sup> In *Landnámabók*, the dream is Hrafnkell’s, and the landslide occurs immediately after his departure. In the *Landnámabók* account, the animals left behind are a boar and a bull, while manuscripts of *Hrafnkels saga* have a boar and a goat or two goats. *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenskt fornrit, 1, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), I-II, pp. 29-397 (p. 299).

<sup>95</sup> The delay of the landslide in the saga account of Hallfreðr’s dream and land-taking may have been added to imply the sacrifice of the animals, the delay providing time for Hallfreðr to perform such a sacrifice.

<sup>96</sup> The boar is associated with Freyr in ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning* and ch. 35 of *Skáldskaparmál*. It might be argued that goats are associated with Þórr rather than Freyr in the mythological traditions that are preserved in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, for Þórr’s chariot is said to be pulled by the two goats Tanngnjóstr and Tanngrísnir in *Gylfaginning* (ch. 21). There is, however, no good reason why the same animal could not be associated with more than one god, and there is some evidence in *Hynduljóð* to suggest that Freyja, Freyr’s sister, was also connected with the goat, for she is accused of going after her lover like the goat Heiðrún on heat. It is not impossible that Freyr, like his sister, might have been similarly associated with the goat. *Hynduljóð*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, I, pp. 460-69 (v. 47); all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

an oath to kill the man who rides Freyfaxi without his permission, and despite the warning he gives about this to his shepherd Einarr Þorbjarnarson, Einarr rides Freyfaxi to locate some lost sheep. His decision to ride Freyfaxi, however, is prompted by the unusual behaviour of Hrafnkell's other horses:

Ok er hann kom til hrossanna, þá elti hann þau, ok váru þau nú skjórr, er aldri váru vön at ganga undan manni, nema Freyfaxi einn. Hann var svá kyrr sem hann væri grafinn niðr.

(And when he came to the horses, then he chased them, but those were now skittish, who were never inclined to shy away from men, except Freyfaxi alone. He was as still as if he were dug down.)

The unusually nervous behaviour of the mares is compounded by the strange stillness of Freyfaxi, and since every indication in this passage points to a premeditated conclusion, the element of foreboding initiated by Hrafnkell's warning is intensified. The phrase 'grafinn niðr' is particularly significant in this context, because it is possible to place the expression at the centre of a complex of mythological associations relating to the horse. Meaning literally 'dug down' (but rendered in many translations as 'rooted to the ground'), Freyfaxi is described in terms of a post anchored in the ground or a plant, perhaps specifically, a tree, growing from the earth.<sup>97</sup> It is possible that a deliberate connection is being forged here between the horse, the tree, and the gallows, and there is considerable evidence elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature of this same connection, particularly in relation to death, sacrifice, and hanging.

Yvonne S. Bonnetain has argued that the horse, along with the tree, may have been perceived as a symbol of a para-mundane journey, noting particularly that Óðinn 'rides'

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, the rendering of the phrase in *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi*, trans. Terry Gunnell, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), v, pp. 261-81 (ch. 5) and *Hrafnkel's Saga*, in Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, Blackwell Introductions to Literature, 6 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 202-23 (p. 205).

Yggdrasill (Yggr's steed) by hanging himself from it for nine nights in *Hávamál* (v. 138).<sup>98</sup> Moreover, kennings such as the *grimman jó Sigars* (savage horse of Sigarr) in *Háleygjatal* (v. 4) and *hábrjóstr Sleipnir hǫrva* (high-breasted Sleipnir of flax cords) in *Ynglingatal* (v. 12) for the gallows similarly link the horse with death by hanging, and Freyfaxi's rootedness to the ground could be symbolic of the rootedness of the foundation of the gallows.<sup>99</sup> In line with the connection between the horse, sacrificial death, and hanging, the para-mundane journey undertaken by the horse is in many cases a journey to the world of the dead or a world with close links to the chthonic, such as Jötunheimar (see, for example, Sleipnir's leap over the gate of Hel in ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning* and the horse capable of passing through the *vafrogi* (flickering flame) to Jötunheimar in vv. 8 and 9 of *Skírnismál*).<sup>100</sup> The symbol of the horse, therefore, is associated with a transition or transaction between worlds and is at least connected with sacrificial practices in Óðinn's sacrifice of himself on Yggdrasill (see also Óðinn's orchestration of King Víkarr's sacrifice under the name Hrosshárs-Grani (Horsehair-Grani) in ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*).<sup>101</sup> The choice of a horse as Hrafnkell's most loved possession is no coincidence. As the phrase 'grafinn niðr' indicates, Freyfaxi is to be seen at the centre of a mythological complex relating to death and sacrifice orchestrating the 'death ride' of Einarr on behalf of Freyr. Indeed, it seems that the Þjóstarssynir recognize the implications of the very dangerous machinations of Freyfaxi in their chosen method of destroying the horse in ch. 6:

<sup>98</sup> Yvonne S. Bonnetain, 'Riding the Tree', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 3 (2007), 11-20. Yggr is given as one of the names of Óðinn in vv. 53 and 54 of *Grímnismál* and ch. 20 of *Gylfaginning*.

<sup>99</sup> *Háleygjatal* and *Ynglingatal*, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. Diana Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 1, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 1, pp. 195-213 and 3-60 respectively; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>100</sup> On the chthonic nature of the giants, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, pp. 55-56.

<sup>101</sup> *Gautreks saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, iv, pp. 1-50; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

Þar leiða þeir nú hestinn fram á hamarinn. Þjóstarssynir drógu fat eitt á höfuð hestinum, taka síðan hávar stengr ok hrinda hestinum af fram, binda stein við hálsinn ok týndu honum svá. Heitir þar síðan Freyfaxahamarr.

(Now they lead the horse out onto the cliff. The Þjóstarssynir pulled a bag onto the horse's head, take afterwards long poles and push the horse forwards, tie a stone around his neck and killed him in this way. That place has been called Freyfaxahamarr ever since.)

It is mentioned after this passage that Hrafnkell's temple buildings are located above the cliff from which Freyfaxi is pushed, and we are perhaps to infer from this that similar animal sacrifices were conducted from this cliff in view of the temple by Hrafnkell during his time as *goði*. Indeed, Þorgeirr's own remark that it is fitting for Freyfaxi to be taken by the one who owns him implies that this was the proper place from which to make offerings to Freyr, who is thus associated with a specific topographical feature. As E. O. G. Turville-Petre has suggested, it seems likely that the intention of the Þjóstarssynir in killing Freyfaxi in this way is to perform a travesty of sacrifice, no doubt balancing Freyfaxi's death with the sacrificial connotations of Einarr's, who is killed by Hrafnkell after Freyfaxi alerts his master to what has transpired.<sup>102</sup>

Hrafnkell's killing of Einarr, which Hrafnkell himself considers to be 'verra' (one of the worst; ch. 3) he has committed, leads to Hrafnkell being prosecuted for the slaying at the *alþingi* (general assembly) by Einarr's cousin Sámur Bjarnason and sentenced to full outlawry (ch. 4). Offered a choice between life and death by Sámur, Hrafnkell chooses life and is forced to leave the farm at Aðalból and establish himself a second time at Hrafnkelsstaðir, while Sámur takes up residence at Aðalból and claims for himself Hrafnkell's authority (ch. 5). Although circumstances are difficult for Hrafnkell on his new farm at first, he enjoys 'mikinn atdrátt af fiskinum' (good supplies from fishing; ch. 5) and does so well in keeping calves and kids that it might be said that there 'væri tvau höfuð á hverju kvikindi' (were two heads

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<sup>102</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 254.

on every animal; ch. 5), and we might assume, therefore, that the patronage of Freyr is still instrumental in Hrafnkell's success.

It is after narration of Hrafnkell's reestablishment of himself at Hrafnkelsstaðir and his growing prosperity on his new farm that the Þjóstarssynir's killing of Freyfaxi is recounted, and after hearing of the death of Freyfaxi and the Þjóstarssynir's subsequent burning of his temple, Hrafnkell renounces belief in the gods, which he calls *hégómi* (foolish), and never performs sacrifices again (ch. 7). It would not be surprising at this point in the narrative if Hrafnkell's renunciation of the gods was followed by an account of his declining fortunes, but in fact the narrator tells us that he stayed at Hrafnkelsstaðir and 'rakaði fé saman' (raked money together; ch. 7), and the saga concludes with Hrafnkell's recovery of Aðalból and his former authority (chs 8-10). Scholars have struggled to account for Hrafnkell's return to power and prosperity after having renounced the gods (and, therefore, his divine patron), with some suggesting that the saga narrates a movement away from dependence on the gods to Hrafnkell's reliance on his own accomplishments and a reformed character.<sup>103</sup> Certainly, Hrafnkell's fall from grace changes his personality in a manner that makes him more popular than before: whereas before he renounces the gods he is an 'ójafnaðarmaðr mikill' (very unjust man; ch. 2), afterwards he is 'miklu...vinsælli ok gæfari ok hægri...at öllu' (much more popular and calmer and easy-going in every respect; ch. 7). Moreover, we are surely to see Sámr's short-lived rule at Aðalból as the result of his own deficiencies; not only is he described as being a 'skartsmaðr mikill' (great man of show; ch. 7), but also there are *misjafn* (mixed; ch. 6) feelings about Sámr's take-over as chieftain in the first place. If we accept that the saga narrates a progression from dependence on the gods to reliance on accomplishments and an amenable, but forceful, character in examining the nature of chieftaincy, we can see in the characterization of Hrafnkell and Sámr an attempt to

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<sup>103</sup> Hermann Pálsson, for example, has attributed Hrafnkell's second rise to power to his 'courage and good luck' and argues that Hrafnkell 'becomes a freer man' by 'losing the objects of his love', Freyr and Freyfaxi. Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in 'Hrafnkel's Saga'* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971), pp. 45-46 and 65.

contrast the man of substance with the man of bluster: Hrafnkell may have been an ‘ójafnaðarmaðr mikill’ from the start, but his flawed character is at least mitigated by the fact that he is ‘mennt vel’ (highly accomplished; ch. 2), and his superior abilities come to the fore a second time, even after he has renounced the gods, to demonstrate his apparently native fitness to rule.

Alternatively, however, and not necessarily mutually exclusively, we might suppose that Hrafnkell continues to be favoured by Freyr in spite of his renunciation of the gods if we consider the Þjóstarssynir’s travestied sacrifice of Freyfaxi to have been accepted as a sincere offering by Freyr. The idea that a mock-sacrifice might become a real one has its precedent elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, for in Book 6 of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* and ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*, the hero Starcatherus/Starkaðr attempts to perform a mock-sacrifice of his lord King Wicarus/Víkarr after his patron Othinus/Óðinn has demanded it, but his contrivance is transformed into a real sacrifice and the god receives his offering; similarly, we might consider Óðinn’s sacrifice of himself to himself by hanging from Yggdrasill, recounted in vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*, to be a mock-sacrifice, for the god appears to survive his hanging, despite the efficacy of the sacrifice in allowing Óðinn to acquire runic knowledge. Since Þorgeirr states that he thinks it “...nu makligt, at sá taki við honum, er hann á...” (“...now fitting that he who owns him takes him...”; ch. 6) in orchestrating the death of Freyfaxi, the horse is specifically given to Freyr in death, despite the fact that it is given mockingly. As Hrafnkell previously dedicated half of Freyfaxi to Freyr, we might suppose that Freyr accepts his portion of the horse from the Þjóstarssynir with interest (the second half of the horse belonging to Hrafnkell) and repays his former protégé for his earlier dedication, now realized sacrificially by the Þjóstarssynir, with increasing prosperity at Hrafnkelsstaðir. In this light, power and fortune in the pre-Christian Iceland depicted in

*Hrafnkels saga* are determined not only by superior ability, as Hrafnkell's eventual defeat of Sámr suggests, but also by the sponsorship of a god, in this case, Freyr.

In *Víga-Glúms saga*, the right of Víga-Glúmr and his family to own the land at Þverá, specifically the fruitful field Vitazgjafi, whose name means 'the certain giver' and is therefore associated with fecundity, is shown to be dependent on their continued worship of Freyr. Víga-Glúmr, however, seems to transfer his allegiance to another god and thereby loses the right to remain in possession of Þverá. It has been suggested by Anne Holtmark that Víga-Glúmr abandons the worship of Freyr in favour of adherence to Óðinn, and Víga-Glúmr's maternal grandfather Vigfúss is in all likelihood instrumental in his conversion.<sup>104</sup> In ch. 6 of the saga, Víga-Glúmr travels to Norway to visit his grandfather, and the description of Vigfúss and his farmhouse is cast in distinctly Odinic terms:

Þegar er hann kom við land, fór hann upp á Vǫrs til Vigfúss. Ok er hann kom at bænum, þá sá hann þar mikit fjölmenni ok margs konar skemmtan ok leika; ok þat þóttisk hann sjá, at þar myndi á ǫllum hlutum stórmennska vera. En þar sem hann sá marga men merkiliga, þá vissi hann eigi, hvar Vigfúss myndi vera, frændi hans. Þat mark hafði hann til hans, at hann sá mann mikinn ok vegligan í ǫndvegi í skautfeldi blám, ok lék sér at spjóti gullreknu, gekk síðan at honum ok kvaddi hann, en hann tók vel kveðju hans.

(As soon as he landed, he went up to Vǫrs to see Vigfúss. And when he came to the farmhouse, then he saw there a great crowd of people and games and sports of many kinds, and he seemed to see that there all things would be done with munificence. But because he saw many remarkable men there, he did not know which one would be Vigfúss, his kinsman. He had worked out who he was when he saw a large and noble man in the high seat wearing a black cloak with skirts and playing with a gold-inlaid spear, and then he went to him and greeted him, and he accepted his greeting favourably.)

The description of Vigfúss in this passage contains two traditionally Odinic motifs: (a) the high seat; and (b) the spear. In Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (chs 9 and 17), Óðinn is said to have a seat named Hliðskjálf from which he can see into all the worlds, and according to Snorri, it is

<sup>104</sup> Anne Holtmark, 'Vitazgjafi', in *Studier i norrøn diktning*, ed. Hallfrid Christiansen *et al.* (Oslo: Gyldendal norsk forlag, 1956), pp. 38-58.

from this seat that Freyr catches sight of the giantess Gerðr in Jötunheimar (ch. 37; see also *Skírnismál*) and Óðinn discovers the hiding place of Loki following the death of Baldr (ch. 50). In ch. 51 of *Gylfaginning*, Hár tells Gylfi that Óðinn will ride to battle at Ragnarök with his spear Gungnir, whose creation by dwarfs is related in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 35). These same dwarfs also forge hair made of gold for Þórr's wife Sif, the ship Skíðblaðnir, Freyr's golden boar, Óðinn's ring Draupnir, and Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir, and since many of these items feature elsewhere as the defining possessions of their owners, in particular, Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir (see, for example, v. 17 of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir's *Haustlög* and the eddic poem *Þrymskviða*), it can be assumed that Gungnir was considered among the defining possessions of Óðinn.<sup>105</sup> It is told by the *völva* in *Völuspá* (v. 24) that Óðinn threw a spear over the host during the first war in the world, and as we saw earlier in *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 9), Óðinn marked himself with a spear shortly before his death with the promise that all men killed by weapons would be dedicated to him, perhaps the intention behind his throwing of the spear in *Völuspá*. Moreover, depictions of Odinic sacrifice in *Hávamál* (v. 138) and *Gautreks saga* (ch. 7) present the spear as a sacrificial weapon.

These motifs alone would be enough to suggest the Odinic nature of Vigfúss, but the description of his farmhouse displays similarly Odinic overtones. The scene inside is one of merriment and prosperity bordering on decadence; a large crowd of remarkable men spend their time engaged in trivial pursuits while Vigfúss observes them from his high seat playfully brandishing a spear (compare the way in which Jormunrekkr allows a golden cup 'hvarfa' (to dangle) in his hand in v. 20 of *Hamðismál*).<sup>106</sup> The extravagance of the festivities at the house at Vǫrs is undoubtedly reminiscent of Óðinn's hall Valhöll, in which the *einherjar* fight each other every day (their 'leikr' (sport) according to Hár) and spend every

<sup>105</sup> Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, *The Haustlög of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir*, ed. Richard North (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1997).

<sup>106</sup> *Hamðismál*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 407-13; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

night feasting on the meat of the regenerating boar Sæhrímnir and drinking the mead which flows from the udders of the goat Heiðrún (*Gylfaginning*, chs 38-41). The term *einherjar* appears to mean ‘peerless warriors’, and the characterization of the men in Vigfúss’s retinue as *merkiligr* (remarkable) can perhaps be interpreted as a deliberate correspondence to the unsurpassable prowess of Óðinn’s champions, among whom can be numbered choice heroes such as Sigmundur and Sinfjötli (see *Eiríksmál*, v. 5).<sup>107</sup> Even more reminiscent of the amusements at Vǫrs is Snorri’s representation of Valhǫll in the frame narrative of *Gylfaginning* (ch. 2). The account of Gylfi’s observations once inside Valhǫll is strikingly similar to the account of Víga-Glúmr’s observation of the scene inside his grandfather’s hall: ‘Þar sá hann mǫrg gólf ok mart fólk, sumt með leikum, sumir drukku, sumir með vǫpnum ok bǫrðusk. Þá litaðisk hann umb ok þótti margir hlutir ótrúligir þeir er hann sá...’ (‘He saw there many rooms and many people, some occupied with sports, some with drinking, some with weapons and fighting. Then he looked around and thought that many of the things he saw were unbelievable...’). Not only are the people in Valhǫll engaged in the same games and sports as the men in Vigfúss’s house, but the sight of such extravagance is considered by Gylfi to be especially noteworthy, just as the lavishness of the proceedings at Vǫrs is evidently regarded by Víga-Glúmr.

The combination of the traditionally Odinic motifs of the high seat and the spear incorporated in the description of Vigfúss and the notable similarities between the depiction of the festivities at the house of Vǫrs and the representation of the merriment and extravagance to be found in Valhǫll clearly demonstrates the deliberate alignment of Vigfúss with the god Óðinn. Vigfúss’s status as an Odinic figure, however, is not limited to an assortment of descriptive details, but is to be discerned also in the function performed by Vigfúss in the saga. Following their exchange of greetings and Víga-Glúmr’s delivery of his

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<sup>107</sup> *Eiríksmál*, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. Diana Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 1, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), II, pp. 1003-13; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

family credentials, Vigfúss's attitude towards his grandson is decidedly cool. Doubting the truth of his ancestry, Vigfúss assigns to his grandson a seat at the outer end of the lower bench and offers him little respect, leaving Víga-Glúmr to lie down and sulk with his cloak over his head while the other men present consider him to be 'fól eitt' (a fool; ch. 6).

Subsequent events, however, reveal that Vigfúss's true intent in providing Víga-Glúmr with such a frosty reception is to test the worth of his grandson, a test which begins with the arrival of a *berserkr* (bear-shirt) named Björn járnhauss (Iron-skull) at a feast held during *vetrnætr* (the winter nights). As soon as he enters the building, Björn traverses the benches in the hall asking each man whether he considers himself to be his equal in bravery, but everyone gathered at the feast, including Vigfúss himself, is careful to defer to Björn on this matter in an attempt to avoid trouble. When Björn asks Víga-Glúmr, however, Víga-Glúmr claims not to know about his bravery, but states that he would not wish to equate himself with a man who carries on in the way that Björn behaves; such a man would be considered a fool in Iceland. With that, Víga-Glúmr bludgeons Björn to death with a firebrand. Following the killing, Vigfúss's attitude towards Víga-Glúmr changes completely, and he considers the triumph of Víga-Glúmr's defeat of Björn to prove conclusively the truth of their kinship. Moreover, Vigfúss explains that his initially inhospitable welcome was only driven by his desire to wait until Víga-Glúmr had earned his place in the family by means of a demonstration of his nobility, evidently dependent on certifiable heroic prowess.

The Odinic nature of this episode of *Víga-Glúms saga* becomes apparent if it is compared to a strikingly similar event narrated in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, one of the *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>108</sup> In ch. 24 of *Hrólfs saga*, King Hrólfr's *berserkir* challenge the men gathered in Hrólfr's hall by asking each of them, starting with the king, whether he considers himself to be their equal. As is the case in the episode from *Víga-Glúms saga*, every man,

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<sup>108</sup> *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1, pp. 1-105; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

including the king, defers to the *berserkir*, but Bøðvarr Bjarki, like Víga-Glúmr, will have none of this. Bøðvarr replies that he considers himself not to be equal to the *berserkir*, but rather superior, and after insulting their leader, he lunges at him and throws him to the ground. Before a fight can break out in the hall, Hrólfr quickly calms the situation and everyone is reconciled, with Bøðvarr being admitted to the company of the king's champions. This episode in *Hrólfs saga* represents the initiation of the warrior Bøðvarr, a relative newcomer to Hrólfr's kingdom, and his success in proving himself worthy to be counted among the champions of the king. The test of Víga-Glúmr is initiatory in the same way, and the initiation into a company of warriors is presented in each case as involving *berserkir*, who are elsewhere connected to Óðinn. In ch. 6 of *Ynglinga saga*, for example, it is said that Óðinn's warriors 'váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjöldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar' (were mad like hounds or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong like bears or bulls) and that this is referred to as 'berserksgangr' (going *berserkr*).<sup>109</sup> Moreover, associations between Óðinn and the hero were noted in the earlier discussion of *Ynglinga saga*, and it is unsurprising, therefore, that Víga-Glúmr's initiation into the company of Vigfúss should be presented in Odinic terms (for further commentary on these associations, see Chapter 2).

The motifs of the high seat, the spear, and the initiatory fight, as well as the similarity between the description of Vigfúss's house at Vǫrs and Óðinn's hall Valhöll, provide clear evidence of Vigfúss's status as an Odinic figure. Víga-Glúmr's conversion to the worship of Óðinn, however, increasingly sours his relationship with Freyr and culminates in his expulsion from the land at Þverá. The full extent of Víga-Glúmr's troubled relationship with Freyr is made known to him in a dream shortly before he is to ride to the *þing* (assembly; ch. 26), and the depiction of the god within this dream, together with the scene described,

<sup>109</sup> On the relationship between Óðinn and the *berserkir*, see Jens Peter Schjødt, 'The Notion of *berserkir* and the Relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature*, II, pp. 886-92.

demonstrates the centrality of the concept of divine right in the saga author's presentation of the cult of Freyr:

En áðr Glúmr riði heiman, dreyndi hann, at margir menn væri komnir þar til Þverár at hitta Frey, ok þóttisk hann sjá mart manna á eyrunum við ána, en Freyr sat á stóli. Hann þóttisk spyrja, hverir þar væri komnir. Þeir svara: “Þetta eru frændr þínir framliðnir, ok biðjum vér nú Frey, at þú sér eigi á brott færðr af Þverárlandi, ok tjóar ekki, ok svarar Freyr stutt ok reiðuliga ok minnisk nú á uxagjöf Þorkels ins háva.” Hann vaknaði, ok lézk Glúmr verr vera við Frey alla tíma síðan.

(But before Glúmr rode away from home, he dreamed that many people had come there to Þverá to meet Freyr, and he seemed to see many people on the gravel banks by the river, but Freyr sat on a throne. He seemed to ask who had come there. They answer: “These are your departed kinsmen, and we are now asking Freyr that you not be driven off the land at Þverá, but it is to no avail, and Freyr answers curtly and angrily and now remembers Þorkell inn hávi's gift of an ox.” He woke up, and Glúmr admitted it to be worse with Freyr ever since.)

In this passage, the image of Freyr is of the king seated in judgement, and his throne is no doubt intended as a parallel to Vigfúss's high seat in the house at Vǫrs. Since Vigfúss is depicted as an Odinic figure, the opposition of throne and high seat signifies the competing claims of Freyr and Óðinn to pre-eminence among the gods. As was noted earlier, Freyr first saw the giantess Gerðr in both accounts of their courtship in *Skírnismál* and ch. 37 of *Gylfaginning* when he was seated in Óðinn's high seat Hliðskjálf. Unique to Snorri's account, however, is the idea of Freyr's presumption in sitting in Óðinn's seat and of Freyr's subsequent lovesickness being a punishment for this presumption. It is perhaps too speculative to draw any firm conclusions from this single account, but it may be that Freyr and Óðinn were thought to be in competition with each other in Old Norse mythology and that such thoughts lie behind Snorri's presentation of Freyr's lovesickness being a punishment. The employment of parallel scenes involving one god sitting on a throne and a human surrogate for another god sitting in a high seat may have been influenced by the same tradition of the competing claims to rulership of Freyr and Óðinn. As we saw earlier in the

discussion of *Ynglinga saga*, Freyr may have been associated with rulership in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, and it may be that Óðinn's similar associations with rulership gave rise to a tradition of competition between the two gods. Such a tradition could quite possibly be related to the fact that these gods belonged originally to distinct races, Freyr to the Vanir and Óðinn to the Æsir, who were once at war (see *Völuspá*, vv. 21-24, *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 657, and *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 4) and may therefore have been thought to retain some residual enmity even after a truce was secured; indeed, in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga*, hostilities between the two races are reignited when the Vanir believe themselves to have been cheated with their Æsir hostages.

The mythological correspondences implied by the authors of *Hrafnkels saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* can be seen as elevating the status of their respective protagonists and confirming their pre-eminent position in the pre-Christian Iceland represented in the two sagas. Hrafnkell's initial rise to power is apparently dependent on the patronage of Freyr, as his second rise to power may also be, and we are perhaps to see in this an attempt to draw out the conceptual similarity between the receipt of divine patronage from a pagan god in pagan Iceland and the receipt of divine patronage from the Christian God in Christian Iceland: as with us, so with them.<sup>110</sup> We might even consider the author's use of mythological traditions relating to sacrifice and the fertility and rulership functions of Freyr as an attempt to characterize the pagan history of Iceland in terms similar to those of Old Testament history, a period in which God frequently intervened in the lives of his chosen patriarchs, such as Abraham, and demanded sacrifice in return for prosperity. In the case of the parallels between Vigfúss and Óðinn and the house at Vǫrs and Valhǫll in *Víga-Glúms saga*, the author imbues

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<sup>110</sup> We might, for instance, compare Hrafnkell's good fortune to the God-given *gipta* (luck) of King Óláfr Tryggvason, which we see, for example, in ch. 6 of *Hallfreðar saga*; indeed, Þorgeir says in ch. 10 of *Hrafnkels saga* that he and Þorkell cannot get involved in Sámur's 'gæfuleysi' (lucklessness) when Sámur asks them for help after Hrafnkell has reclaimed Aðalból, suggesting that Hrafnkell's success is partly due to his possession of the *gæfa* (luck) Sámur lacks. *Hallfreðar saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 133-200; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

his depiction of Víga-Glúmr's maternal grandfather and his hall with mythological resonances to portray appropriate aristocratic behaviour: it is proper for aristocrats to indulge in leisurely pursuits, in 'margs konar skemmtan ok leika', and not to worry about farming. Víga-Glúmr's movement away from Freyr is emblematic of his distinctly aristocratic maternal ancestry and suggests that regardless of the circumstances of birth and upbringing nobility will out. In both sagas, then, mythological patterns, characters, and motifs are employed in the depiction of the pagan past to examine the nature of power and nobility, particularly as it relates to the concept of divine sanction and self-evident pre-eminence.

### *Converting the Pagans*

In the texts considered thus far, representations of the pagan past incorporating aspects of mythological tradition have been concerned with examining the nature of power, and in each case it seems that incorporating the pagan past in literate and scholarly culture serves the important function of enabling medieval Christian Icelanders and Scandinavians to conceive of themselves and their own power structures in relation to their pagan history. In *Ynglinga saga*, for example, the typological model of right rulership formulated by Snorri in the first saga of his compilation of *konungasögur* can be seen as both an ancestral explanation for the contested possession of Norway, as depicted in the other sagas of *Heimskringla*, and a warning to the future rulers of Scandinavia, while the mythological correspondences between Vigfúss and Óðinn and the house at Vǫrs and Valhǫll in *Víga-Glúms saga* demonstrate standards of aristocratic behaviour just as relevant to the noble classes of post-conversion Iceland (skill at playing games and sports, for example, is presented as an essential aristocratic ability in other Old Norse-Icelandic texts, including v. 39 of *Rígsþula* and ch. 13

of *Vǫlsunga saga*).<sup>111</sup> Elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, incorporating the pagan past and its associated traditions is evidently undertaken with a degree of caution, and a number of texts suggest that as much as mythological, and ostensibly pagan, patterns, characters, and motifs were useful in situating medieval Christian Iceland and Scandinavia in relation to their pagan past, it was also important to maintain the proper distance between pre- and post-conversion Iceland by converting those patterns, characters, and motifs accordingly.

One strategy that was particularly useful for achieving simultaneously the two purposes of incorporating the pagan past and distancing it from the present was to satirize pagans and their religious practices to produce the distancing, and perhaps sanitizing, effects of humour: if something can be laughed at, its threat can be suppressed. The author of *Gautreks saga* produces such satirical humour at the very beginning of the saga, and we can consider the saga's initial satire to be the means by which the subsequent narrative of pagan characters in a pagan world is distanced from its medieval Christian audience. In ch. 1 of *Gautreks saga*, King Gauti gets lost in the woods while out hunting, but he follows the sound of a barking dog to a farmhouse where a family of peasants live. These peasants are extremely niggardly and treat Gauti inhospitably, but Gauti is undeterred by their behaviour and makes himself at home, eating with the family without invitation. Gauti's arrival makes the father of the peasants believe that they have become too many, and he and his wife decide to throw themselves from Ætternisnappi, a cliff used by the family to reduce their numbers by suicide, after which they believe they will go to Valhǫll. The similarity of the name Gauti to the Odinic name Gautr (*Grímnismál*, v. 54) suggests an intention to align Gauti with Óðinn, in which case it seems that the peasant family interpret his arrival as a sign from the god that their numbers are too many. Of course, we know that Gauti is not Óðinn, and the stupidity of their over-zealous interpretation of signs and omens, which continues after Gauti's arrival

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<sup>111</sup> *Rígsþula*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 449-57; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

until all the family have committed suicide, hinges on a typically Odinic scene of mistaken identity, as we see, for example, in *Vafþrúðnismál*. The traditional pattern of this mistaken identity, however, is reversed, for in *Vafþrúðnismál* the error is in mistaking Óðinn for someone else, whereas at the beginning of *Gautreks saga*, the error appears to be in mistaking someone else for Óðinn. A typically Odinic story pattern found in a number of mythological texts, then, is in *Gautreks saga* subverted to elicit humour.

As Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has argued, the depiction of the peasant family as worshippers of Óðinn is intended as satire, for Óðinn is traditionally associated elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature with heroes, kings, and princes, not with peasants and paupers.<sup>112</sup> As we saw earlier, Óðinn, disguised as Hárbarðr, claims in v. 24 of *Hárbarðsljóð* that “...Óðinn á jarla/pá er í val falla,/en Þórr á þræla kyn...”, and the god is credited in the Prologue to Snorri’s *Edda* as being the progenitor of the major royal and heroic dynasties of Europe and Scandinavia. Moreover, he is the patron of great heroes, including Sigmundur, Sinfjötli, and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and later in *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn appears as the foster-father of the tragic hero Starkaðr and demands the sacrifice not of a peasant, but of a king, Starkaðr’s lord King Víkarr (see Chapter 2 for detailed discussion of Óðinn’s patronage of heroes in the *fornaldarsögur*). With such a wealth of tradition relating to Óðinn’s aristocratic proclivities, the author actively subverts the mythological expectations of his audience in characterizing a group of Óðinn-worshippers as, in Ashman Rowe’s words, ‘preternaturally stupid peasants’, and it is through this subversion of expectation that satirical humour is created.<sup>113</sup> A similar kind of humour is achieved in *Qgmundar þáttur dytts* by the parodying of a fertility ritual not unlike that described by Tacitus in his *Germania* in his account of the cult

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<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘Folktale and Parable: The Unity of *Gautreks Saga*’, *Gripla*, 10 (1998), 155-66 (pp. 159-60).

<sup>113</sup> Ashman Rowe, ‘Folktale and Parable’, p. 160.

of Nerthus.<sup>114</sup> In it, a man named Gunnarr wrestles with the idol of Freyr and defeats him, only to take his place and be mistaken by the Swedes for their god. The humour in this tale is very much derived from the gullibility, perhaps stupidity, of the Swedes, which is presented in similar terms to the stupidity of the peasants in their over-zealous interpretation of signs and omens in *Gautreks saga*. In both *Gautreks saga* and *Qgmundar þáttr*, then, depictions of pagan religious practices featuring aspects of mythological tradition are incorporated in the narratives at the same time as they are distanced from the medieval Christian audience through humour and thereby sanitized. This distancing, however, does not prevent the authors of the two works from achieving their wider and more serious purposes: the author of *Gautreks saga* may poke fun at his family of pagan peasants, but the narrative still functions as a parable praising generosity as an essential aristocratic trait regardless of religious persuasion, and the parodic representation of a fertility ritual in *Qgmundar þáttr* ultimately proves the power and pre-eminence of Christianity, for Gunnarr is brought back into the Christian fold after his time among the Swedes.

In *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda*, mythological patterns and motifs are adapted in a story detailing the conversion of a recalcitrant heathen to reflect on the position of a centralizing Christian monarchy that must exist alongside unconverted pagans. In this story, distance between paganism and Christianity is achieved not through humour, but through careful and considered use of mythological patterns and motifs that help to imbue the author's depiction of paganism with a sense of its alienating strangeness. In the *þáttr*, Þorvaldr tasaldi (Tassel) falls out of favour with King Óláfr Tryggvason following the persistent slander of one of the king's retainers. The king provides a way for Þorvaldr to make amends by sending him to the recalcitrant heathen Bárðr digri (the Stout), who will neither accept the Christian faith nor visit the king. Bárðr is characterized not by his adherence to pagan religious practices such as

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<sup>114</sup> *Qgmundar þáttr dytts*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 99-115; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

sacrifice (there is no temple at his farm), but by the fact that his customs and conduct are ‘óvísir’ (unknown). An element of the strange and uncanny nature of paganism and its religious operations was encountered earlier in this chapter in the unusual behaviour of Freyfaxi and the mares in *Hrafnkels saga*, and it would seem that much of Bárðr’s uncanniness derives from the location of his activities on the fringes of the kingdom and their unknowability. Indeed, it could be argued that the strangeness of paganism was conceived of in the minds of certain authors as being rooted in its lack of an authoritative and regulatory body to govern its practices and its consequently ingrained resistance to the centralizing tendencies of Christian monarchy.<sup>115</sup> The author of *Þorvalds þáttr* was so intent on emphasizing these themes that he modelled his account of Þorvaldr’s encounter with Bárðr on the story of Þórr’s encounter with Útgarðaloki, which engages with similar themes in a mythological setting.

The story of Þórr’s encounter with Útgarðaloki is recounted in chs 44-47 of *Gylfaginning*. In this story, Þórr travels to the kingdom of Útgarðaloki, which like the home of Bárðr lies on the fringes of the mythological world unincorporated by any centralizing power. One of the first motifs the story has in common with *Þorvalds þáttr* is that of the glove, for in the story of Þórr’s encounter with Útgarðaloki, Útgarðaloki appears first as the giant Skrímir, who has a large glove in which Þórr and his companions take shelter, mistaking it for a hall. In *Þorvalds þáttr*, it is noted that Bárðr is wearing deer-skin gloves. The central elements in the story of Þórr and Útgarðaloki though are the contests of strength in which Þórr and his companions participate, contests which at first appear to be about eating, running, drinking, lifting a cat up off the ground, and wrestling an old woman. A contest of strength is also employed in *Þorvalds þáttr*, but this time only a single contest is included in the form of Þorvaldr’s wrestling match with Bárðr and Sigurðr’s with Þóra

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<sup>115</sup> McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 20-26 (p. 21).

(compare *Ógmundar þáttur dytts*, in which the motif of wrestling with a god is also employed). A further parallel with Þórr's encounter with Útgardaloki is to be found in the description of the departure of Þorvaldr and his men from Bárðr's farm, which is cast in terms similar to those used in the description of Þórr's departure from the stronghold of Útgardaloki. The relevant passages are quoted below, the first from *Þorvalds þáttur* and the second from *Gylfaginning*:

Um morgininn, er þeir váru braut búnir, bað Bárðr menn sína fylgja þeim af garði. En er þeir váru út komnir, litaðisk Þorvaldr um ok sá enga menn hjá þeim; hann mælti þá: “Þat vildi Bárðr nú, at vit fœrim brott ok ættimsk vér ekki fleira við, en þat skal nú eigi vera; finna skulu vit hann enn áðr.”

(In the morning, when they were ready to leave, Bárðr told his men to lead them away from the house. But when they had come away, Þorvaldr looked around and saw no men near them; then he said: “Bárðr now wants that, that we go away and have no more purpose with him, but now that will not be; we will see him yet before we go.”)

En er Þórr heyrði þessa tölur greip hann til hamarsins ok bregðr á lopt, en er hann skal fram reiða þá sér hann þar hvergi Útgardaloka. Ok þá snýsk hann aptr til borgarinnar ok ætlask þá fyrir at brjóta borgina. Þá sér hann þar völlu víða ok fagra en önga borg.

(And when Þórr heard this speech, he snatches up his hammer and swings it in the air, but when he intended to strike, then he saw that Útgardaloki was nowhere. And then he turned back to the stronghold and intended to smash the fortress. Then he saw there a wide and beautiful field, but no fortress.)

There is something of the strange and uncanny about both Bárðr's home and the home of Útgardaloki, and both stories employ a common model. What were originally presented as feats of strength to Þórr are later revealed to be unwinnable contests with elemental forces: fire; time; the sea; Miðgarðsormr (the cat); and old age.<sup>116</sup> Þórr does not succeed in winning the contests, and when he turns to visit his vengeance upon Útgardaloki, both he and his castle have disappeared, producing a rather unsettling ending to the tale as the usually victorious Þórr departs as neither winner nor loser. Þórr fails to demonstrate the superior

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<sup>116</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, pp. 52-53 and 265-68.

strength of the Æsir as he does in his fight with the giant Hrungrir in ch. 17 of *Skáldskaparmál*, and the disappearance of Útgarðaloki and his stronghold makes his subjugation impossible: he remains a dangerous alternative power operating independently of Ásgarðr. In *Þorvalds þáttr*, the imperial concerns of the gods in subjugating the giants living beyond their borders is translated as the imperial concerns of a Christian monarch in subjugating the pagans living outside of his centralized control. Of course, Þorvaldr has the benefit of Christianity and succeeds in finding Bárðr and his farm again, after which Bárðr is persuaded to convert and incorporated in King Óláfr's kingdom. The Útgarðaloki story is borrowed by the author of *Þorvalds þáttr* to parallel the Æsir's necessary attempts to incorporate the giants as they consolidate their power with the necessary incorporation and conversion of recalcitrant pagans in consolidating a Christian kingdom. In doing so, the author presents Christianity and its god as being superior to the pagan gods: where Þórr the heathen god failed, Þorvaldr the Christian succeeded, and a medieval Icelandic audience in full possession of shared mythological capital would have been able to discern the critique of paganism implied by the parallels with the story of Útgarðaloki. According to the author of *Þorvalds þáttr*, then, paganism is dangerous because it is strange and peripheral, and the author is careful to deploy mythological patterns and motifs in representing Bárðr digri and his home in such a way as to alert the medieval Christian audience to the potential dangers of recalcitrant heathens and the importance of a fully consolidated Christian kingdom that distances itself from the unknowable practices of paganism.

The status of the shared mythological capital we have seen incorporated in the sagas and *þættir* considered in this chapter, with its pagan religious associations, was not unproblematically assimilated to the Christian worldview of medieval Iceland, even though the examples discussed in the foregoing analysis might suggest otherwise. In fact, a number of *þættir* included in the various sagas detailing the lives of King Óláfr Tryggvason and King

Óláfr Haraldsson address the pagan nature of myths and legends by pitting the missionary king against the story-telling of Óðinn or an Odinic figure. In ch. 305 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* in Flateyjarbók, for example, an old and one-eyed man, the characteristic guise of the god Óðinn in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, as we shall see in the following chapter, arrives one Easter at Qgvaldsnes, where Óláfr is staying, and proceeds to tell the king about the pagan ruler King Qgvaldr, after whom Qgvaldsnes is named, and his sacred cow.<sup>117</sup> Despite the bishop's attempts to make Óláfr go to sleep, the king stays up late into the night listening to the stories of the old man, who eventually disappears. The king later discovers that the old man left two sides of beef in the kitchens earlier, having criticized the quality of the meat already there, and Óláfr assumes that the visitor was the devil in the form of Óðinn, who hoped to tire the king with his late-night stories and make him miss Mass by oversleeping, as well as trick Óláfr and his men into eating 'hans eitrfulla fæðu' (his poisonous provisions), which Óláfr orders to be disposed of. As Carolyne Larrington has expertly demonstrated, the tainted meat provided by the Odinic devil is symbolic of the tainted meat of the pagan stories with which he regales King Óláfr and is intended to elicit feelings of disgust from the audience as an emotive warning against the danger of pagan stories.<sup>118</sup> Larrington also shows how the same intention is at work in *Þorsteins þáttur skelks*, a *þáttur* incorporated in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* in Flateyjarbók, in which the Icelander Þorsteinn, one of Óláfr's men, goes to the privy alone in the middle of the night against the king's injunction and comes close to being carried off by a demon who tells him that the well-known pagan heroes Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Starkaðr are now suffering in hell; whereas in the first *þáttur* considered here, disgust is elicited through the symbolic relationship between pagan stories and tainted meat, in *Þorsteins þáttur skelks*, it is elicited through the

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<sup>117</sup> *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols (Akraness: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-45), I, pp. 39-578 and II, pp. 1-71; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>118</sup> Carolyne Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil: Disgust and the Pagan Past', in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2006), pp. 138-55 (pp. 148-55).

association between the pagan past and, in Larrington's words, 'the malodorous contents of a privy'.<sup>119</sup> As much as these two *þættir* warn against the danger of stories of the pagan past, however, their authors are nevertheless forced to admit these stories into their works by having the Odinic devil and the privy-demon narrate them for their listeners and, by extension, the audience of the two narratives. No matter how dangerous these stories are, the two *þættir* suggest that the medieval Christian Icelander or Scandinavian has no choice but to confront them, and perhaps we are to see in this a certain degree of resignation to the fact that pagan stories are so ingrained in medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian culture that it cannot be eradicated, only resisted. At the very least, successful resistance of such diabolical material affirms the ultimate triumph of the Church over paganism, and by pitting deceptive pagan forces against King Óláfr, these *þættir* attest not only Óláfr's fitness to rule as a Christian missionary monarch with a crucial role to play in the conversion of Iceland and Scandinavia, but also remind medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians of the dependence of Christianity's successful adoption on the moral example of the king. Because Óláfr eventually discovers and circumvents the Odinic devil's deception and rescues Þorsteinn from the privy-demon by having the church bells rung to scare off the demon, he is unquestionably superior to diabolical forces and is unassailably established as the prime representative of the Scandinavian Church against the pagans.

Other versions of this tale-type are much more open to incorporating stories of the pagan past in the worldview of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, and the sentiments these versions express were undoubtedly shared by the authors of the texts considered in the course of this chapter, for whom mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs played a central role in conceiving of power and rulership and reflecting on processes of religious conversion. In *Norna-Gests þáttur*, for instance, a stranger calling himself Gestr visits King

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<sup>119</sup> *Þorsteins þáttur skelks*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 1, pp. 462-64. Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil', p. 154.

Óláfr Tryggvason at Trondheim and reveals himself to be a pagan who has received the *prima signatio*, but has not yet been baptized.<sup>120</sup> During the course of his stay with the king, Gestr entertains Óláfr and his men with harp-playing and story-telling. His presentation of a piece of saddle-buckle made of exquisite gold prompts Gestr's account of the time he spent with the legendary hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, which includes narration of material relating to Sigurðr known from eddic poetry, some of which is incorporated in Gestr's story, and *Völsunga saga*; it turns out that the piece of saddle-buckle belonged to Sigurðr's horse Grani, and Gestr produces a lock of Grani's hair as proof of the relic's authenticity. Following this, Óláfr asks Gestr whether he ever spent time with the sons of Ragnarr loðbrók (Hairy-breeches), and the visitor duly speaks of the brief time he served in the company of these legendary figures, recalling how the sons of Ragnarr were turned back from an assault on Rome by a man Óláfr believes must have been sent by God to stop them. After informing the king that he liked the Christian court of King Hloðvér, where he received the *prima signatio*, best of all the courts of the kings he has visited, Gestr reveals the story of his own life and the reason for his naming as Norna-Gestr. He explains that he was cursed as a baby by one of the *normir*, who believed she was not receiving enough attention from Gestr's father and his men at a fortune-telling gathering, to live no longer than the candle beside his crib would burn; one of the other *normir* extinguished the candle and handed it to his mother to look after, and Gestr himself has taken care of the candle ever since he was fully grown. At Óláfr's prompting, Gestr is baptized and becomes an exemplary Christian; later, with Gestr's acquiescence, Óláfr orders Gestr's candle to be lit, and when the candle has burned away, Gestr dies.

A similar tale is told in *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, in which a man named Tóki Tókason, who like Norna-Gestr has received the *prima signatio*, but has not yet been baptized, visits

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<sup>120</sup> On the *prima signatio* in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, see Joseph Harris and Thomas D. Hill, 'Gestr's "Prime Sign": Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttur*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 104 (1989), 103-22.

King Óláfr Haraldsson. Tóki tells the king of his time with the legendary King Hrólfr kraki and King Hálfir and asks Óláfr to choose which of these legendary kings was the best, to which the king replies that Hálfir's men were stronger than Hrólfr's, but no one of that time seems to have been as wise or as generous as Hrólfr; of course, being Christian and a future saint, Óláfr is superior to both of them. Afterwards, Tóki is baptized and dies in the white robes of a convert.

The conversion of Norna-Gestr and Tóki Tókason can be seen as signifying the conversion of the stories they have told and suggests their ripeness for incorporation in the conceptual world of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. In both of these *þættir*, the stories have to do with kings and heroes of the pagan past, and judgements are made by Norna-Gestr in the first instance and Óláfr Haraldsson in the second as to the relative merits of these noblemen. Norna-Gestr, for example, praises the great *sjálfraði* (freedom) the sons of Ragnarr allowed their followers in the way they lived, while Óláfr commends the strength of Hálfir's men and the wisdom and generosity of Hrólfr kraki. The implication here is that stories of the pagan past can be retold as exemplars of appropriate behaviour; by praising the freedom allowed to the followers of the sons of Ragnarr, Norna-Gestr suggests that all good kings and rulers should allow the same freedom, and Óláfr's commendation of strong retainers, wisdom, and generosity imply that these are likewise attributes of a good king. As in the story of the Odinic devil in the Flateyjarbók version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, Christian kings are measured against their pagan predecessors, and the exemplary nature of the pagan material recounted is reminiscent of similarly exemplary material relating to the behaviour of kings and rulers in works belonging to the *specula principum* tradition, though in the case of the episode involving the Odinic devil in the Flateyjarbók version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, the exemplar is a negative one, the Christian king being

contrasted with King Ógvaldr's superstitions relating to his sacred cow.<sup>121</sup> No matter how good pagan kings like Hálfir and Hrólfr kraki may have been, of course, they pale into insignificance in comparison to the Christian Óláfrs, who can overcome the power and deception of demons and effect the full conversion of those who have only received the *prima signatio*, but their inferior pagan status does not preclude the possibility of them having possessed admirable qualities worthy of imitation by Christian monarchs, or so *Norna-Gests þáttir* and *Tóka þáttir Tókasonar* suggest. By allowing for the existence of pagan models of behaviour and narrating the conversion of pagans who tell stories about exemplary heathens, these two *þættir* admit the possibility that the material of the pagan past might itself be converted to Christianity and be marshalled in the interests of exploring the proper behaviour of Christian kings and their role in conversion.<sup>122</sup>

In the case of such tales involving Óláfr Tryggvason, there seems to have been an additional connection between the king and Óðinn, as we have seen in the story of the arrival of an Odinic devil in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* in *Flateyjarbók* (a version of this tale is told also in ch. 43 of Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and in ch. 64 of Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in Heimskringla*, though in Snorri's version Óðinn is not identified as the devil, reducing the diabolical nature of both teller and tales in a manner consistent with the pains he took to historicize and euhemerize the pagan gods in the early chapters of *Ynglinga saga*); moreover, there is something very Odinic about *Norna-Gests þáttir*, for Norna-Gestr is occupied most of the time by telling the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and includes in his account the intervention of a mysterious man named Hnikarr, who is presumed by Sigurðr's company to be Óðinn, during a particularly bad storm, as well as verses taken from the eddic poem *Reginismál* in which Hnikarr provides Sigurðr with

<sup>121</sup> On the *specula principum* tradition in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of 'The King's Mirror'*, *Mediaeval Scandinavia Supplements*, 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987).

<sup>122</sup> Merrill Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók*, *Folklore Fellows' Communications*, 301 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011), ch. 1.

knowledge of the best omens for battle (vv. 21-26).<sup>123</sup> On the basis of these stories, we can conclude that Óðinn was popularly employed as a foil for Óláfr Tryggvason; the old and new religions are reduced to their representative figureheads to invite both contrast and comparison, and Óláfr's spiritual defeat of Óðinn in the versions of the *þáttr* pitting the two against each other serves to demonstrate not only Óláfr's spiritual replacement of Óðinn in the religious mind-set of Iceland and Scandinavia, but also the superiority of Christianity generally. As we shall see in Chapter 2, Óðinn was especially associated with kings and noble heroes in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and is frequently portrayed in the *fornaldarsögur* as their patron or foster-father. The chief god of Old Norse myth therefore provided a suitable mythological figure not only for the exploration of religious conversion, but also for the examination of kingship and standards of aristocratic behaviour.

### *Conclusion*

The foregoing analysis does not claim to be exhaustive in its coverage of depictions of the pagan past in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, but the texts considered here demonstrate the cognitive utility of mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs in examining the nature of power and the various strategies employed by medieval Icelandic writers in attempting to balance the two imperatives of incorporating the pagan past and containing its more dangerous potentialities. In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri euhemerizes the gods and incorporates carefully selected myths and mythological commonplaces, including the traditional attributes of particular gods and the myth of the Æsir-Vanir war, to formulate a model of right rulership, according to which the war and conquest of imperial foundation must be succeeded by the peace and prosperity of political stability. This typological model

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<sup>123</sup> Oddr Snorrason, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gad, 1932) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 1, pp. 225-372; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

roots Norway's history of contested possession narrated in *Heimskringla* in the genealogical links of the present with the past. In both *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Víga-Glúms saga*, mythological traditions associating Freyr with fertility lie behind the connection between Freyr, land ownership, and the establishment of secular and religious authority, notably dramatized in *Víga-Glúms saga* by symbols (the high seat, for example) signifying competition between Freyr and Óðinn. Mythological expectations of Óðinn's aristocratic connections are subverted to elicit humour in *Gautreks saga*, and in *Qgmundar þáttur dytts*, a fertility ritual is travestied to highlight the foolish and gullible nature of pagan Swedes; in both narratives, humour is employed to distance the medieval Christian present from the pagan past at the same time as mythological traditions associated with the pagan past are incorporated. The story of Þórr's encounter with Útgarðaloki is deployed in *Þorvalds þáttur tasalda* to imbue a typical conversion narrative with a sense of the strange and uncanny nature of paganism; the mythological narrative is transposed to tenth-century Norway and employed both as a thematic model, specifically with regard to the anxieties of a centralizing Christian monarchy, and as a source of traditional and, therefore, resonant motifs. In each of these texts, the truly religious nature of Scandinavian paganism is displaced by other ideological concerns, foremost among them being rulership, divine sanction, and the prosperity of the land, but nowhere are ideological concerns addressed more concertedly than in the tradition of *þættir* exploring the status of stories of the pagan past in a medieval Christian kingdom. Although some versions of these tales warn against the danger of such stories and traditions, others are prepared to admit the possibility that they can be converted to Christian ends and incorporated in the conceptual world of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, offering as they do a means of exploring not only religious conversion, but also the role and duties of the king.

## Chapter 2

### Fostered Heroes, Fathered Realms: Óðinn and the Odinic Figure in the *fornaldarsögur*

In the previous chapter, the characterization of Óðinn as conqueror and war-leader in the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* was shown to be a method not only of reclaiming the cultural inheritance of the pagan past, but also of constructing a model of rulership for thirteenth-century Scandinavia. Mythological traditions concerning Óðinn and his position as god of battle were identified as the basis for this characterization, and these same traditions are also the foundation for his representation in the *fornaldarsögur*, as we shall see in the course of this chapter. Óðinn appears either as himself or in disguise in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Gautreks saga*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, and *Völsunga saga*.<sup>124</sup> *Völsunga saga* is a special case in this respect, for Óðinn appears in no other *fornaldarsaga* as frequently as he does there; generally, Óðinn appears only once or twice in the aforementioned sagas, and his role is largely restricted to that of the patron or foster-father of heroes. As far as *Qrvar-Odds saga* is concerned, however, Óðinn's appearance as Rauðgrani does not occur in the shorter version of the saga, suggesting that his role in the lives of heroes was not essential (as the evidence of *Völsunga saga* might seem to suggest), in some cases being a later development and absent from earlier branches of oral and written tradition.

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<sup>124</sup> *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, III, pp. 323-65, II, pp. 93-134 and 1-71, and I, pp. 337-63 respectively; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text. Annette Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament: en teksthistorisk studie* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2011), ch. 10.

In Chapter 1, we saw that the incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in a range of sagas depicting aspects of the pagan past is directed towards the expression of ideological convictions relating to rulership; descent from the gods or divine patronage authenticate claims to power, while the opposition between Óðinn and King Óláfr Tryggvason in various *þættir* validates the pre-eminent status of the king. In engaging with the same mythological traditions, the authors of the *fornaldarsögur* in which Óðinn appears similarly offer ideological configurations of pre-eminence, although the focus in the sagas considered in this chapter is as much on heroic nobility as it is on the procurement of sovereignty. In the discussion that follows, the portrayal of Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur* will be considered in relation to the eddic conception of the god. The first section of this chapter focuses on the role of Óðinn in *Völsunga saga* and provides detailed analysis of his involvement in the lives of the Völsungar as dynastic patron. Sustained commentary on *Völsunga saga* is warranted by the abnormally high number of appearances Óðinn makes in the saga (eight in total, plus two appearances by proxy), which can be partly attributed to the author's use of eddic poems detailing the exploits of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in composing his narrative; in *Reginismál*, Óðinn intervenes at precisely the same moment as he does in *Völsunga saga*, providing evidence of direct borrowing from eddic tradition, but other appearances of the god in the saga have no parallel in eddic poetry, whether because the poems that did feature Óðinn at these points in the story are now lost to us or because these story elements were added by the author. The unifying ideology of *Völsunga saga*, shortly to be exposed, suggests that the additional appearances of Óðinn in the saga are most likely the invention of the author, being a reflex of his attempts to consolidate divergent Odinic traditions. Following consideration of *Völsunga saga*, the predominant role of Óðinn as patron or foster-father in other *fornaldarsögur* is examined, as is the tendency of the authors of the *fornaldarsögur* to circumscribe Óðinn's operation to functions primarily associated

with battle and heroic instruction and reduce or suppress the mythological status of the figure. Euhemeristic interpretations of the pagan gods, discussed in the previous chapter, were doubtless instrumental in shaping the representation of Óðinn we encounter in the surviving *fornaldarsögur*, but it is also true to say that these variations are the outcome of a process of ideological reconfiguration to be expected from the proliferation of heroic and dynastic narrative and the gradual transition from myth to folklore.

### *The Role of Óðinn in 'Vǫlsunga saga'*

*Vǫlsunga saga* is unique among the *fornaldarsögur* for its indebtedness to eddic poetry, on which the author modelled his narrative to such an extent that he incorporated verses of poems preserved in the Codex Regius in the saga. As such, the conception of Óðinn in parts of *Vǫlsunga saga* is distinctively eddic, though there is also evidence of the role of the one-eyed god having been shaped by the demands of the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre. The conception of Óðinn in eddic poetry generally pertains to three specific categories: poetry, wisdom, and battle (see Chapter 1 for a brief survey of the god's associations with these areas in eddic poetry). Since the *fornaldarsögur* are primarily the biographies of heroes, it is unsurprising to find that Óðinn's connection to battle pervades the characterization of the god in these sagas, as this chapter will demonstrate. His association with poetry and wisdom is activated in some of the *fornaldarsögur* in which he appears, but it is largely secondary, with notable exceptions, among them *Vǫlsunga saga*, to his relationship with battle. Moreover, where mythological traditions relating to Óðinn, poetry, and wisdom are invoked in the representation of the god, the associations are circumscribed.

Óðinn's first appearance in *Vǫlsunga saga* is as the father of Sigi, who is outlawed for the murder of a slave named Breði and guided from the land by his father (ch. 1). One day,

Sigi and Breði go hunting together until the evening. When the hunters compare their successes, it turns out that Breði has made more kills than Sigi, who is displeased that a slave has bested him at hunting. Sigi kills the slave and buries his body in a snowdrift, claiming on his return home that Breði rode away from him in the forest. Breði's owner Skaði, noted as being 'ríkr ok mikill fyrir sér' (powerful and overbearing), doubts the truth of Sigi's story and gathers men to search for Breði in the forest. Eventually, Breði's body is found in the snowdrift, after which Skaði decrees that all such snowdrifts are thenceforth to be called 'Breðafönn' (Breði's Drift). Sigi is promptly outlawed, and his getaway is facilitated by Óðinn.

At the heart of this episode is competition between the classes. It is not his defeat that causes Sigi to kill Breði so much as his defeat by a slave, and this murder evidently takes place in the context of rivalry between Óðinn's household and that of Skaði, whose power is undercut by the author's admission that Sigi is 'enn ríkari ok ættstærri' (yet more powerful and of higher descent). The rivalry between Óðinn and Skaði is sublimated to a contest between their representatives, a son and a slave respectively, and the different relationships between these representatives and the two heads of household is significant. With his son acting as proxy, Óðinn is shown to have secured his lineage through familial generation, and the author's admission that Sigi was more powerful and of higher descent than Skaði establishes the ideological prioritization of biological descent, through which nobility and pre-eminence are naturally transmitted and can be proven. By contrast, Skaði's representative is a slave. Although Breði is described as being 'fróðr við þat, er hann skyldi at hafast' (wise in that which he had to do) and 'hafði íþróttir ok atgervi jafnframt hinum, er meira þóttu verðir, eða umfram nokkura' (had skills and accomplishments equal to those who were considered greater, or superior to some), his abilities do not have the guarantee that comes from noble descent. The master-slave relationship between Skaði and Breði cannot be

presented as proof of pre-eminence in the same way that the father-son relationship between Óðinn and Sigi can, no matter how powerful and overbearing Skaði might be; there is no genetic transmission of skill from master to slave, and Skaði is made inferior in not having a son to represent him against Sigi. Demonstration of skill and accomplishment is not enough; heroic or courtly aptitude must be certified by genetic precedent (compare the rigidly hierarchical delineation of the classes prioritizing birth over accomplishment in the eddic poem *Rígsþula*, in which pre-eminence is guaranteed by noble birth, as we see in the figure of ‘Konr ungr’ (young Konr; vv. 41, 44, and 45), whose name is a pun on the Old Norse-Icelandic noun *konungr* (king)).

In this context, the highly accomplished Breði can be considered as being an aberration, and Sigi’s displeasure at losing to a slave in a hunting contest can be attributed to its contravention of societal norms. Sigi’s murder of Breði restores the natural order of society, according to which slaves are inferior to freemen and are not in possession of skills and abilities greater than those of their social betters. In light of the special relationship between Óðinn and the noble classes discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, it is surely Sigi’s reassertion of aristocratic primacy that gains for him his father’s favour and the assistance he provides in his flight from the country. After making a journey described as being ‘*stóru bar*’ (greatly undertaken), Óðinn leads Sigi to where a fleet of warships are anchored, which his father gives to him along with the troops needed to man the fleet. Sigi goes raiding with his men and is so successful that he eventually manages to capture a kingdom and take the crown, securing for himself in the process a noble marriage to bolster his dominion. Performing the role of gift-giver, Óðinn equips his son with the means to establish himself in another land and prepare the ground for the rise of a royal dynasty.

Despite the difference in sex between the two figures, the name shared by Skaði the slave-owner and Skaði the giantess, wife of the god Njǫrðr, suggests the conscious

collocation of the two characters. The hunting contest and Sigi's concealment of Breði's body in a snowdrift similarly point towards a deliberate association with the giantess Skaði, for she is said in ch. 23 of Snorri's *Gylfaginning* to spend her time skiing and shooting game with a bow and arrow after her separation from Njörðr and is called 'ǫndurguð eða ǫndurdís' (snowshoe-god or snowshoe-dís). The myth of Skaði's marriage to Njörðr is recounted in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 656), in which the giant Þjazi is killed by the Æsir for kidnapping the goddess Iðunn. Þjazi's daughter Skaði takes 'hjálmm ok brynju ok ǫll hervápn' (helmet and mail-coat and all weapons of war) and travels to Ásgarðr with the intention of avenging her father. To avoid a revenge killing, the gods offer to Skaði the choice of a husband from among their ranks as compensation on the condition that she makes her selection on the sole basis of his feet. She picks a pair of feet that were 'forkunnar fagra' (exceptionally beautiful), believing that they are the feet of Baldr, but it turns out that they are in fact the feet of Njörðr. Skaði's incorporation in Ásgarðr through marriage is short-lived, however, for she and Njörðr separate after failing to resolve a dispute over their preferred habitations, Njörðr favouring his home by the sea and Skaði her ancestral home in the mountains (see ch. 23 of *Gylfaginning*). The incompatibility of god and giantess is configured here in topographical terms. The features of the landscape chosen to represent the two mythological beings are consonant with their deific functions as sea-god and 'ǫndurguð' respectively, and in the case of Skaði, with the mountainous regions presented elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as one of the natural habitations of the giant race.<sup>125</sup> The topographical features representing Njörðr and Skaði are symbolic of fundamental ethnic differences between the Æsir and the giants, and the story as a whole can be understood as a critique of exogamy.

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<sup>125</sup> On the various habitations of the giants in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Where Do the Giants Live?', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 121 (2006), 101-12.

Elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the giants are presented as a class of mythological beings inferior to the gods, and the gods are frequently shown to assert their cosmological primacy in their dealings with the giants. Clunies Ross has noted in particular that a state of ‘negative reciprocity’ exists between gods and giants generally in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological works, according to which the gods deny the giants access to goddesses and other resources, sometimes resorting to deceit and oath-breaking to maintain and increase their wealth and supremacy.<sup>126</sup> As a result of the negatively reciprocal relationship between the two races, the giants are the dispossessed race of Old Norse myth *par excellence* (see Chapter 4 for more on this). By pitting Óðinn and his son against a man named Skaði, then, mythological traditions concerning the giantess Skaði and, by extension, the inferior status of the giants in comparison to the gods generally are brought to bear on a dynastic origin myth that already triggers the association between Óðinn, the nobility, and the delineation of the classes. The story of Njǫrðr and Skaði’s unsuccessful marriage expresses the fundamental incompatibility of gods and giants, and this literary commonplace helps to configure the fundamental incompatibility of the classes and the impermeable nature of social boundaries presented in the opening episode of *Vǫlsunga saga*, specifically intended to introduce the major ideological concerns of the saga. Óðinn is heralded as the arbiter of dynastic fortune and patron of the noble classes, whose pre-eminence is secured by heroic prowess and familial generation, both of which Óðinn demonstrates in the person of his son Sigi; at the same time, traditions relating to Skaði and the giant race are activated by the name of Breði’s master, and mythological race distinctions are thereby invoked to express human distinctions of class: god is to giant as nobleman is to slave.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, ch. 4.

<sup>127</sup> The giantess Skaði is identified as the dynastic matron of the Norwegian Háleygir dynasty in v. 2 of *Háleygjatal*, which Gro Steinsland has interpreted in terms of the myth of the *hieros gamos*. If the author of *Vǫlsunga saga* was aware of this attribution of ancestry to Skaði, it may be that her pre-existing dynastic associations prompted him to incorporate a figure aligned with her in an episode of the saga with similarly dynastic concerns. The change of sex, however, makes clear that the author of *Vǫlsunga saga* is preoccupied

After Sigi's death at the hands of his brothers-in-law, attention turns to his son Rerir, who takes over his father's kingdom and avenges Sigi's death by killing his maternal uncles and their accomplices. Even though the narrator tells us that King Rerir's revenge 'óskapliga væri fyrir alls sakir' (was immoderate on all counts), it is nevertheless presented as the proper course of action, for Rerir afterwards becomes 'meiri fyrir sér en faðir hans' (greater than his father had been), the suggestion being that the extermination of enemies, or treacherous kinsmen in Rerir's case, is essential to the consolidation and expansion of power. The treachery of kinsmen, specifically brothers-in-law, becomes prominent later in the saga, when Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Rerir's great-grandson, is killed by Guttormr at the urging of Gunnarr and Högni, all of whom are the brothers of his wife Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. The murder of Sigi by his brothers-in-law clearly foreshadows the later betrayal and murder of Sigurðr by his own brothers-in-law, but it also initiates a cycle of revenge perpetuated throughout the saga until the death of Sigurðr, whose son is too young and 'kann eigi at varast fjáendr sína' (cannot guard against his enemies; ch. 30) or, presumably, avenge his father. Evidently, familial generation alone does not secure dynastic survival, for the survival of a royal line is also reliant on the maturation of children and their ability to avenge their fathers and defend the kingdom from enemies. In this light, the cycle of revenge in *Völsunga saga* and the collapse of that cycle following the death of Sigurðr, the greatest hero of the *Völsungar*, can perhaps be seen as expressing anxieties over child maturation and succession.

The imperative of familial generation, established in the opening story of Sigi's murder of Breði, and anxieties over child maturation and succession form the core of the episode detailing Óðinn's interaction with his grandson Rerir, which is the second intervention of Óðinn in *Völsunga saga* (ch. 2). Although Rerir successfully avenges his father and secures his kingdom, he falls short in fathering a son and securing the future of his

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with patriliney and descent from Óðinn. Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i 'Skírnismál', 'Ynglingatal', 'Háleygjatal' og 'Hyndluljóð'* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991), ch. 10.

lineage. Despite having been together for a long time, Rerir and his wife are unable to conceive and pray to the gods for help. Óðinn's wife Frigg hears their prayers and informs Óðinn of their predicament, who provides magical assistance to the couple in the form of an apple:

Hann verður eigi örþrifráða ok tekr óskmey sína, dóttur Hrímnis jötuns, ok fær í hönd henni eitt epli ok biðr hana færa konungi. Hún tók við eplinu ok brá á sik krákuham ok flýgr til þess, er hún kemr þar, sem konungurinn er ok sat á haugi. Hún lét falla eplit í kné konunginum.

(He [Óðinn] is not without resources and calls his wish-maiden, the daughter of the giant Hrímnir, and places in her hand an apple and tells her to take it to the king. She took the apple and transformed herself into the shape of a crow and flies until she comes to where the king was sitting on a mound. She let the apple fall into the lap of the king.)

The king eats a portion of the apple and sleeps with the queen, after which she conceives Volsungr, the hero from whom the most famous dynasty of warrior princes takes its name.<sup>128</sup> The pregnancy is not an easy one, however, for Volsungr is in the queen's womb for six years, during which time his mother is unable to give birth to him; realizing that she does not have much longer to live, she asks that the child be cut from her, and once this is done, the reason for the difficult pregnancy is revealed to be the advanced maturation of her son, who is said to kiss his mother before she dies. As a baby, Volsungr is already 'mikill vexti' (well-grown), and he soon becomes 'mikill ok sterkr ok áræðisfullr' (big and strong and courageous) and matures into the greatest of warriors, achieving victory in all his battles. Clearly, the apple is not only a magical aid to conception, but also a guarantor of advanced development in both biological and heroic terms, and therefore confers upon Rerir and his queen hyper-fertile reproductive capabilities.

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<sup>128</sup> The minimization of the female contribution to procreation here, it being the king, rather than the queen, who eats the apple, may recall examples of non-female procreation in Old Norse myth. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, ch. 5.

The manifestation of Óðinn's magic in the form of an apple is modelled on the preservative qualities of the apples of the goddess Iðunn, which according to Hár in ch. 26 of *Gylfaginning* the gods must feed on when they age to regain their youth; indeed, when Iðunn is kidnapped by the giant Þjazi along with her apples, the Æsir soon become 'hárir ok gamlir' (grey and old; see ch. 656 of *Skáldskaparmál*). Moreover, the decision to attribute Vǫlsungr's advanced development to the magic of Óðinn can be seen as deriving from Óðinn's conception of gods in other Old Norse-Icelandic mythological works, particularly his conception of Váli, who according to v. 32 of *Vǫluspá* is born 'snemma' (quickly) and begins fighting at one night old, this last detail also being noted in v. 11 of *Baldrs draumar*. In vv. 32-33 of *Vǫluspá* and v. 11 of *Baldrs draumar*, it is suggested that Váli is conceived for the sole purpose of avenging the death of Baldr, unwittingly killed by his brother Høðr under the deceitful influence of Loki (see ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning*); indeed, Snorri says in ch. 12 of *Skáldskaparmál* that Váli can be referred to in skaldic poetry with the kennings 'hefni-Ás Baldr(s)' (avenging-Áss of Baldr) and 'dólg Haðar ok bana hans' (enemy of Høðr and his slayer). The speed with which Váli matures implies that the quick execution of vengeance is imperative if Óðinn is to reassert his dynastic supremacy after losing his son Baldr, and it is significant in this respect that Óðinn/Othinus resort to the use of magic to facilitate the conception of Váli/Bous in v. 3 of *Sigurðardrápa* and Book 3 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>129</sup>

In the accounts of Váli's conception and maturation, we can infer anxiety over the maturation of children and the ready availability of avengers in the face of dynastic threat, and the motif of the speedily-maturing hero in *Vǫlsunga saga* can perhaps be attributed to the same anxiety, or at least anxiety over succession. Certainly, Rerir dies of sickness on a campaign 'at friða land sitt' (to pacify his land; ch. 2) before Vǫlsungr is taken from the womb, leading to an interregal period presumably cut short by the accelerated growth and

<sup>129</sup> *Sigurðardrápa*, in *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols (Copenhagen and Christiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1908-15), VI, pp. 69-70; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

heroic development of Rerir's heir. Notwithstanding his mother's difficult pregnancy and birth, the transition from Rerir to Vǫlsungr is presented as being relatively smooth, there being no treacherous brothers-in-law to dispatch, as in the case of Rerir's succession, or rival king (Rerir is not killed in battle, but dies of sickness on the way to battle), and any other contender for the throne is in all likelihood swiftly suppressed in the victorious campaigns led by Vǫlsungr. The advanced development of Vǫlsungr suggests that the speedy maturation of heroes descended from gods, perhaps specifically from Óðinn, was a well-established motif by the time *Vǫlsunga saga* was written, and it is significant that Óðinn's magical abilities operate exclusively in this episode in the interests of fertility, a theme with which the god is already associated in the story of Sigi and Breði. If the evidence of *Vǫlsunga saga* and the various accounts and references to the story of Óðinn's conception of Váli is anything to go by, the motif of the speedily-maturing hero was a form of literary wish-fulfilment, reflective of succession anxieties that had their cognitive placeholder in the figure of Óðinn.

Particularly important in this episode of the saga is the delivery of the apple by Óðinn's *óskmey*, a female figure whose role appears to be similar to that of the *valkyrjur* (choosers of the slain). The *valkyrjur* are often conflated elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature with other superhuman or supernatural female figures, including *skjaldmeyjar* (shield-maidens) and swan-maidens, and it is likely that the *óskmey* is similarly conflated here. After describing the Ásynjur in ch. 36 of *Gylfaginning*, Hár provides Gylfi with a description of the *valkyrjur* and their role in Ásgarðr:

Enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhöll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ǫlgagna... Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hveggjar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri.

(There are still others who must wait on people in Valhöll, serve drink and take care of the tableware and drinking-vessels... These are called valkyries. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and determine victory.)

The role of the *valkyrjur* is twofold, encompassing both the domestic function of serving at feasts in Valhøll and attending to the assembled guests and the martial function of apportioning death and victory in battle, which also credits the *valkyrjur* with a role in the administration of fate; indeed, Skuld, one of the *normir* (norns), a group of female supernatural figures who appear to be associated with the governance of fate (see ch. 15 of *Gylfaginning*), is said to ride into battle to choose the slain and govern the killings shortly after the description of the *valkyrjur*. The servile function of the *valkyrjur* in distributing drink at feasts corresponds with the distributary role of the *óskmey* in *Völsunga saga* (compare the drink given to Sigurðr by the *valkyrja* Brynhildr Buðladóttir before her runic dispensation in ch. 20, called *minnisveig* (memory-drink) in the prose introduction to *Sigrdrífumál*, on which the episode in *Völsunga saga* is based, and the ‘minnisöl’ (memory-ale) referenced in v. 45 of *Hyndluljóð*), but the nature of the gift bestowed is very different.<sup>130</sup> The delivery of a magical aid to conception, rather than alcoholic drink, assigns to the *óskmey* a part in the apportioning of dynastic fertility. Although she functions in the saga as an Odinic surrogate, ultimately realizing the desires of Óðinn (as the name *óskmey* suggests), it is apparently essential to the practice of Óðinn’s fertility magic that it be transported by a female figure (note also the intercession of Frigg and its part in Óðinn’s decision to send the apple), and fertility is thus conceptualized in both Odinic and feminine terms, even though the apple is eaten by King Rerir, rather than the queen.

According to the saga, the *óskmey* is the daughter of the giant Hrímnir, and this information about the *óskmey*’s descent imbues Óðinn’s handmaid with even further mythological significance. In Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the giants are often presented as being particularly involved in the procurement of fertility and prosperity. The relationship between Freyr and the giantess Gerðr, for example, which is documented in the eddic poem

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<sup>130</sup> *Sigrdrífumál*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 313-21; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

*Skírnismál* and in ch. 37 of Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, has often been interpreted as a manifestation of the *hieros gamos* motif (compare the marriage of Njǫrðr and Skaði discussed above, which may also have been related to the *hieros gamos* motif). The theme of fertility is especially pronounced in the account of the relationship provided in *Skírnismál*, in which Freyr's emissary Skírnir unsuccessfully offers Gerðr objects apparently symbolic of youth, fertility, and prosperity (eleven golden apples, perhaps identical to the rejuvenating apples of Iðunn, and the self-reproductive ring Draupnir) to make her receptive to Freyr's advances and later curses her to be as unproductive as the thistle destroyed at the end of the harvest if she rejects Freyr's suit (v. 31). Elsewhere, giantesses are involved in the allotment of prosperity and function as the patrons of kings and princes. In *Grottasöngur*, for example, the giantesses Fenja and Menja grind out peace and plenty for King Fróði until his relentless demands lead them to grind out an army to attack his kingdom instead, which Judy Quinn has read in terms of Fróði's 'greedy exploitation of resources', while in *Hyndluljóð*, the giantess Hyndla is persuaded by the goddess Freyja to provide the genealogical information required to secure the inheritance of Freyja's protégé Óttarr, which he has wagered with a man named Angantýr.<sup>131</sup> Both of these poems suggest that giantesses could perform the role of heroic patron in a manner similar to the *valkyrjur* and other supernatural female figures in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, their primary role being the governance of royal fortune and, by extension, the conferment of sovereignty or pre-eminence.

The giant descent of Óðinn's *óskmey*, then, is rooted in the association between giants, fertility, prosperity, and the conferment of sovereignty and therefore complements Óðinn's role in *Vǫlsunga saga* as dynastic progenitor and champion of aristocratic pre-eminence. In ch. 2 of the saga, the same *óskmey* who delivers the magic apple to Rerir is sent to Vǫlsungr by her father Hrímnir, and she is identified by name, Hljóð, for the first time.

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<sup>131</sup> Judy Quinn, 'Mythological Motivation in Eddic Heroic Poetry: Interpreting *Grottasöngur*', in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 159-82 (p. 178).

Völsungr and Hjód are married and have eleven children, the eldest of whom are the twins Sigmundr and Signý, described as being the ‘fremst ok vænst um alla hluti barna Völsungs konungs’ (foremost and best-looking of all the other children of King Völsungr). The birth of twins as the first offspring of Völsungr and Hjód is a mark of the hyper-fertility bestowed upon the Völsungar with the gift of the magic apple and amplified by the marriage of Völsungr not to an ordinary woman, but to Óðinn’s giant-descended *óskmey*. Arguably, the hyper-fertility of the dynasty culminates in the incestuous union of Sigmundr and Signý, from which Sinfjötli is conceived, a hero of purely Völsungar descent whose pre-eminence is relatively short-lived (ch. 7). In her desire to produce a son worthy of his Völsungar descent, Signý specifically uses her reproductive capacity to preserve by genetic transmission the superior qualities of her dynasty in their purest form.

Another instance of Óðinn performing his fertility function in the *fornaldarsögur* is to be found in ch. 1 of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. The saga opens with an account of an ale-brewing contest between Signý, the wife of King Alrekr, and Geirhildr, a contender for the king’s affections. Geirhildr is spotted at a previous ale-brewing by one of Alrekr’s men, who thinks she will be a good match for Alrekr and speaks to the king of her beauty. Meanwhile, Geirhildr is visited by a man named Höttr, who is Óðinn in disguise, while she is ‘at léreftum’ (dressing). Höttr makes a bargain with Geirhildr, promising that Alrekr will marry her if she calls on him for everything, and sure enough, after seeing Geirhildr, Alrekr arranges their wedding for that very autumn. Unfortunately, however, the king cannot remain married to both Signý *and* Geirhildr because of their ‘ósamþykki’ (disharmony), and the king announces that his wife will be the woman who brews the best ale for him when he returns from his journey. During the ale-brewing contest, Signý calls on Freyja, but Geirhildr follows instructions and appeals to Höttr, who spits in her ale-mash, though curiously he is not said to physically appear as Óðinn does in other *fornaldarsögur*. After spitting into the ale-mash,

Hǫttr ‘kveðst vilja fyrir tilkvámu sína þat, er var milli kersins ok hennar’ (said that he wanted in return her new arrival, which was between the tub and her), referring enigmatically to the baby now in her womb. Thanks to Hǫttr’s intervention, Geirhildr produces ‘gott öl’ (good ale), and although the winner of the ale-brewing contest is never explicitly revealed, the verse recited by Alrekr, in which he calls her ale ‘gott’, suggests that Geirhildr is victorious. That year, Geirhildr gives birth to a boy named Víkarr.

Although Víkarr is identified in ch. 1 as the ‘sonr Alreks ok Geirhildar’ (son of Alrekr and Geirhildr), we are perhaps to assume that this is not Alrekr’s child, but Óðinn’s. The act of spitting into the ale-mash is doubtless a substitute for sexual intercourse, the spit resembling semen and the ale-mash symbolic of Geirhildr’s reproductive potential. The idea that the spittle of the gods is especially potent derives in its Old Norse-Icelandic context from the myth of the mead of poetry, versions of which are told in *Hávamál* (vv. 13-14 and 104-10) and Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál* (chs 657-658). The primary power of the mead of poetry in the *Skáldskaparmál* account is its capacity to transform its drinker into a ‘skáld eða frœðamaðr’ (poet or wise man), but the first stage in the creation of the mead is concerned instead with the birth of life. In this version of the myth, the Æsir and the Vanir organize a peace-meeting to end a dispute between them and spit into a vat to seal their truce. The gods ‘vildu eigi láta týnask þat griðamark ok sköpuðu þar ór mann’ (did not wish to let that symbol of truce go to waste and shaped a man from it), and this man, whose name is Kvasir, is in possession of extraordinary wisdom. In addition to being intellectually potent, the spittle of the gods is capable of producing anthropomorphic life, and it is this aspect of the myth of the mead of poetry that encouraged the author of *Hálfs saga* to use the ale-brewing motif to reveal Víkarr’s biological father. Given Óðinn’s notoriety in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition as having seduced Rindr to beget Váli (see especially Book 3 of the *Gesta Danorum*), as well as other women, as we shall see shortly, it is likely that at some stage in the transmission of the

story of Víkarr's conception Hǫttr and Geirhildr were presented as engaging in sexual intercourse and thereby conceiving Alrekr's heir. In this case, the employment of the spitting motif functions as a symbolic nod towards the god and his female champion having done more than make a bargain when they met; indeed, that Hǫttr is explicitly said to visit Geirhildr while she is 'at léreftum' may euphemistically point towards their engagement in sexual intercourse. Óðinn's conception of Víkarr would be entirely consonant with his role as progenitor of kings and heroes elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, discussed in detail in the previous chapter and as we have seen in *Vǫlsunga saga* in the present chapter. Moreover, the mythological motif employed to suppress what would otherwise have been an Odinic seduction motif has been purposefully taken from a myth specifically associated with Óðinn, who is credited in the accounts of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál* with reclaiming the mead of poetry from the giants (see Chapter 3 for more on the Odinic associations of poetry and poets). The author of *Hálfs saga* may have wanted to suppress the sexual relationship between Hǫttr and Geirhildr, but not at the expense of his audience being unable to identify the real father of Alrekr's heir.

In ch. 13 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, an Odinic seduction motif is used openly in an account of a bargain similar to the one made by Hǫttr and Geirhildr in *Hálfs saga*. After making two unsuccessful attempts to attack the bride of her intended husband, Arinnefja enters the wedding feast of Hring and Ingibjörg at the moment the bride is being led to her bed and grabs the bridegroom (ch. 12). Next, she thinks that she has run off with Hring to some cliffs overlooking the sea and throws him from the summit, but when she comes to her senses, it turns out that she never left the bed and has only thrown Hring behind the bed-curtain. Arinnefja is captured and charged with making a journey to the underworld to fetch three treasures in order to save her life: an inflammable cloak, an undrainable drinking horn, and a self-playing chess set. The inflammable cloak is the third and final

treasure she acquires, and Arinnefja is forced to make a deal with Óðinn to procure it (ch. 13):

Fór ek nú niðr í undirdjúp at sækja skikkjuna. Fann ek þá höfðingja myrkranna. En er hann sá mik, mælti hann til samfara við mik. Þótti mér sem þat mundi Óðinn vera, því at hann var einsýnn. Bað hann mik eiga skikkjuna, ef ek vilda þat til vinna at sækja hana þangat, sem hún væri. Var þangat at hlaupa yfir eitt mikit bál. Lá ek fyrst hjá Óðni, ok hljóp ek síðan yfir bálit, ok fekk ek skikkjuna, ok er ek síðan skinnlaus um allan kroppinn. (ch. 13)

(Now, I went down into the under-deep to find the cloak. I found then the chief of darkness. And when he saw me, he said he wanted to sleep with me. It seemed to me that he must be Óðinn because he was one-eyed. He told me to have the cloak if I was willing to work to fetch it from the place where it was kept. There was a great fire to leap over in that place. First, I slept with Óðinn, and afterwards, I leapt over the fire, and I got the cloak, and since then, I have been skinless all over my body.)

Sexual intercourse with Óðinn is the price Arinnefja has to pay in order to acquire the cloak. It is significant that she sleeps with Óðinn before leaping over the great fire separating her from the cloak, for this suggests that she could not have survived the flames without having slept with Óðinn first, even though the liaison clearly provides no protection from the physical effects of burning. As we saw in the previous chapter, Óðinn was thought to have only one eye in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, and this detail is commonly included in descriptions of the god in the *fornaldarsögur* as a means of identifying him without having to name him, as we shall see in the course of this chapter. The influence of demonological interpretations of the pagan gods, which were discussed in Chapter 1, can also be detected in his description here, for the epithet ‘höfðingja myrkranna’ aligns Óðinn with Satan, who has similar titles in Christian tradition. The identification of Óðinn with Satan in this instance may have been encouraged by the underhanded way in which Óðinn extorts sexual intercourse from Arinnefja, comparable to the deceptive nature of Satan’s dealings in Judaeo-Christian mythology, particularly his role in the Fall of Man, as well as by the apparent

modelling of this episode on Classical myths and legends encompassing a journey to the underworld and interaction with its guardian.<sup>132</sup>

Elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Óðinn is portrayed as a great seducer. His seduction of Rindr in order to conceive Váli, for example, has already been noted, accounts of or references to which can be found in vv. 32-33 of *Völuspá*, v. 11 of *Baldrs draumar*, v. 3 of *Sigurðardrápa*, and Book 3 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, and in *Hávamál*, Óðinn tells of his frustrated attempts to sleep with Billingr's girl (vv. 95-102). In v. 3 of *Sigurðardrápa* and Book 3 of the *Gesta Danorum*, Óðinn's seduction of Rindr is achieved with magic, deceptively so in the *Gesta Danorum*, and awareness of such underhand Odinic courtship tactics no doubt lies behind the sexual bargain offered to Arinnejfa by Óðinn in *Egils saga einhenda*. Of course, Óðinn's liaison with Arinnejfa resembles closely his relationship with Gunnlōð in ch. 658 of *Skáldskaparmál*, in which Óðinn sleeps with Gunnlōð, daughter of the giant Suttungr, for three nights in exchange for three drinks of the mead of poetry. Naturally, the exchange is deceptive, for with each drink Óðinn drains one of the three vats in which the mead of poetry is stored, after which he transforms himself into an eagle and flies back to Ásgarðr with the mead in his crop. The Odinic bargain, witnessed in both *Egils saga einhenda* and *Skáldskaparmál*, was in all likelihood a standard motif in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, perhaps always sexual in nature and commonly combined with some form of deception on the part of Óðinn (the god's attempts to sleep with Billingr's girl in *Hávamál*, however, are a notable exception, for there it is Óðinn who is deceived by the object of his affections). The Odinic bargain in *Egils saga einhenda*, however, constitutes the inverse of the bargain with Gunnlōð in *Skáldskaparmál*; in the latter example, it is Óðinn who wishes to acquire a desirable object by means of sexual intercourse with Gunnlōð, whereas in

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<sup>132</sup> *Egils saga einhenda* seems generally to have been influenced by Classical myth and legend, since Egill's account of his time as the captive of a giant shepherd in chs 9-10 is clearly based on the story of Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer, *The Odyssey*, ed. and trans. A. T. Murray, rev. George E. Dimock, Loeb Classical Library, 104 and 105, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1, Book 9; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

*Egils saga einhenda*, it is the woman in the exchange, the giantess Arinnejfa, who hopes to obtain a precious item through her liaison with Óðinn. On the basis of other accounts of Óðinn's sexual relationships with various partners, in most of which it is Óðinn who stands to gain from the relationship, it might be assumed that placing Óðinn in the role of the acquirer in a sexual exchange was the more usual configuration of the Odinic bargain. The alternative configuration, in which the woman in the exchange seeks to obtain a desired object, establishes a change in the gender politics at work, providing an opportunity for the female participant of the Odinic bargain to benefit materially from granting sexual favours: when it is Óðinn who hopes to acquire some trinket from engaging in sexual intercourse, as in the cases of his seduction of Rindr and relationship with Gunnlōð, only Óðinn/Othinus secures some gain for himself (a son to avenge Baldr/Balderus from Rindr/Rinda and the mead of poetry from Gunnlōð), but when a female occupies this position, as does Arinnejfa, it is the woman in the exchange who benefits (Arinnejfa leaps over the fire and acquires the inflammable cloak), even though Óðinn also benefits in these situations in being able to indulge his lust. Since it is likely that the bargain made by Óðinn and Geirhildr in *Hálfs saga* is sealed with sexual intercourse, we might categorize their relationship as another Odinic bargain in which the woman in the exchange also benefits from the deal; not only is Óðinn able to father the child he intends to request at the ale-brewing contest and whose life he will demand prematurely as sacrifice in ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*, but also Geirhildr wins the contest and replaces Signý once and for all as Alrekr's wife. It would be tempting to interpret the bargains made with Geirhildr and Arinnejfa as attempts to accommodate a greater degree of female agency in the sagas in which they appear, but since medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian society was fundamentally patriarchal and its literature produced primarily by male authors, scribes, and compilers, it is perhaps more probable that the shift in the acquirer's gender from male to female in depictions of the Odinic bargain was instead

intended to communicate an altogether different ideological proposition: that woman does best who willingly submits to male desires.

After his intervention in the lives of Rerir and his queen, Óðinn next appears in *Völsunga saga* at the wedding of Siggeirr and Signý (ch. 3). The celebration takes place in Völsungr's hall, in the centre of which a great tree named Barnstokkr (Child-trunk) grows, and Völsungr furnishes the feast 'inum beztum föngum' (with the best provisions). In the evening, proceedings are disrupted by the entrance of an unknown man:

Sjá maðr hefir þess háttar búning, at hann hefir heklú flekkóttá yfir sér. Sá maðr var berfættur ok hafði knýtt línbrókum at beini. Sá maðr hafði sverð í hendi ok gengr at barnstokkinum ok hött síðan á höfði. Hann var hár mjök ok eldiligr ok einsýnn. Hann bregðr sverðinu ok stingr því í stokkinn, svá at sverðit sökkr at hjöltum upp.

(This man has dress of this kind, that he has a hooded and flecked cloak about him. This man was barefoot and had linen breeches tied around his legs. This man had a sword in his hand, and he goes to Barnstokkr, and over his head is a low-hanging hood. He was very tall and elderly and one-eyed. He draws the sword and thrusts it into the trunk so that the sword sinks up to the hilt.)

As the assembled guests watch silently, the old man explains that whoever draws the sword from the trunk will receive it from him 'at gjöf' (as a gift), after which he leaves Völsungr's hall as mysteriously as he entered. Many men attempt to draw the sword from the tree unsuccessfully; when Völsungr's son Sigmundur steps forward, however, he draws the sword from the tree 'sem laust lægi fyrir honum' (as if it lay loose for him). Of course, the sword is intended for the most promising youth of the dynasty that Óðinn himself engendered and marks not only the heroic pre-eminence of Sigmundur and the dynasty from which he is descended, but also the god's continuing patronage of the Völsungar in its next generation. In this context, the symbolism of the great tree Barnstokkr and Óðinn's thrusting of the sword into the trunk is manifold. On the one hand, it is impossible not to associate Barnstokkr with the world-tree Yggdrasill, with which Óðinn is especially connected not only in the name of

the tree, but also in the myth of Óðinn's hanging from the world-tree for nine nights to gain knowledge of the runes recounted in vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*; on the other, the name Barnstokkr clearly demonstrates that the tree functions as a representation of a family tree, signifying the extraordinary fertility gifted to the Völsungar and its heroic productivity: from the apple of Rerir has grown a mighty tree. Moreover, the insertion of the sword, an undeniably phallic symbol, into the tree by Óðinn might be interpreted as a reminder of the god's instrumental role in the pre-eminence of Völsungr's lineage and that the fortune of his dynasty rests in the hands of its patron; indeed, the gift of the sword may equip Sigmundr with a fine weapon with which to perform heroic exploits, but Óðinn's gift is also the cause of strife between Sigmundr and his new brother-in-law Siggeirr, whose offer to buy the sword from Sigmundr is rejected, insulting Siggeirr and causing him to exact revenge on Óðinn's favourite. In light of this, the relationship between Barnstokkr and Yggdrasill becomes one between microcosm and macrocosm, the vulnerability of the dynasty being comparable to the vulnerability of Yggdrasill, which according to Óðinn in v. 35 of *Grímnismál* 'drýgir erfíði/meira, en menn viti' (suffers pain more than men know) and is constantly under attack by the animals that live in its boughs.

Óðinn's gift-giving function is something we have seen twice before in *Völsunga saga*, first in his provision of warships and a retinue for Sigi (ch. 1) and later in his gift of the magic apple to Rerir and his queen (ch. 2); in the first instance, his gift is essential for Sigi's heroic success and in the second for the reproductive capacity of Óðinn's own dynasty. Óðinn's gift of the sword to Sigmundr falls into the same category as the gift of warships and a retinue to Sigi, being an item with which Sigmundr can demonstrate heroic prowess and pre-eminence, and Óðinn's distributary role can thus be seen to operate generally in the interest of heroic conduct. Later in the saga (ch. 13), Óðinn performs precisely this role in his interaction with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani by advising him to choose from a stud the horse Grani,

who happens to be descended from Óðinn's own eight-legged horse Sleipnir and was in all likelihood placed among the stud by the god himself. The gift of the magic apple to Rerir constitutes a different kind of gift from those given to further the heroic pre-eminence of the Völsungar; it is a magical gift, and one which functions solely in the interest of reproduction, albeit to ensure the genetic transmission of heroic pre-eminence from one generation to another. A similarly magical gift is brought to Sigmundr by a raven in ch. 8 of the saga, and since the ravens Huginn and Muninn appear as two of Óðinn's familiars in v. 20 of *Grímnismál*, ch. 38 of *Gylfaginning*, and ch. 7 of *Ynglinga saga*, we can be fairly certain that the gift has been sent by the god, who is employing the raven as his proxy in the same way that he used his *óskmey* to deliver the magic apple to Rerir. Under the influence of an enchanted *úlframr* (wolf-skin), Sigmundr severely wounds his son and nephew Sinfjötli by biting him in the windpipe. Later, Sigmundr sees two weasels, one of which inflicts on the other the same wound as Sigmundr has inflicted on Sinfjötli. The attacking weasel runs into the forest and returns with a leaf, which it places on the wound of its injured companion to heal it. It is after this that a raven arrives with a leaf for Sigmundr, who uses it to heal Sinfjötli in the manner demonstrated by the weasel. There is a clear parallel here between this episode and the presentation of the apple to Rerir, for magical objects are embodied in both instances in floral form, an unsurprising similarity given that the magic contained within the objects is restorative (the apple restores reproductive capabilities and the leaf heals Sinfjötli's wounds), just as the life-cycle of deciduous trees and perennial plants. As we have already seen, the great tree Barnstokkr that grows in Völsungr's hall represents the family tree of the Völsungar, and the magical apple and leaf operate in the same extended vegetation metaphor likening men to flora and the fortune of the dynasty to the fate of Yggdrasil.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Since the author made use of eddic poetry in composing his narrative, the extended vegetation metaphor in *Völsunga saga* may have been inspired by vegetation similes in v. 19 of *Guðrúnarkviða I*, in which Guðrún laments the death of Sigurðr and claims she is now 'svá lítil/sem lauf' (as little as a leaf), and v. 5 of *Hamðismál*, in which she reflects on the deaths of her kinsmen and says she stands alone 'sem qsp í holti' (like

With the aforementioned examples of Óðinn's gift-giving in mind, we can conclude that gift-giving occupied a central place in real-world constructions of the role of foster-father in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia and was given an equally central position in literary expressions of these constructions. The majority of Óðinn's appearances in *Völsunga saga* involve gift-giving of one sort or another, and gift-giving can therefore be regarded as the primary function of the god in this saga. Arguably, Óðinn's agency has been reduced by the author to that of the donor, as defined by Vladimir Propp in his morphological analysis of Russian folktales: 'It is from him that the hero (both the seeker hero and the victim hero) obtains some agent (usually magical) which permits the eventual liquidation of misfortune.'<sup>134</sup> That instances of Óðinn's agency correspond so neatly with Propp's description of an archetypal role in Russian folktales suggests a certain degree of folkloricization, but not to the extent that the eddic conception of Óðinn is entirely suppressed; rather, the provision of gifts essential for heroic success and magical aids to conception and healing retains something of the mythological character of Óðinn's battle-orientated interaction with heroes, clearly related to his position as the god of battle in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, and a vestige of his magical abilities in the form of the magical gift.

It is undeniable, however, that the operation of Óðinn's magic in *Völsunga saga* is not as free and wide-ranging as it is in eddic poetry; we do not, for example, see Óðinn use every one of the eighteen spells he claims to know in vv. 146-63 of *Hávamál*. On three occasions, Óðinn's magic is restricted to the provision of magical gifts (the apple, Sigmundr's sword, which is magically loosened when Óðinn's chosen hero draws it from Barnstokkr, and the leaf), the magic inhering in the objects, rather than in Óðinn himself. Similarly, the magic

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an aspen in the wood), her kinsmen slain 'sem fura at kvisti' (like a fir cut down). *Guðrúnarkviða I*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 329-34.

<sup>134</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, 9, Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics, 10, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 39.

involved in sending Brynhildr into an enchanted sleep comes not from the god, but from the *svefnþorn* (sleep-thorn) with which he pierces her, and that the action is narrated by Brynhildr, rather than presented to us as it happens, lends a degree of narrative distance to Óðinn's use of sleep-magic (ch. 20). The same restriction of Óðinn's magical operation in the saga is also apparent in the treatment of the Hnikarr episode in ch. 17, which differs significantly from its equivalent in *Reginismál*. In the poem, Hnikarr's boarding of Sigurðr's ship is followed by his dispensation of the omens (vv. 21-26), but this dispensation is omitted from *Völsunga saga*, in which only Hnikarr's calming of the storm is narrated. As well as limiting Óðinn's magical operation, the god's role as counsellor is also circumscribed by this omission, effectively removing from the conception of Óðinn in this saga the association with esoteric and arcane forms of wisdom so prevalent in eddic poetry, such as the runic knowledge he acquires in v. 139 of *Hávamál* and the eighteen spells he claims to know in vv. 146-63 of the same poem.

The omission of the omens dispensed by Hnikarr in *Reginismál* is not a case of silencing expressions of magical knowledge in *Völsunga saga* as a whole, however, for shortly afterwards Sigurðr receives instruction in runic lore from Brynhildr (ch. 20), and the saga author quotes seventeen verses from Sigdrífa's runic dispensation in *Sigrdrífumál* (vv. 6-22). Nor is Óðinn entirely prevented from imparting wisdom in *Völsunga saga*, since the god advises Sigurðr when he is choosing an appropriate steed in ch. 13 and instructs the hero how to prepare for and execute his killing of the dragon Fáfnir in ch. 18 (in the latter episode, the god is unnamed, but the description of Sigurðr's advisor as old and long-bearded clearly identifies the man as Óðinn). Evidently, heroic counsel is a properly Odinic domain, and it is only magical instruction from which Óðinn is excluded. In this context, the omission of Hnikarr's omens restricts Óðinn's agency to the heroic sphere; the eddic role of magical counsellor is transferred from Óðinn to one of his valkyries, and magical knowledge is

therefore characterized as a feminine domain (compare the similar omission of the prophecy of Sigurðr's fate spoken by his maternal uncle Grípir in *Grípisspá*; in ch. 16 of *Völsunga saga*, Grípir's prophetic gifts are noted, as is the fact that Grípir makes a prophecy, but the prophecy itself is not recorded, which may suggest that it is magical or prophetic utterance, rather than magical knowledge itself, that is perceived in the saga as a feminine domain).<sup>135</sup>

Closely related to Óðinn's position as the god of battle in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition is his role as psychopomp, a role he performs on multiple occasions in *Völsunga saga*. Doubtless, this role is derived from his governance of those warriors who fall in battle and his stewardship of the *einherjar* in the Valhøll complex, but his involvement in the deaths of heroes in *Völsunga saga* is not exclusively concerned with ensuring the collection and training of the best warriors in preparation for Ragnarøk, as it seems to be in a number of our surviving Old Norse-Icelandic mythological works. First appearing as psychopomp in ch. 10 to bear away the body of Sinfjötli, perhaps to Valhøll, Óðinn takes a more active role in orchestrating the death of Sigmundur, appearing in ch. 11 of the saga in his capacity as arbiter of victory to turn the tide of battle with King Lyngvi against him:

Ok er orrosta hafði staðit um hríð, þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hött ok heklu blá. Hann hafði eitt auga ok geir í hendi. Þessi maðr kom á mót Sigmundi konungi ok brá upp geirinum fyrir hann. Ok er Sigmundur konungr hjó fast, kom sverðit í geirinn ok brast í sundr í tvá hlúti.

Síðan sneri manfallinu, ok váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill, ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum.

(And when the battle had been going on for a while, then a man with a low-hanging hood and a blue cloak came into the battle. He had one eye and a spear in his hand. This man came against King Sigmundur and raised his spear before him. And when King Sigmundur struck hard, the sword came against the spear and broke apart into two pieces.

Afterwards, the tide of battle turned, and King Sigmundur's luck was against him, and many of his men fell before him.)

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<sup>135</sup> *Grípisspá*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 286-95.

The description of Óðinn's appearance here is similar to the description of the old man who disrupts the wedding feast of Siggeirr and Signý earlier in the saga; both are said to be one-eyed, wear a low-hanging hood and cloak, and are equipped with a weapon, a sword in the earlier episode and a spear in the later.<sup>136</sup> These two Odinic interventions bookend Sigmundr's heroic life and clearly function as call and answer, but the difference between a sword and a spear indicates that Óðinn has turned up on the battlefield in an altogether sterner capacity than he did in the earlier episode. Whereas the sword he thrusts into the trunk of Barnstokkr is the weapon of the hero, a prerequisite accoutrement for the performance of heroic exploit, the spear is the weapon of ritual. As was noted in the previous chapter, one of Óðinn's defining possessions in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition was his spear (named Gungnir in ch. 51 of Snorri's *Gylfaginning* and ch. 35 of *Skáldskaparmál*). Not only is a spear involved in Óðinn's account of his self-sacrifice in *Hávamál* (v. 138) and the sacrifice of King Víkarr in *Gautreks saga* (ch. 7), but it is also thrown by the one-eyed god over the host during the first war in the world in *Völuspá* (v. 24) and used by the euhemerized Óðinn to mark himself before death with the promise that all men killed by weapons would be dedicated to him in *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 9). In each of these examples, the spear is associated not only with death, but also with ritual (sacrifice and the dedication of slain warriors to Óðinn), and Óðinn's breaking of Sigmundr's sword makes for a fitting denouement of the hero's life: the spear of death and ritual shatters the sword of heroism (compare the death of Ásmundr berserkjabani (*Berserkir*-slayer) in ch. 18 of *Egils saga einhenda*, whom some men say was run through with a spear by Óðinn). Óðinn's breaking of the sword revokes the favour he bestowed on Sigmundr with its gifting, and Sigmundr himself notes this on his deathbed after the battle, in which he is mortally wounded following Óðinn's intervention:

“...Vill Óðinn ekki, at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði. Hefi ek haft orrostur,

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<sup>136</sup> Although their spheres of operation are different, the description of Óðinn's appearance on the battlefield against Sigmundr is also similar to the description of Víga-Glúmr's maternal grandfather Vigfúss in *Víga-Glúms saga* (see Chapter 1).

meðan honum líkaði.” (“...Óðinn does not wish that we should wield the sword, since it is now broken. I have won battles while it pleased him.”; ch. 12). Although Óðinn’s apparent abandonment of his protégé may seem unfair, it is important to remember that Sigmundr will be rewarded with a place in Valhøll for his death in battle (compare Rerir in ch. 2, who ‘ætlaði at sækja heim Óðin’ (intended to seek the home of Óðinn) after his death) and that the psychopompic role of Óðinn serves to reinforce the dependence of the Völsungar on the arbitration of its progenitor, as well as offer ideological consolation in the face of conventional wisdom: ‘Nú er sem mælt, at eigi má við margnum.’ (Now it is as said, that no one is able against many.).

Óðinn’s final appearance as psychopomp comes at the very end of *Völsunga saga* (ch. 42), and it is especially appropriate that the saga should be brought to its close with the final intervention in the lives of heroes belonging to or associated with the Völsungar by the originator of the dynasty. After urging Hamðir and Sqrli, her sons by Jónakr, to avenge the killing of her daughter Svanhildr (ch. 41), who is falsely accused of being the mistress of her future stepson and trampled underfoot by horses at the command of her suitor Jörmunrekkr (ch. 40), Guðrún prepares their armour in such a way as to make it invulnerable to iron (ch. 42). The armour does not, however, offer complete protection from injury, for Guðrún warns Hamðir and Sqrli ‘eigi skeðja grjóti né öðrum stórum hlutum’ (not to cause damage with stones or other large things) in their upcoming fight and that harm will be caused if they do. Naturally, the brothers ignore their mother’s warning, using stones to wound their enemies, and their breach of magical taboo prompts the arrival of Óðinn and his deadly instructions to Jörmunrekkr:

Þá kom at einn maðr, hár ok eldiligr, með eitt auga ok mælti: “Eigi eru þér vísir menn, er þér kunnið eigi þeim mönnum bana at veita.”

Konungrinn svarar: “Gef oss ráð til, ef þú kannt.”

Hann mælti: “Þér skuluð berja þá grjóti í hel.”

Svá var ok gert, ok þá flugu ór öllum áttum steinar at þeim, ok varð þeim þat at aldragi.

(Then a man came up, tall and elderly, with one eye, and said: “You are not wise people if you do not know how to kill these men.”

The king answers: “Give us advice about it if you can.”

He said: “You should stone them to death.”

And so it was done, and then stones flew at them from all directions, and that was the death of them.)

As in other instances of his appearance in *Vǫlsunga saga*, Óðinn is not identified by name, but by this stage in the narrative, it is unnecessary to provide anything more than the standard description of the chief god as old and one-eyed. This is the only instance in the saga of Óðinn occupying the role of magical counsellor, for his knowledge of how to circumvent the protective powers of enchanted armour evidently derives from his familiarity with magical laws and injunctions. In the eddic poem *Hamðismál*, which also provides an account of the doomed revenge mission of Hamðir and Sǫrli, it is Jǫrmunrekkr himself who issues the command to stone the brothers without any intervention from Óðinn, unless we understand the epithet ‘inn reginkunngi’ as meaning ‘the divinely-inspired’ in v. 25, and we might therefore assume that the appearance of Óðinn at Jǫrmunrekkr’s court in *Vǫlsunga saga* is the addition of its author, particularly since the involvement of Óðinn in the decision to stone the brothers is also absent from the allusive account of Hamðir and Sǫrli’s revenge mission in the surviving verses of Bragi Boddason’s *Ragnarsdrápa* (vv. 2-6) and from Snorri’s telling of the tale in ch. 42 of *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>137</sup> Given the restriction of Óðinn’s educative role elsewhere in the saga to the provision of heroic counsel and the circumscription of his magical operation in comparison to the same in eddic poetry, the decision to end the saga with an Óðinn seemingly closer to the eddic conception of the god and his magical knowledge may appear uncharacteristic, but since the purpose of Óðinn’s advice to Jǫrmunrekkr is intended to cut short the lives of two heroes, we may suppose that evidence of Óðinn’s magical knowledge is

<sup>137</sup> *Ragnarsdrápa*, in *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, VI, pp. 1-4.

permissible provided that it is used in the interests of his position as god of battle, which incorporates his psychopompic role, and patron of heroes; indeed, this same restriction can be observed in the operation of Óðinn's magic throughout the saga, for the magic apple facilitates the conception of an extraordinary hero and dynastic line, the magically loosened sword drawn from Barnstokkr by Sigmundr elects Óðinn's next dynastic champion, the restorative leaf heals the wound of Sinfjötli and circumvents the death of a warrior before his time, Hnikarr's calming of the storm ensures the safe arrival of Sigurðr in the kingdom of King Hundingr and success in avenging the death of his father, and Óðinn's use of the *svefnþorn* on Brynhildr punishes the *valkyrja* for awarding victory in battle to the wrong man.

It is possible to group the actions of Óðinn in *Völsunga saga* according to five categories: (1) actions that generate and promote the fertility of the Völsungar; (2) actions that temporarily or permanently stunt the male line of the Völsungar or heroes associated with the dynasty; (3) gift-giving; (4) the provision of heroic counsel; and (5) magical intervention. Óðinn's exploits in the saga can be divided between these categories, with inevitable overlaps, as follows:

(1) Actions that generate or promote the fertility of the Völsungar

- (a) Óðinn guides his son Sigi from his homeland after he has been outlawed for the murder of the slave Breði; Sigi is able to establish himself as king elsewhere and secure his lineage through marriage and the birth of a son;
- (b) Óðinn sends his *óskmey* to Rerir, son of Sigi, with a magic apple to circumvent the infertility of Rerir and his wife; Völsungr, from whom the dynasty of the Völsungar takes its name, is conceived and born following a prolonged gestation period.

(2) Actions that temporarily or permanently stunt the male line of the Völsungar or heroes associated with the dynasty

- (a) Óðinn, in the guise of a ferryman, removes the body of Sinfjötli, son of Sigmundr and Signý, after he has been poisoned;
- (b) Óðinn breaks the sword he gifted to Sigmundr, son of Völsungr, in battle, after which the battle turns against Sigmundr and he is killed;

- (c) Óðinn advises Jǫrmunrekkr to have Hamðir and Sǫrli, sons of Jónakr and Guðrún, stoned to death because their armour is invulnerable to iron, thereby eliminating the last warriors with a connection to the Vǫlsungar.

### (3) Gift-giving

- (a) Óðinn sends his *óskmey* to Rerir, son of Sigi, with a magic apple to circumvent the infertility of Rerir and his wife; Vǫlsungr, from whom the dynasty of the Vǫlsungar takes its name, is conceived and born following a prolonged gestation period;
- (b) Óðinn gifts a sword to Sigmundr after he has drawn it from Barnstokkr, the tree in Vǫlsungr's hall;
- (c) a raven, presumably sent by Óðinn, brings a magic leaf to Sigmundr, which he uses to heal the wound he inflicted on Sinfjötli under the influence of an *úlfhamr*;
- (d) Óðinn advises Sigurðr, son of Sigmundr, as he chooses a horse; Sigurðr chooses the horse Grani, who happens to be descended from Sleipnir, Óðinn's own eight-legged horse.

### (4) Provision of heroic counsel

- (a) Óðinn advises Sigurðr, son of Sigmundr, as he chooses a horse; Sigurðr chooses the horse Grani, who happens to be descended from Sleipnir, Óðinn's own eight-legged horse;
- (b) Óðinn instructs Sigurðr to dig more than one ditch to prepare for his attack on the dragon Fáfnir and explains to him how to kill the creature;
- (c) Óðinn advises Jǫrmunrekkr to have Hamðir and Sǫrli, sons of Jónakr and Guðrún, stoned to death because their armour is invulnerable to iron, thereby eliminating the last warriors with a connection to the Vǫlsungar.

### (5) Magical intervention

- (a) Óðinn sends his *óskmey* to Rerir, son of Sigi, with a magic apple to circumvent the infertility of Rerir and his wife; Vǫlsungr, from whom the dynasty of the Vǫlsungar takes its name, is conceived and born following a prolonged gestation period;
- (b) Óðinn gifts a sword to Sigmundr after he has drawn it from Barnstokkr, the tree in Vǫlsungr's hall;
- (c) a raven, presumably sent by Óðinn, brings a magic leaf to Sigmundr, which he uses to heal the wound he inflicted on Sinfjötli under the influence of an *úlfhamr*;
- (d) Óðinn, disguised as Hnikarr, is granted passage on Sigurðr's ship in stormy weather, and the storm subsides as soon as he steps aboard;
- (e) Brynhildr explains to Sigurðr that Óðinn pricked her with a *svefnþorn* for awarding victory in battle to the wrong man.

Although the boundaries between some of these categories are permeable, the divisions made are useful in providing a panoramic view of Óðinn's agency in *Vǫlsunga saga*. Other

permutations might be suggested, but the categorization employed here is sufficient to demonstrate the prevailing spheres of the god's operation.<sup>138</sup> Groups (1) and (2) constitute the two extremes of Óðinn's sponsorship of the *Völsungar*; the god is responsible for their genesis and therefore possesses and exercises the right to terminate the lives of individual heroes like Sigmundr and, indeed, the dynasty as a whole. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo sometimes presents this kind of behaviour as duplicitous and capricious (see, for example, Othinus's murder of his protégé Haraldus Hyldetan in Book 8), but Snorri notes in *Ynglinga saga* that both victory and defeat in battle were considered 'góðr' (good) to the Swedes, since those defeated would go to Valhøll (ch. 9), although this sentiment is by no means universal in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (compare the equivocal feelings of King Hákon góði (the Good; c. 920-61) about his arrival in Valhøll in vv. 12 and 15 of *Hákonarmál*).<sup>139</sup> In this respect, the agency of Óðinn serves an important psycho-social function for male warriors in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, providing not only an otherworldly explanation for the apparently arbitrary allotment of victory and defeat, but also the comforting promise of a heroic afterlife. In *Völsunga saga*, however, this function is less important than the ideological work Óðinn is employed to perform as dynastic progenitor; his early interventions are concerned with heroic succession and establish the prioritization of birth over ability and the importance of descent as validation of heroic prowess and pre-eminence, expressing in the process real-world anxieties about child maturation and inheritance. In the previous chapter, it was argued that Snorri articulates a model of rulership for thirteenth-century Scandinavia in both the Prologue to his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* according to which war and conquest must eventually give way to peace and plenty if a secure kingdom is to be

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<sup>138</sup> Óðinn's involvement in the death of Otr and payment of the otter's ransom in ch. 14 of the saga has not been included among the other Odinic interventions categorized in this chapter because the god does not act alone of the Æsir in this episode, as he does in all the other examples of his agency considered thus far. Since he is accompanied by Loki and Hœnir, and it is Loki who plays the dominant role in this story, it cannot be considered a specifically Odinic interaction with the heroic world and therefore falls outside of our consideration here.

<sup>139</sup> *Hákonarmál*, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, ed. Diana Whaley, 1, pp. 171-95.

established, and the conquest and defence of successive generations of the Völsungar in the early part of *Völsunga saga* expresses a similar model, even if this model is ultimately presented as being futile with the death of Sigurðr at the hands of another heroic dynasty.

Groups (3) and (5) above evince the greatest degree of overlap and demonstrate that the efficacy of Óðinn's magic in the heroic world depicted in *Völsunga saga* is circumscribed, operating primarily in the form of the magical gift or object and deployed solely in the interests of heroic succession; only Óðinn's calming of the storm as Hnikarr in the episode based on *Reginismál* (ch. 17) features the god performing one of the spells he claims to know in *Hávamál* (v. 154) and included by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga* in his enumeration of Óðinn's magical abilities (ch. 7), but even here the god is not shown actively performing spells or magical rites and the connection between Hnikarr's stepping aboard and the dropping of the wind must be inferred. In four instances, the transference of magical potency from Óðinn to the objects he uses or gives to his protégés partially dissociates the god himself from the practice of magic, and Óðinn's employment of his *óskmey* and a raven as his surrogates to deliver the apple and the leaf respectively effects one further remove from the practice of magic. The omission of the omens provided by Óðinn as Hnikarr in *Reginismál* in the equivalent episode of the saga strips the god of his predominantly eddic role as magical counsellor, a role fulfilled instead by Brynhildr, and his educative function is restricted to the provision of heroic counsel, as Group (4) above demonstrates. The admission of Óðinn's magical abilities in the saga suggests that the author was unwilling to completely dispense with the eddic conception of the god, but their curtailment, operating solely in the interests of Óðinn's role as dynastic progenitor and patron of heroes, indicates that borrowing from eddic tradition was specifically limited to the expression of the author's chief ideological concern: heroic succession. Throughout the saga, the author consolidates divergent Odinic traditions,

the eddic and euhemerized, the latter of which was discussed in the previous chapter, and both are made to converge in the presentation of Óðinn as patron and foster-father of heroes.

*Fostering Heroes in the 'fornaldarsögur'*

As in *Völsunga saga*, Óðinn's primary role in the remaining *fornaldarsögur* to be discussed in this chapter is that of the patron and foster-father of heroes, and it is clear that interaction between the eddic and euhemerized conceptions of Óðinn contributed to the gradual assimilation of the god to the folkloric figure of the Proppian donor by transferring the god and his operation from the mythological to the historical world. In line with his role as the foster-father or patron of heroes in these sagas, whose job it is to raise children with the necessary heroic and courtly graces, Óðinn is associated with the *íþróttir*, a series of aristocratic accomplishments including such skills as shooting, swimming, and poetic talent, and the progressively humanizing representation of the god this entailed required alternative strategies for the incorporation of mythological detail, one of which was the transference of Odinic roles, traits, and motifs from Óðinn himself to the hero in receipt of his patronage and foster-fathers not explicitly identified as Óðinn.<sup>140</sup>

In *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, a fragment of a saga detailing the lives of legendary Swedish and Danish kings probably based on the lost *Skjöldunga saga*, Óðinn features as the patron of King Haraldr hilditönn (War-tooth). Although Óðinn does not appear in person, at least explicitly, Haraldr discusses the god in terms suggestive of a prior teacher-pupil relationship, and there emerges in this discussion an educative role similar to the one we find Óðinn occupying in *Völsunga saga*. During preparations for the Battle of Brávellir, Haraldr sends his commander Bruní, the 'vitrastr' (wisest; ch. 8) of all those who are with the king,

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<sup>140</sup> For further elaboration of the *íþróttir*, see Geoffrey R. Russom, 'A Germanic Concept of Nobility in *The Gifts of Men* and *Beowulf*', *Speculum*, 53 (1978), 1-15.

and Heiðr to spy on how his enemy King Hringr has arranged his forces. On their return, Bruni informs the king that Hringr has deployed his troops in *svínfylking* (swine-formation), and Haraldr expresses his fear that this means he has lost the favour of his patron:<sup>141</sup>

Þá segir Haraldr konungr: “Hverr mun Hringi hafa kennt hamalt at fylkja? Ek hugða engan kunna nema mik ok Óðin, eða mun Óðinn vilja skjöplast í sigrgjöfinni við mik? Þat hefir aldri fyrr verit, ok enn bið ek hann, at hann geri eigi þat. En með því at hann vili nú eigi veita mér sigr, þá láti hann mik falla í orrostu með her minn allan, ef hann vill eigi, at Danir hafi sigr sem fyrr, ok allan þann val, sem fellr á þeima velli, gef ek Óðni.”

(Then King Haraldr says: “Who can have taught Hringr to deploy his troops in *svínfylking*? I thought no one knew it, except me and Óðinn, or can Óðinn wish to fail in the gifting of victory to me? That has never happened before, and yet I ask him that he not let that happen. But if he does not wish to grant me victory now, then let him cause me to fall in battle with all my army, if he does not wish that the Danes have victory as before, and all those slain, who fall on this field, I give to Óðinn.”)

As in *Völsunga saga*, Óðinn’s tutelary role is restricted to the provision of heroic counsel, the god apparently having first instructed Haraldr in the art of battle-formation and then his enemy Hringr. The conception of Óðinn here in *Sögubrot* is indebted to his roles as god of battle and psychopomp elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, both of which are central to his conception in *Völsunga saga*, as we saw in the previous section of this chapter; indeed, Haraldr’s realization that he might have lost Óðinn’s favour is strikingly similar to the words of Sigmundr on his deathbed in ch. 12 of *Völsunga saga*, and the dependence of heroic success on the patronage of Óðinn, which can be revoked at any time, is a theme common to the two works. A version of the story of Haraldr, Hringr, and the Battle of Brávellir is told also in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, in which Othinus teaches the *svínfylking* to both Haraldus Hyldetan and his enemy Ringo (Book 7 and Book 8), a battle-formation with which he is generally associated in Saxo’s history (see, for example, Book 1). The major difference

<sup>141</sup> *Svínfylking* is presumably an arrangement of men in successive lines of increasing number to form a wedge-shaped column resembling the narrowing snout of a pig.

between Saxo's version and that in *Sögubrot*, however, is the explicit identification of Haraldus's deputy Bruno (Bruni's counterpart) as Othinus, once a friend to the king and now disguised before him to decide his fate (Book 8). Entirely consonant with Saxo's characterization of the god as a malevolent figure generally in the *Gesta Danorum*, the duplicitousness of Othinus in apparently teaching the *svínfylking* to Haraldus's enemy and capriciously murdering Haraldus after being unmoved by his plea for victory in the battle against Ringo is deliberately pronounced by this difference in Saxo's version of the tale, and this can perhaps be attributed to the commingling of the euhemeristic and demonological interpretations of the pagan gods current in Christian thinking of the time. In *Sögubrot*, the informant role of Haraldus's commander and the king's death at his hands are retained, but Bruni is never explicitly identified as Óðinn. Having said this, that Bruni is noted as being the 'vittrastr' man in Haraldus's retinue and is still the slayer of the king in *Sögubrot*, an act for which no motivation is provided in this fragment, suggests a subtler attempt at Odinic characterization than we find in Saxo, for as we saw in the previous chapter, Óðinn is associated with wisdom elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, particularly in eddic poetry, and often appears to end the lives of his protégés or turn the tide of battle against them (see, for example, his rumoured role in the death of Ásmundr in ch. 18 of *Egils saga einhenda* and involvement in the defeat and death of Sigmundr in ch. 11 of *Völsunga saga*). The audience may be intended to infer from these clues that Bruni is really Óðinn, and in this case *Sögubrot* presents a figure much more enigmatic than we find in both Saxo and *Völsunga saga*, his definite identity being blurred with surreptitious signifiers unresolved by any conclusive revelation. Whether these signifiers originated with the author of *Sögubrot* or were found in the lost version of *Skjöldunga saga* on which *Sögubrot* is probably based is uncertain, but we might suppose that they were present in *Skjöldunga saga* and that Saxo's explicit identification of Bruno as Othinus and emphasis on his treachery is an alteration

symptomatic of his desire to present the god as a morally disreputable figure throughout the *Gesta Danorum*.

Bruni is not the only character in *Sögubrot* to be presented in Odinic terms, for the foster-father of King Ívarr, a man named Hǫrðr, is similarly portrayed as an Odinic figure. As is the case with Bruni, Hǫrðr is not explicitly identified as Óðinn, but we may be intended to infer that he is the god in disguise. In ch. 3 of the fragment, Ívarr musters his fleet against King Raðbarðr, who has married Ívarr's daughter Auðr without her father's permission. One night, while sleeping on the poop-deck of his ship, Ívarr has a portentous dream, and when he wakes up, he tells his foster-father Hǫrðr, who is standing 'í bjargi fyrir ofan bryggjuspörð' (on a rock below the head of the pier), about the dream and asks him to interpret it. Although Hǫrðr refuses to board Ívarr's ship and is reluctant to interpret the dream, he eventually informs the king that it is likely there will soon be a change of rulers in Sweden and Denmark, after which Ívarr and Hǫrðr engage in a hostile verbal contest with questions and answers replicating the following format:

Konungr mælti: "Hverr var Hálfðan snjalli með Ásum?"

Hǫrðr svarar: "Hann var Baldr með Ásum, er öll regin grétu, ok þér ólíkr."

(The king said: "Who was Hálfðan snjalli [the Brave] among the Æsir?")

Hǫrðr answers: "He was Baldr among the Æsir, and all the gods wept, but not like you.")

The contest between Ívarr and Hǫrðr functions much like *Vafþrúðnismál* in that its questions are concerned with mythological subject matter, specifically in this case with the gods and their human counterparts. Moreover, the reluctance of Hǫrðr to interpret Ívarr's dream and the hostility between the two speakers suggests an affinity with the generic features of *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, in which overt hostility between Óðinn and the *vǫlur* he questions in the poems is unmistakable. Ívarr's repeated commands that Hǫrðr come aboard

his ship and speak to him are twice met with the refrain “‘Hér mun ek standa ok heðan segja.’” (“Here will I stand and from here speak.”), which bears a striking resemblance to similar refrains in eddic poetry, such as the ‘[v]ituð ér enn – eða hvat?’ (know you yet, or what?) of *Völuspá* (vv. 27, 28, 33, 34, 38, 40, 50, 60, and 61) and “‘...Nauðug sagðac,/nú mun ek þegja.’” (“...Unwillingly, I told you; now I will be silent.”) of *Baldrs draumar* (vv. 7, 9, and 11). This exchange is clearly modelled on the generic and stylistic features of eddic poetry, specifically those poems involving a dialogue or contest comprising interrogation and the transmission of wisdom. As was noted in the previous chapter, Óðinn is one of the participants in many of these poems, including *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, and we can therefore consider this type of exchange to be particularly Odinic. Whether this conversation was present in the source version of *Skjöldunga saga* or originated with the author of *Sögubrot* cannot be ascertained, but it suggests a concerted effort to cast Hǫrðr as an Odinic character, who might conceivably be Óðinn himself. Arguably, Hǫrðr’s characterization as an Odinic figure is more explicit than that of Bruni, but we might suppose that both *Skjöldunga saga* and *Sögubrot* featured a series of interventions in the lives of kings and heroes by Odinic foster-fathers and Óðinn himself in a manner similar to the Odinic interventions we see in *Völsunga saga*, in which carefully deployed Odinic signifiers, such as his age and single eye, render the explicit identification of Óðinn unnecessary. This would suggest that these interventions were considered a prerequisite generic feature of dynastic sagas (compare the similarly Odinic foster-fathers in *Ynglinga saga*, such as Svipdagr inn blindi (the Blind) in ch. 64), no doubt developing from the ascription of divine descent in genealogies.

As well as invoking the eddic poetic genre to suggest that Hǫrðr is Óðinn himself, the author of *Sögubrot* also alludes to various mythological traditions with which Óðinn is associated by carefully selecting the gods referred to in the exchange between Ívarr and his foster-father. After Hǫrðr has identified Hálfðan snjalli as Baldr, he identifies Hrœrekr as

Hœnir, the ‘hræddastr’ (most frightened) of the Æsir, Helgi inn hvassi (the Keen) as Hermóðr, who ‘bezt var hugaðr’ (was best courageous), and Guðrøðr as Heimdallr, the ‘heimskastr’ (most foolish) of the Æsir. The gods appearing in this exchange and the epithets assigned to them are not randomly selected; rather, they are purposefully deployed to cast the exchange between Ívarr and Høðr in a mythological context. In ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga*, Hœnir is one of the hostages sent by the Æsir to the Vanir to seal a truce agreed between them after war; it turns out, however, that Hœnir is dependent on the wisdom of Mímir, another of the hostages sent by the Æsir, at meetings of the Vanir and shifts the burden of judgement to others whenever Mímir is not with him. With this in mind, the identification of Hœnir as the ‘hræddastr’ of the gods could be based on an interpretation of Hœnir’s reticence to give counsel as a fear of voicing his own opinions. The great courage of Hermóðr surely derives from the bravery he demonstrates in making a dangerous journey to Hel to demand the return of Baldr from the dead (see ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning*), while Heimdallr’s apparent sacrifice of his hearing, possibly the meaning of an obscure verse of *Völuspá* (v. 27), may have suggested the epithet ‘heimskastr’, for it is a foolish thing for the watchman of the gods, whose job it is to guard the bridge to Ásgarðr from the giants (see ch. 27 of *Gylfaginning*), to sacrifice one of the senses essential for the execution of his duty.

Each of the gods mentioned in the exchange is associated in one way or another with mythological conflict and violence, and these associations serve to frame the hostility between Ívarr and his foster-father in mythological terms. Baldr is unwittingly murdered by his blind brother Høðr at the instigation of Loki (see ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning*), and his death appears to have been a portent of Ragnarøk, the cataclysmic battle between the gods and the giants (in vv. 31-56 of *Völuspá*, the *völvu* refers to the death of Baldr immediately before telling of Loki’s capture and incarceration for his involvement in the murder and the events that will happen shortly before, during, and after Ragnarøk, and Snorri follows this

chronology in chs 49-51 of *Gylfaginning*). Heimdallr is similarly associated with Ragnarøk through his role as watchman of the gods; not only is the god responsible for blowing Gjallarhorn to awaken the gods after the enemy armies have assembled on the plain Vígríðr in ch. 51 of *Gylfaginning*, but he also fights with Loki at Ragnarøk. As the god who travels to Hel to bring Baldr back from the dead, Hermóðr is defined by his role in the story of Baldr's murder and its association with Ragnarøk, while Hœnir's reluctance to provide advice at meetings in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga* prompts the Vanir, who believe themselves to have been cheated by the Æsir in the hostage exchange, to behead Mímir. Referencing these gods leads ultimately to Ívarr's identification as the Miðgarðsormr, whose battle with Þórr, in some cases occurring at Ragnarøk, is recounted widely in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and depicted in various visual forms. All of these mythological allusions elevate the encounter between Ívarr and his foster-father to a cosmic struggle, suggesting that Hǫrðr is not what he seems and even that the verbal duel precedes a personal Ragnarøk for the king; indeed, immediately after the exchange with Hǫrðr, Ívarr angrily leaps from the ship at his foster-father, only for Hǫrðr to jump from the rock he is standing on into the sea and Ívarr to follow him, neither of them being seen again.

In addition to their association with mythological conflict and violence, the gods named in the dialogue between Ívarr and Hǫrðr are also connected to Óðinn. Most obviously, Baldr is Óðinn's son, and this Odinic affiliation might also extend to Hermóðr because of his role in the story of Baldr's death. Hœnir appears on a number of occasions as part of a triumvirate of gods including Óðinn (see, for example, his role in the creation of the first humans Ask and Embla in v. 18 of *Völuspá*, his presence in the story of the giant Þjazi's kidnap of the goddess Iðunn in ch. 65 of *Skáldskaparmál*, and his involvement in the death of Otr and payment of the otter's ransom in *Reginismál*, ch. 39 of *Skáldskaparmál*, and ch. 14 of *Völsunga saga*), and there are certain parallels between Óðinn and Heimdallr in Old

Norse-Icelandic literature, such as the combination of myths of Heimdallr and Óðinn in *Rígsþula*, noted by Ursula Dronke, and the similarity between Óðinn's sacrifice of his eye and Heimdallr's sacrifice of his hearing in *Völuspá* (vv. 27-28).<sup>142</sup> These connections to Óðinn are in all likelihood intended to imply that Hǫrðr is really Óðinn in the same way that the eddic echoes of the exchange are, and this argument becomes even more convincing when we consider the aquatic nature of the altercation between Ívarr and Hǫrðr, since a number of other Odinic encounters similarly take place by a body of water. The closest parallel is Óðinn's appearance as Hnikarr on an outcrop overlooking the sea in both *Reginismál* and *Völsunga saga*, which resembles Hǫrðr's position 'í bjargi fyrir ofan bryggjusporð'. In *Reginismál*, Hnikarr is stood 'á berginu' (on a rock; p. 300) on a 'bergnös' (rocky outcrop; p. 300), while in *Völsunga saga*, only a 'bergnös' (ch. 17) is mentioned. In Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, an Odinic old man on the shore waves his mantle to indicate to the hero Hadingus that he wishes him to sail into land, after which he teaches him how to arrange his troops and helps them to defeat the Bjarmians with magic (Book 1), while Sinfjötli's body is taken away by a suspiciously Odinic ferryman in *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* and ch. 10 of *Völsunga saga*, and the *senna* (quarrel) between Óðinn and Þórr in *Hárbarðsljóð* occurs across a fjord. These examples provide evidence of a type-scene that might be referred to as the aquatic Odinic encounter. The aforementioned manifestations of the aquatic Odinic encounter present Óðinn's interactions with a hero or king as his patron or foster-father, while the instances of the type-scene in *Sögubrot*, the *Gesta Danorum*, *Reginismál*, and *Völsunga saga* precede engagement in battle, which in *Sögubrot* does not take place, Ívarr having been dispatched by his foster-father before the battle can commence. The episode in *Sögubrot* also differs from the other incarnations of this type-scene in Hǫrðr's reluctance to board Ívarr's ship, which suggests either that certain versions of this encounter involved an

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<sup>142</sup> Dronke (ed. and trans.), *The Poetic Edda*, II, p. 175.

injunction preventing Óðinn from boarding ships or that the author of *Sögubrot* or *Skjöldunga saga* introduced one. Employing a version of the Odinic aquatic encounter can be considered another strategy of revealing Hǫrðr's true identity without explicitly identifying him as Óðinn, and we might attribute Hǫrðr's decision to lead Ívarr to his watery grave and prepare the way for the reign of Haraldr hilditönn, who similarly loses Óðinn's favour in the *Sögubrot* episode discussed earlier, to the king's failure to recognize his patron from the clues that have been provided. The situation here would then be comparable to that found in *Grímnismál*, in which King Geirroðr is killed after failing to identify Grímnir as his patron Óðinn and succeeded by his son Agnarr; perhaps Ívarr's fault lies in failing to ask his foster-father the crucial question: *Hverr var Hǫrðr með Ásum?* (Who was Hǫrðr among the Æsir?).

In both episodes of *Sögubrot* considered here, Óðinn's agency is restricted to the heroic sphere: disguised as Hǫrðr, he kills his foster-son Ívarr to make way for Haraldr hilditönn and perhaps also for failing to recognize the true identity of his patron, while later as one of Haraldr's commanders, who can be identified as the god on the basis of very subtle Odinic signifiers and Saxo's explicit identification of the king's deputy in his version of the tale, Óðinn teaches martial strategy to Haraldr's enemy Hringr and kills him in battle. The conception of Óðinn in *Sögubrot* shares with that in *Völsunga saga* the god's judicial role in determining the reign and succession of kings, the closest parallel being his elevation and demotion of Sigmundr in *Völsunga saga*. Despite a concerted effort to present Óðinn as an actor in the heroic world and foreground his role as god of battle and royal privilege, both works also display an interest in accommodating other mythological traditions about Óðinn, but the incorporation of these traditions in *Sögubrot* and *Völsunga saga* is heavily circumscribed. In *Völsunga saga*, for example, the wide-ranging magical abilities ascribed to Óðinn in eddic poetry and *Ynglinga saga* operate primarily through magical objects, rather than the god himself, while in *Sögubrot*, mythological traditions are incorporated through

allusion and generic suggestion, a textual circumscription indicative of a conceptual one. The representation of Óðinn in both *Sögubrot* and *Völsunga saga*, then, can be considered as an attempt to reduce the mythological status of the god by limiting his operation to heroic action (in *Völsunga saga*, for example, Óðinn's magic is employed solely in the interests of heroic pre-eminence and exploit).

Óðinn's role is similarly circumscribed in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, but on this occasion he is presented as the psychopompic judge of the fate of King Heiðrekr, rather than his patron or foster-father. In ch. 10 of the saga, Heiðrekr is said to have vowed not to deprive those who have wronged him of a trial by his judges, but anyone who can beat the king in a contest of riddles is to be released, although none have managed this before. A man named Gestumblindi, who has committed many offences, is summoned by the king and does not reckon much to his chances of being released, believing that the king's judges will sentence him to death and that he will be no match for the king in a riddle contest. Gestumblindi sacrifices to Óðinn and asks him for help, and later that evening, a stranger who looks identical to Gestumblindi and shares his name turns up and swaps clothes with his host. The second Gestumblindi is clearly Óðinn answering his disciple's plea for help, and he takes the real Gestumblindi's place by coming before Heiðrekr and chooses to participate in a riddle contest with the king.

As Torfi H. Tulinius has argued, the incorporation of the riddles that follow the disguised Óðinn's meeting with Heiðrekr, among which are riddles with identical solutions, is a sign that the author of the saga was in possession of a pre-existing riddle collection he was eager to incorporate wholesale, but his intent is not simply the preservation of these riddles; rather, the author is employing a typically Odinic encounter through which Óðinn can interact with the heroic world.<sup>143</sup> As was noted in the previous chapter and earlier in the

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<sup>143</sup> Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 84.

discussion of Ívarr and Hǫrðr's encounter in *Sögubrot*, Óðinn is often the participant in dialogues and contests involving the exchange and transmission of wisdom in eddic poetry, as in *Vǫluspá* and *Grímnismál*, and the conclusion of the riddle contest with the unanswerable question with which Óðinn secures his victory against the giant Vafþrúðnir in v. 54 of *Vafþrúðnismál* indicates that the contest in *Hervarar saga* is modelled specifically on this poem, or at least a tradition represented by both *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Hervarar saga*:<sup>144</sup>

“...Hvat mælti Óðinn  
í eyra Baldri,  
áðr hann væri á bál hafiðr?”

(“...What did Óðinn say in the ear of Baldr before he was carried to the pyre?”)

The wisdom contested in *Vafþrúðnismál*, however, is of a different nature from that of riddles. The questions asked in the poem concern mythological lore, such as the identity of the oldest beings in the cosmos (vv. 28-29) and from where Njǫrðr came to the Æsir (vv. 38-39), whereas the riddles, despite the fact that some have mythological solutions, represent a more playful form of wisdom than mythological knowledge; indeed, they are deployed by Óðinn to present what turns out to be a very dangerous encounter as a mere game, luring Heiðrekr into a false sense of security. Moreover, the riddles constitute a circumscription of Óðinn's wisdom similar to that present in *Vǫlsunga saga*, for if we imagine a hierarchy of wisdom with heroic counsel at the bottom and mythological knowledge at the top, riddles would come somewhere below mythological knowledge, representing a demotion of the wisdom Óðinn possesses in *Hervarar saga* from the more arcane elements of his wisdom in eddic poetry. Indeed, despite the preceding Óðinn-riddle, the unanswerable question comes rather unexpectedly, and its purely mythological register clashes with the ludic nature of the riddles, revealing Óðinn's true identity in the process. Its disruption of the contest leads even

<sup>144</sup> McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, ch. 4 (pp. 95-98).

to the activation of a motif borrowed from the myth of the mead of poetry, for after Heiðrekr has realized the identity of his opponent and draws his sword to attack, Óðinn transforms himself into a hawk and flies off, in some versions cursing Heiðrekr to be killed by slaves (in the account of the myth of the mead of poetry in chs 657-658 of *Skáldskaparmál*, Óðinn transforms himself into an eagle after acquiring the mead from Gunnlōð and flies back to Ásgarðr with the mead in his crop). The unanswerable question and Óðinn's subsequent metamorphosis are an irruption of the mythological in the heroic world, which is revealed to have been disguised by the apparently unthreatening nature of the riddle contest. As soon as Óðinn has been revealed in his mythological aspect, he disappears from Heiðrekr's sight and, indeed, the text itself, suggesting that the god can only operate in the heroic world for any prolonged amount of time with a non-mythological identity. We may see in this the textual expression of a process of conceptual circumscription undertaken by the author in his attempt to transform Óðinn into a figure suitable for the royal and heroic interests of the *fornaldarsögur*; certainly, the other references to Óðinn in the saga are distinctly devoid of mythological resonance beyond associations with battle and warriors and focus entirely on dynastic, religious-psychopompic, and martial concerns, being identified as the father of King Sigrlami in ch. 2 (and therefore corresponding with his position as progenitor of the Völsungar in *Völsunga saga*), having King Haraldr, his son, and his host dedicated to him by Heiðrekr in place of sacrificing his own son in ch. 7, and being invoked as an angered battle-god by Heiðrekr's foster-father Gízzurr in a verse he recites within earshot of the Huns in ch. 14.

In the contest between Heiðrekr and Óðinn in *Hervarar saga*, Óðinn has become a figure onto which the author can graft the fear of the unknown, embodying the potentially malevolent operation of fate that governs all in the heroic world and cannot be circumvented, even though it originates from the mythological world that the author of *Hervarar saga*

distinguishes from the heroic in his circumscription of Óðinn's role, apparently recognizing the different generic demands of mythological works and the *fornaldarsögur*. The Odinic characterization of Hǫrðr and Bruni in *Sögubrot* and the god's dynastic governance in *Völsunga saga* might also be said to embody the operation of fate, no doubt ultimately rooted in the Valhǫll-complex found widely throughout Old Norse-Icelandic literature, but there is a very clear difference between the presentation of Óðinn in *Sögubrot* and *Hervarar saga* and that in *Völsunga saga*. As Hǫrðr, Bruni, and Gestumblindi, Óðinn's actions are invariably hostile and capricious in a way they are generally not in *Völsunga saga*; with the exception perhaps of his role in the deaths of Hamðir and Sǫrli, his interventions in the lives of the Völsungar are largely positive, being instrumental in maintaining the heroic pre-eminence of the dynasty. It may be that the representations of the god in *Sögubrot* and *Hervarar saga* betray the influence of demonological interpretations of the pagan gods, for Óðinn's malevolent dealings with kings in these works are comparable in tenor to his appearances as a devilish trickster to tempt King Óláfr Tryggvason elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

In *Gautreks saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Óðinn's assimilation to the heroic context of the genre has placed him almost exclusively in the role of the foster-father of heroes. In chs 4 and 7 of *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn appears as the foster-father of the tragic hero Starkaðr and goes by the name of Hrosshárs-Grani (Horsehair-beard). Starkaðr is the most highly regarded of the warriors of King Víkarr (the son conceived by Geirhildr in *Hálfs saga*, whose father may have been Óðinn, as was suggested earlier in this chapter), and in ch. 10 of the saga, Víkarr's lot repeatedly comes up in divination to decide who is to be sacrificed to Óðinn to disperse unfavourable winds. Perturbed by this development, Víkarr and his men decide that a meeting should be held the following day to discuss the problem, but during the night, Hrosshárs-Grani wakes Starkaðr and asks him to accompany him, after which they sail to an

island together to attend a council of the gods. Once Hrosshárs-Grani sits in the twelfth chair at the council, the other eleven members greet him by the name Óðinn. The council takes the form of a verbal contest between Óðinn and Þórr, and its purpose is to determine the fate of Starkaðr. Óðinn gives Starkaðr a series of blessings, and Þórr counters each blessing with a curse according to the following format:

Óðinn mælti: “Ek gef honum skáldskap, svá at hann skal eigi seinna yrkja en mæla.”  
 Þórr mælti: “Hann skal ekki muna eftir, þat er hann yrkir.”

(Óðinn said: “I give to him the art of poetry, so that he shall not be slower to compose verses than to speak.”

Þórr said: “He shall not remember afterwards that which he composes.”)

In addition to poetry, Óðinn blesses Starkaðr with unnaturally long life, the best of weapons and clothing, moveable property, victory and prowess in every battle, and a superlative reputation among nobles, and it is in these blessings that we see something of Óðinn’s association with the *íþróttir*, one of which is poetic talent (see, for example, *Qrvar-Oddr’s* demonstration of poetic talent in ch. 9 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, which is discussed later in this chapter). Of course, Óðinn is presented elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as the god of poetry, being responsible for the reclamation of the mead of poetry from the giants in vv. 13-14 and 104-10 of *Hávamál* and chs 657-658 of *Skáldskaparmál*, but in this instance, poetry seems not to be presented in mythological terms, but in heroic terms, functioning as one of the gifts most necessary for the successful hero. The other blessings are not counted among the *íþróttir*, but many of them, such as the provision of the best of weapons and clothing, give to Starkaðr the prerequisite accoutrements of the highly accomplished hero. Óðinn’s role in blessing Starkaðr with poetic talent and other heroic gifts is consonant with his position as Starkaðr’s foster-father, comparable to Reginn’s role in equipping his foster-son Sigurðr with the *íþróttir* in ch. 13 of *Vǫlsunga saga*, including ‘tafl ok rúnar ok tungur

margar at mæla, sem þá var títt konungasonum, ok marga hluti aðra' (chess and runes and to speak many tongues, as was the custom for the sons of kings, and many other things). That the enunciation of Starkaðr's fate takes the form of a verbal contest invites comparison with the contests in which the eddic Óðinn participates, in particular the contest between Óðinn and Þórr in *Hárbarðsljóð*; indeed, the author seems to draw on the same tradition as the eddic poem in his association of Óðinn with the nobility and Þórr with commoners, for Óðinn says Starkaðr will have the best reputation among nobles, while Þórr says the common people will hate him. Rather than resembling a contest of mythological wisdom, however, the exchange in the saga is instead akin to the *senna*, in which the two gods attempt to outdo each other not in insults, but in the administration of good and bad fate. The contest is thus closer to *Lokasenna* than it is to *Vafþrúðnismál* and inhabits more appropriately the heroic context of the *fornaldarsögur*, especially since *sennur* are often included in heroic eddic poems, such as those between Sinfjötli and Guðmundr in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and Atli and Hrímgæðr in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, functioning as a prelude to battle in which the participants boast of their prowess and accuse the opponent of bad conduct.<sup>145</sup> The central concern of the contest in *Gautreks saga* is what makes for a good heroic life and what makes for a bad one, and given Óðinn's interest in battle and the hero elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is only fitting that the verbal contest should have been used in this way.

In the version of this story told in the *Gesta Danorum*, Þórr is not involved in determining the fate of Starkaðr. Instead, it is Othinus who bestows both blessing and curse, and Saxo claims that he only made Starcatherus renowned for courage and spell-making so that he might commit abominable deeds, including the killing of King Wicarus. Whether the involvement of Þórr was removed by Saxo, an alternative tradition, or the invention of the author of *Gautreks saga* is unclear, but the attribution of the curses to Þórr reduces the

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<sup>145</sup> *Lokasenna*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 408-21; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

demonological aspects of Óðinn's character, which are amplified in Saxo's account. It enables Óðinn to fulfil the role of foster-father less problematically, being responsible for blessing Starkaðr in a manner essential for heroic success, but the double-edged nature of Óðinn's patronage and his potential capriciousness remains in his demand that Starkaðr send Víkarr to him to repay the blessings he has bestowed on him. Óðinn provides Starkaðr with a spear that will appear to be only a *reyrsproti* (reed-stalk) and explains to him how to go about sacrificing Víkarr. In the morning, Starkaðr arranges a mock-sacrifice using apparently innocuous items and acts as if carrying out the decision of Víkarr's counsellors to pretend to sacrifice the king; it becomes clear, however, that he has been following the instructions of Óðinn from the night before, for at the moment of the mock-sacrifice, Starkaðr's contrivance becomes an instrument of death and the king is killed:

Þá lét Starkaðr lausan furukvistinn. Reyrsprotinn varð at geir, ok stóð í gegnum konunginn. Stofninn fell undan fótum honum, en kálfsþarmarnir urðu at viðju sterkri, en kvistrinn reis upp ok hóf upp konunginn við limar, ok dó hann þar.

(Then Starkaðr let loose the fir-bough. The reed-stalk became a spear and stuck in the king. The tree-stump fell from beneath his feet, and the calf's intestines became a strong withy, and the bough rose up and lifted up the king into the branches, and he died there.)

Although his sacrifice of Víkarr makes him a much-hated man and Óðinn's demand that Starkaðr perform the killing might therefore seem to correspond more with the demonologically-influenced representations of Óðinn in *Sögubrot* and *Hervarar saga*, the transposition of the curses to Þórr in *Gautreks saga* has transformed Óðinn's duplicitousness from the marker of wickedness it is presented as in the account of Starkaðr in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* into a manifestation of the arbitrary and uncontrollable nature of heroic and royal fate. In this, the saga's portrayal of the god is close to the presentation of Óðinn as the judge of dynastic fortune in *Völsunga saga*, and the high probability that Víkarr is Óðinn's son

perhaps justifies the god's psychopompic role here in the same way that descent from Óðinn justifies it in relation to the *Vǫlsungar* (it is notable that this episode constitutes another example of a story concerning Óðinn and the death of his son, whose sacrificial context could be compared to the myth of the death of Baldr).

Despite the council of the gods being an overtly mythological motif (we see the gods gather together to decide who should create the lord of the dwarfs in v. 9 of *Vǫluspá*, for example, and Þórr must wade rivers every day 'er hann dæma ferr/at aski Yggdrasils' (when he goes to judge at the ash of Yggdrasill) in v. 29 of *Grímnismál*), its mythological operation is circumscribed in *Gautreks saga* in a manner we have perhaps come to expect in our analysis of the depiction of Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur*. The council takes place in an area removed from the heroic world: in a clearing within a wood on an island; moreover, Hrosshárs-Grani wakes Starkaðr near midnight to travel to the island. The circumscription of the mythological and its operation in this saga, then, is inscribed in its geographical isolation; the gods and their judgements have an impact on the heroic world, but the freedom of their governance must be conceptually curtailed to suit the heroic context of the *fornaldarsögur*.

The false name Óðinn adopts as Starkaðr's foster-father represents a similar restriction of the mythological, this time by linguistically contracting an entire mythological complex. Hrosshárs-Grani is a doubly equine name, incorporating not only an inflected form of the noun compound *hrosshár*, but also the name of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's steed Grani, who is descended from Óðinn's own horse Sleipnir. The name given by Óðinn in *Qrvar-Odds saga* can be added here as a similarly equine appellation, for while Rauðgrani literally means 'Red-beard', the element *-grani* echoes the name of Sigurðr's horse just as Hrosshárs-Grani does. On the basis of Óðinn's equine names, E. O. G. Turville-Petre considers whether Óðinn might have been believed to have taken the form of the horse in some quarters, but regardless of this, we can at least conclude that Óðinn was associated with the horse in Old Norse-

Icelandic tradition.<sup>146</sup> In addition to having equine names, Óðinn possesses a number of horse-god attributes. Not only is one of Óðinn's familiars the eight-legged horse Sleipnir, referred to in ch. 15 of *Gylfaginning* as the 'baztr' (best) of all the horses of the Æsir, but the god also helps Sigurðr to choose the pre-eminent horse of a stud, who turns out to be descended from Óðinn's own horse Sleipnir and whose name, like that of Starkaðr's foster-father, is Grani, in ch. 13 of *Vǫlsunga saga*. As was suggested in the discussion of Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* in the previous chapter, the horse appears to have had sacrificial associations in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, encapsulated most clearly in the name of the world-tree Yggdrasill, which appears to mean 'Yggr's steed', Yggr being one of the names of Óðinn in vv. 53 and 54 of *Grímnismál*. Óðinn hangs for nine nights from Yggdrasill in order to acquire knowledge of the runes in vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*, sacrificing himself to himself in a manner that suggests a mythological complex in which sacrifice is expressed in terms of Óðinn riding a horse. In this respect, the name Hrosshárs-Grani is an appropriate appellation for Óðinn in this episode of *Gautreks saga*, for he exercises the role of sacrificing psychopomp under an equine name that may be intended to allude to, as well as contain, mythico-religious traditions relating to horses, hanging, and Óðinn.

Before arriving at the council, Óðinn is exclusively called Hrosshárs-Grani, only being addressed by his true name by the other gods present at the assembly; as soon as the council is over, however, the author reverts to calling the god Hrosshárs-Grani, and it seems that this is intended to activate additional mythological symbolism relating to the horse. In Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, the mythological significance of the horse lies in its ability to cross the boundaries between worlds. In vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*, for example, the world-tree Yggdrasill enables Óðinn to pass from the upper world to the underworld, from which he returns with knowledge of the runes. In ch. 17 of *Skáldskaparmál*, Sleipnir crosses the

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<sup>146</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 56-57 (p. 57) and Michael Hart, 'Óðinn and the Horse in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature' (forthcoming).

boundary between the world of the gods and the world of the giants, allowing Óðinn to travel into Jötunheimar and challenge the giant Hrungrnir, while in ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning*, Sleipnir leaps the gate of Hel in the story of Hermóðr's unsuccessful attempt to bring Baldr back from the dead. Frigg's servant Gná rides the horse Hófvarfnir into all the worlds as she carries out her mistress's bidding in ch. 35 of *Gylfaginning*, Skírnir rides a horse capable of passing through the *vaftrlogi* (flickering flame) in vv. 8 and 9 of *Skírnismál*, a feat also performed by Sigurðr's horse Grani in ch. 27 of *Völsunga saga*, and Óðinn rides on Sleipnir to Niflhel in *Baldurs draumar* to question a *völva* about Baldr's disturbing dreams. Extending the boundary-crossing capabilities of horses elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Óðinn's equine name in *Gautreks saga* might be said to facilitate his travel between the heroic world and the mythological, providing him with a legitimate heroic identity that can be distinguished from his mythological identity and enable him to interact with the heroic world. The name Hrosshárs-Grani is a linguistically, but not semantically, restrictive space into which mythological associations can be distilled in mnemonic form and operates in tandem with the geographically isolated space of the island on which the council of the gods takes place: the mythological Óðinn may interact with the heroic world, but the operation of the mythological must be circumscribed, as it is in this episode of *Gautreks saga* both spatially and linguistically.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Óðinn does not feature in the shorter version of *Qrvar-Odds saga*; in the longer version, he appears twice as a man named Rauðgrani.<sup>147</sup> Qrvar-Oddr's first encounter with Rauðgrani occurs in ch. 19 of the saga and follows the hero's interaction with the giant Hildir and his sojourn in Risaland in ch. 18. One

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<sup>147</sup> On the Rauðgrani episodes in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, see Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 163-64 and Fulvio Ferrari, 'Gods, Warlocks and Monsters in the *Qrvar-Odds saga*', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature*, ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick, 1, pp. 241-47 (244-45) and 'Qgmundr: The Elusive Monster and Medieval "Fantastic" Literature', in *Studi anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell*, ed. Maria Elena Ruggerini (Cagliari: Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Cagliariitana, 2009), pp. 365-77.

day, Qrvar-Oddr emerges from the forest into which he disappears after taking a sword, a helmet, and a shield left for him by Hildir (ch. 18). He comes across a man who is ‘í bláflekkótttri heklu’ (in a blue-speckled cloak), wears ‘uppháva skó’ (high shoes), and has a ‘reyrsproti í hendi’ (reed-stalk in his hand; compare the spear given to Starkaðr by Hrosshárs-Grani, who is really Óðinn, for the sacrifice of King Víkarr in ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*, which appears to others as a *reyrsproti*); he wears gold-embroidered gloves, is averagely-sized and ‘kurteisligr at sjá’ (courteous to look at), has a hood covering his face, and sports a red moustache and beard, hence the name Rauðgrani. After his final appearance in the saga in ch. 23, it is said that some people believe Rauðgrani was Óðinn, and it is significant in this respect that Qrvar-Oddr swears blood-brotherhood with Rauðgrani in ch. 19, for in v. 9 of *Lokasenna*, Loki claims that Óðinn swore blood-brotherhood with him, suggesting that the decision to have Rauðgrani as Qrvar-Oddr’s blood-brother, rather than his foster-father, as he appears elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, may derive from this mythological tradition. Despite the fact that Rauðgrani is Qrvar-Oddr’s blood-brother, however, the role he ultimately fulfils in the saga is that of foster-father, limited as it is on both occasions to the provision of information regarding Qrvar-Oddr’s primary antagonist Qgmundr that prompts heroic exploit. In ch. 19, Rauðgrani informs Qrvar-Oddr of Qgmundr’s backstory, occupying Óðinn’s traditional educative role and allowing the author to use Rauðgrani as an authorial surrogate in order to provide additional information about Qgmundr that might not otherwise have a place in the saga; in ch. 23, Rauðgrani performs the same role, reluctantly revealing to Qrvar-Oddr where he can find Qgmundr, and in this, Óðinn becomes something of a *deus ex machina*. Although in each of these instances Rauðgrani attempts to dissuade Qrvar-Oddr from pursuing Qgmundr, Qrvar-Oddr is nevertheless spurred on to heroic action (perhaps Rauðgrani’s true intent in suggesting a man may not be capable of defeating Qgmundr), killing Qgmundr’s monstrous mother in ch. 20,

who according to Rauðgrani in the previous chapter has been sent by Qgmundr to kill Qrvar-Oddr, and unsuccessfully attacking Qgmundr again.

According to the narrator in ch. 20, however, ‘sjaldan var Rauðgrani þá við staddr, er nokkurar mannaunir váru í, en inn ráðugasti var hann, þá er þess þurfti við, ok latti sjaldan stórvirkja’ (Rauðgrani was seldom present when there were any dangers, but he was the best at giving advice whenever it was needed and rarely held them back from great deeds). Later in the saga (ch. 23), the narrator reiterates this, claiming that Rauðgrani hardly ever did anything to endanger his life, but was the hardest at providing counsel. In contrast to the depiction of Óðinn as a highly accomplished warlord in the Prologue to Snorri’s *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* and to his combative role in some of the *fornaldarsögur* considered thus far (his involvement in the deaths of Sigmundr in ch. 11 of *Völsunga saga* and Ásmundr in ch. 18 of *Egils saga einhenda*, for example), the redactor of the longer version of *Qrvar-Odds saga* removes Óðinn completely from the sphere of heroic action. Instead, his function in the saga is strictly limited to the provision of heroic counsel, much more severely than in *Völsunga saga*, in which Óðinn performs a much wider range of functions than he does elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*. The two references to Rauðgrani’s avoidance of dangerous heroic action transform Óðinn into a parodic figure of fun; there is something hilariously hypocritical about a god who prompts others to undertake feats of bravery and provides excellent heroic advice, yet undertakes no such exploits himself, especially when this god happens to be the god of battle in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition.

Despite the parodic role of Óðinn in the longer version of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, traditional Odinic traits and motifs are nevertheless employed in the representation of Qrvar-Oddr elsewhere in the saga. These Odinic traits and motifs are largely concentrated in an extended stay at the court of King Herraúðr (chs 24-27) and begin with Qrvar-Oddr’s retreat from society following an unsuccessful second attack on Qgmundr and the loss of his blood-

brother Garðarr in the process (ch. 23). Overcome with sorrow, he leaves the company of men and takes up the life of a wanderer, eventually adopting a disguise comparable to those frequently used by Óðinn elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, such as his appearance as

Hrosshárs-Grani in *Gautreks saga*:

Ferr hann þá at flutningum, þar sem þeira þarf við, en stundum ferr hann um merkr ok skóga, ok ratar hann harðla stóra fjallvegu. Hann hefir þá örvamæli sinn á baki sér. Ferr hann nú víða um lönd, ok kemr svá ráði hans, at hann hafði þat eitt til atvinnu sér, er hann skaut fugla fyrir sik. Hann spennir þá at sér um bol ok færtr næfrum. Síðan gerir hann sér næfrahött mikinn á höfuð sér. Er hann ekki öðrum mönnum líkr, meiri miklu en allir menn aðrir, er hann er allr þakinn næfrum.

(He goes then by transport to wherever he needed, and he sometimes travels through forests and woodland, and he roams very great mountain-roads. All the while, he has his quiver of arrows on his back. He travels now widely through different lands, and the time comes when he shot birds for himself, so that he had a means of subsistence. He fastens birch-bark then around his body and feet. Afterwards, he makes himself a large bark-hat for his head. He is not like other men, being bigger than all other men when he is all covered in bark.)

Dressed in his new attire, Qrvar-Oddr emerges from the forest and approaches a small farmhouse, where a man whose name turns out to be Jólfr is chopping firewood. After being greeted and asked for his name by the man, who is described as ‘lítill vexti ok hvítr fyrir hærum’ (small in stature and white with grey hair), Qrvar-Oddr introduces himself as Næframaðr (Bark-man), thus concealing his identity in a typically Odinic manner.

Næframaðr stays for the night at Jólfr’s farmhouse, much to the annoyance of Jólfr’s wife, who claims that her and her husband have nothing to offer him in the way of hospitality.

Later in the evening, however, Næframaðr places a good knife with two rings on it, one made of gold and the other silver, on the plate set before him on the table. After telling the story of how he came by the knife, Næframaðr gives it to Jólfr, and the hosts and their guest eat and go to bed. On the following day, Jólfr places beside the plate ‘steinörvar þrjár’ (three stone arrows), which are so large and fair that Næframaðr has never seen their like before. Jólfr

offers them to Næframaðr, and although the bark-clad guest initially believes he has no need of them, he accepts the gifts after Jólfr reveals that he knows without having to be told that Næframaðr is really Qrvar-Oddr, that he is in possession of the three arrows called Gusisnautar (Gusir's Gifts; for more on these arrows, see ch. 3 of *Ketils saga hængs*), and that there might be a time in the future when Gusisnautar fail him and the stone arrows save him.<sup>148</sup> Since the role of Jólfr here corresponds so closely to the gift-giving function of the Proppian donor, as Óðinn's position as patron and foster-father of heroes does in a number of the sagas considered thus far (*Volsunga saga* and *Gautreks saga*, for example, in the latter of which gift-giving is a central unifying theme of the saga), it seems that both Qrvar-Oddr and Jólfr are presented as Odinic figures in this episode. Consonant with the general tendency to reduce or suppress the less easily assimilated mythological aspects of Óðinn and the Odinic observed throughout this chapter, both Qrvar-Oddr and Jólfr are Odinic in purely heroic terms.

Retreating into the wilderness signifies mental instability in medieval romance, featuring most notably in stories of Sir Tristan, and it is likely that the influence of this motif has been brought to bear on Qrvar-Oddr's own escape into the wilderness.<sup>149</sup> Its combination with recognizably Odinic motifs in the representation of Qrvar-Oddr's disguise as Næframaðr and the gift-giving role of Jólfr suggests the transformation of the heroic and Odinic into something more courtly under continental influence, which can also be observed in the description of Rauðgrani's clothing and accoutrements in ch. 19 of the saga, among which the traditionally Odinic *reyrsproti* (present also in ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*) is accompanied by the much more courtly gold-embroidered gloves. It transpires that the introduction of Odinic motifs in Qrvar-Oddr's characterization and the gift-giving role of Jólfr is preparing the way

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<sup>148</sup> *Ketils saga hængs*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 149-81; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, 'The Madness of Sir Tristram', in Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, 2 vols (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), I, pp. 376-410.

for Qrvar-Oddr's reintegration into society after his self-imposed exile in the wilderness, effected by trials of the *íþróttir* suggestive of an even more firmly cemented association between Óðinn and heroic accomplishments than found previously in the blessings issued by the god in *Gautreks saga*. After Qrvar-Oddr's stay with the farmer, Jólfr takes him to the court of King Herraudr, where the hero is forced to compete in three contests with Sigurðr and Sjólftr, Herraudr's two most important men, each contest being prompted by wagers made between the two men and Qrvar-Oddr's companions Óttarr and Ingjaldr as to whether they or Qrvar-Oddr are the more accomplished at certain activities (chs 26-27; these wagers are triggered by Qrvar-Oddr's extraordinary hunting prowess in ch. 25). In the three contests, Qrvar-Oddr demonstrates his shooting prowess, his swimming abilities, and his high tolerance for alcohol and poetic talent, all of which are attributes elsewhere considered prerequisite for the successful hero (see, for example, the inclusion of swimming and shooting among the activities of Jarl's children in vv. 39 and 40 of *Rígsþula*).

The most Odinic contest is the poetic trial, the last of the contests and one which involves the participants taking turns in draining horns of alcohol and reciting poetry afterwards. Although there is no explicit reference to the mead of poetry in this contest, it is difficult not to make the connection between alcohol and poetry that pervades Old Norse-Icelandic tradition (see Chapter 3, especially the discussion of two very similar episodes in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*), poetic talent being attributed to intoxication with the mead of poetry in the account of its attendant myth in chs 657-58 of *Skáldskaparmál*. The purpose of this mythological echo, however, is fundamentally heroic, allowing Qrvar-Oddr to demonstrate his total mastery of the *íþróttir*; indeed, his ability to compose poetry under the influence of vast quantities of ale exceeds that of Sigurðr and Sjólftr to such an extent that he continues to create verses even after his victory has been secured:

Þá varð óþ mikit í höllinni af þessu, er Oddr hafði kveðit, ok drekka þeir af hornum sínum, en Oddr sezt niðr. Konungsmenn hlýða skemmtan þeirra. Enn færa þeir Oddi hornin, ok vinnr hann skjótt um þau bæði. Eftir þat ríss Oddr upp ok gengr fyrir þá ok þykkist vita, at nú sígr at þeim drykkrikkinn ok allt saman, at þeir váru fyrir lagðir í skáldskapnum.

(Then there was a great shouting in the hall because of this, when Oddr had spoken, and they [Sigurðr and Sjólf] drink from their horns, but Oddr sat down. The king's men are captivated by their entertainment. Still, they bring the horns to Oddr, and he quickly dispatches them both. After that, Oddr got up and walks over to them and seems to know that now the drink intoxicates them completely, that poetry was beyond them.)

The effect of the ale on Sigurðr and Sjólf is more like that of the *ómínnis hegri* (heron of forgetfulness) in v. 13 of *Hávamál* than it is that of the mead of poetry as described by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*; its effect on Qrvar-Oddr, however, is consonant with the equation of poetic composition and intoxication with or creation of the mead of poetry found widely in skaldic poetry (see Chapter 3), allowing the hero as it does to compose more verses than his opponents, whose increasing intoxication eventually incapacitates them. Since poetry is also conceived of as the gift and due of Óðinn in skaldic poetry (see Chapter 3), deriving from his reclamation of the mead from the giants in both *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál*, Qrvar-Oddr proves his heroic superiority once and for all in typically Odinic fashion.

Qrvar-Oddr participates in the contests under his false name Næframaðr until after the swimming contest, when he reveals his real name, but not his family, to King Herraudr. It is not until after the poetic contest that he reveals his lineage as well, and the contests can be seen as a gradual process of disclosure leading ultimately to conclusive proof of Qrvar-Oddr's heroic prowess and his complete reintegration into courtly society, the final stage of which is framed in Odinic terms in the poetic contest. Indeed, the morning after achieving victory in this contest, Qrvar-Oddr goes to wash himself in one of the lakes, and Óttarr and Ingjaldr notice a tear in the bark of one of his cuffs, through which they can see 'ermr rauð ok

gullhringr á armi' (a red sleeve and a gold ring on the arm). The brothers tear away the bark covering him, and Qrvar-Oddr is revealed in all his courtly splendour:

...hann er í skarlatskyrtli rauðum, hlaðbúnum, en hár lá á herðum niðr. Hann hafði knýtt gullhlaði um höfuð sér ok var allra manna vænstr.

(...he is in scarlet clothes of red, decorated with lace, and his hair flowed down over his shoulders. He had knotted gold lace around his head and was of all men the most handsome.)

The brothers take Qrvar-Oddr to the king and tell him that they seem to have been entertaining a man who they have not clearly perceived. The king asks Qrvar-Oddr who he is, and this time, he gives not only his name, but also his lineage, identifying himself as "...sonr Gríms loðinkinna..." ("...the son of Grímr loðinkinni (Hairy-cheek)..."), suggesting an ideological configuration similar to the one we find in *Völsunga saga* according to which heroic prowess must be verified by noble descent. The significance of clothes made from bark is dependent on mythological tradition, for in vv. 17 and 18 of *Völuspá* and ch. 9 of *Gylfaginning*, the first man and woman, Askr and Embla, are made from two pieces of driftwood washed up on the shore; in both works, Óðinn is involved in their creation, in *Völuspá* by having given them 'qnd' (breath; v. 18) and presumably in *Gylfaginning* 'qnd ok lif' (breath and life), but his co-creators are different in the two accounts of this myth (Hœnir and Lóðurr in v. 18 of *Völuspá* and Óðinn's brothers Vili and Vé in *Gylfaginning*). In this context, the removal of Qrvar-Oddr's bark represents his return to personhood just as driftwood was transformed into people, his time at the court of King Herraudr functioning therapeutically and constituting the final stage of his reintegration into human and courtly society. The involvement of Óðinn in the creation of the first humans lends a further Odinic resonance to an episode already characterized as being fundamentally Odinic. It is clear that the influence of continental romance heavily influenced the composition of this episode, for

Qrvar-Oddr's arrival at the court of Herrauðr as a disguised and unproven man only for him to demonstrate his heroic superiority closely resembles the motif of *le bel inconnu* (the fair unknown), which appears, for example, in the tales of Sir Gareth of Orkney, La Cote Male Tayle, and Sir Percival in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.<sup>150</sup> In all likelihood, an increasing association between Óðinn and the *íþróttir*, which may itself have been influenced by the focus on proper knightly conduct and behaviour in medieval romance, provided a suitable point of contact between native Odinic motifs and the motifs of medieval romance, in this case, that of *le bel inconnu*. It is perhaps as a result of such cross-cultural interaction that we see the transference of Odinic roles, traits, and motifs from Óðinn to the hero, as the god possibly became less important than the opportunity to examine the psychology, conduct, and behaviour of the courtly hero.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the role of Óðinn is very similar to that of Jólfr in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, for a series of foster-father figures, including Reginn, Vífill, and Bøðvarr Bjarki, culminates in the appearance of the *bóndi* (farmer) Hrani, with whom King Hrólfr and his men stay for three nights and who offers heroic guidance and gifts to the king. At the same time, however, there is a demonological element to the presentation of Óðinn in this saga similar to the ones we find in *Sögubrot* and *Hervarar saga*. On their way to the court of King Aðils to recover the inheritance of Hrólfr's father in ch. 39 of the saga, the king and his retainers happen upon a farmhouse owned by a man whom some men call Hrani. It is only revealed later in the saga that this farmer is probably Óðinn (ch. 46), but several clues suggesting the true identity of Hrani are provided from the outset for those familiar with Old Norse-Icelandic mythological traditions. The first clue is Hrani's response to Hrólfr's concerns that Hrani does not possess sufficient means to offer lodgings to so many men (the king is travelling with a hundred men in addition to his twelve champions and twelve

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<sup>150</sup> 'Sir Gareth of Orkney', 'La Cote Male Tayle', and 'Sir Percival', in Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, 1, pp. 223-88, 360-75, and 699-713 respectively.

*berserkir*). Hrani laughs and replies: “...sét hefi ek menn stundum ekki færri koma, þar sem ek hefi verit...” (“I have sometimes seen no fewer men come to where I have been...”). If Hrani is Óðinn, it can be assumed that the place he has been is Valhøll. According to Óðinn in v. 23 of *Grímnismál*, there are five hundred and forty doors in Valhøll, presumably to accommodate the large number of slain warriors congregating in Óðinn’s hall; moreover, eight hundred *einherjar* go out of one door when they leave to fight the wolf, and we can therefore be relatively certain that Hrani’s response to Hrólfr contains a veiled reference to the Valhøll-complex to signify that he is Óðinn. Once Hrólfr has accepted the farmer’s offer of lodgings, he asks the farmer his name, to which he replies “Hrana kalla mik sumir menn” (“Some men call me Hrani”). That only some men call him Hrani suggests that he is known to others by different names, and as we have seen, the adoption of multiple names, guises, and identities is a commonplace of representations of Óðinn in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Again, we have a clear Odinic signifier to suggest the true identity of Hrani, and this is soon amplified by a third Odinic cue in the fact that Hrólfr and his men can find no question to which Hrani does not have an answer during the evening’s hospitality; consequently the king believes him ‘vera inn óheimskasti’ (to be no fool), and there is obviously an allusion here to the great wisdom with which Óðinn is credited elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, particularly in eddic poetry.

During their stay, Hrólfr and his men are forced to endure excessive cold, unbearable thirst, and excessive heat, and Hrani tells Hrólfr to dismiss those men unable to withstand these trials, eventually advising the king as follows:

“...er þat mitt ráð, at ekki fari nema þér ok kappar yðar tólf, ok er þá nokkur ván, at þér komið aftr, en engi elligar.”

(“...it is my counsel that no one should go except you and your twelve champions, and then there would be some hope that you will come back, but otherwise none.”)

Hrani's concern in advising Hrólfr is apparently to ensure that only the elite warriors in Hrólfr's retinue accompany the king in his attempt to reclaim his inheritance from Aðils. Hrani's methods of weeding out inferior warriors by tests of excessive cold, unbearable thirst, and excessive heat are specifically Odinic, for the three-night ordeal of Hrólfr and his men resembles the nine-night ordeal of Óðinn in *Grímnismál*, yet again offering a clue to the true identity of Hrani. In *Grímnismál*, King Geirroðr fails to recognize his patron in the guise of Grímnir after heeding the deceitful counsel of Frigg's maid Fulla and has him placed between two fires as a means of torture (compare ch. 8 of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, in which King Hjörleifr is hung up by his shoe-strings between two fires in the hall of King Hreiðarr, perhaps an imaginative recombination of two separate Odinic ordeals). Interestingly, the esoteric character of the ordeal is suppressed in *Hrólfs saga*, being deployed not as a prelude to the exposition of mythological knowledge, as it is in *Grímnismál*, but as a test of the mettle of Hrólfr and his men, although there is, of course, an element of this in *Grímnismál* as well. Once Grímnir reveals that he is Óðinn, Geirroðr rushes from his seat to pull the god away from the fires, only for him to fall and be impaled on his own sword, which falls hilt downwards as he gets up from his throne. The death of Geirroðr by his own sword indicates that the king has signed his own death warrant by failing to recognize his patron and provide him with the necessary hospitality, thereby proving himself unworthy of kingship. By contrast, Geirroðr's son Agnarr proves himself worthy of the crown by treating Grímnir as Geirroðr should have and serving the god a drink. In *Grímnismál*, then, Óðinn decides on the fitness to rule of two royal candidates and determines dynastic succession as he does in many of the sagas considered in this chapter, including *Sögubrot* and *Völsunga saga*; in a similar way, the three-night ordeal of Hrólfr and his men determines the heroic pre-eminence of the king and his troop to ensure heroic success, but the arcane nature of the ordeal as it appears in

*Grímnismál* has been stripped away to make the trial more appropriate for the heroic concerns of the *fornaldarsögur*.

On the way back from their triumph at the court of King Aðils (46), Hrólfr and his men once again encounter Hrani and his farmhouse. Hrani offers the company hospitality and remarks that their journey has not transpired very differently from what he had foreseen. He attempts to give Hrólfr a shield, a sword, and a mail-coat, performing the role of the Proppian donor as Óðinn does elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, but Hrólfr rejects these gifts, calling them *ferligr* (hideous). Believing himself to have been dishonoured, Hrani becomes angry and parts with Hrólfr and his men, who do not stay for the night, on bad terms. There are obvious parallels here with the events at Jólfr's farmhouse in *Qrvar-Odds saga*; in both instances, we have a farmer who wishes to present the protagonist with gifts, and these are doubtless manifestations of two versions of a common type-scene, one in which the hero accepts the gifts, and the other in which he rejects them. Since it is more common for the hero to accept the gifts offered to him by a donor elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur* (Sigi accepts the warships, Rerir the apple, Sigmundr the sword and leaf, and Sigurðr the horse Grani in *Völsunga saga*, for example, and Starkaðr accepts the blessings and spear of Óðinn in *Gautreks saga*), it might be assumed that this constitutes the usual outcome of the type-scene, as Propp's description of the folkloric donor would also suggest. In this case, the inversion of the usual outcome of the type-scene in *Hrólfs saga* would correspond in function with the earlier three-night ordeal at Hrani's farmhouse, both operating as trials of worth, in the earlier instance of heroic worth and in the later royal worth. Hrólfr proves himself unworthy of kingship and Odinic patronage by failing to recognize the true identity of Hrani and rejecting his gifts in the same way that Geirroðr fails to recognize his patron in *Grímnismál*, and this is no doubt the reason why Hrólfr is shortly afterwards killed in a battle in which Óðinn appears to be on the side of his enemies and is cast in demonological terms (ch. 51). In recent years,

scholars have debated whether or not Hrólfr is depicted in *Hrólfs saga* as a good king.

Ármann Jakobsson, for example, believes that Hrólfr comes close ‘to embodying the ideal of an almost perfect king’ from the very beginning and considers him to be ‘the king of courtly romance’.<sup>151</sup> Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir, however, argues that the author of the saga belittles Hrólfr and parodies courtly behaviour, presenting the king as ‘a negative exemplum’, while Marianne Kalinke maintains that Hrólfr is not an ideal king, but ‘one whose downfall is brought about by his lack of wisdom and prudence.’<sup>152</sup> If one considers the relationship between Hrólfr’s interaction with Hrani and *Grímnismál*, however, not to mention the many other examples of Óðinn’s governance of heroic and royal fortune elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, the arguments proposed by Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir and Kalinke are more convincing than those of Ármann Jakobsson. For this reason, Óðinn’s role in *Hrólfs saga* is not merely ‘ornamental’, as Ármann Jakobsson has claimed, but contributes to the presentation of Hrólfr as an incompetent king, entirely lacking in discernment.<sup>153</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen in this chapter, the role of Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur* is heavily circumscribed, and there was evidently a tendency among the authors of these sagas to reduce or suppress those mythological attributes of Óðinn that were less easily assimilated to the heroic context of the genre. Unsurprisingly, it is the position of Óðinn as god of battle and his special relationship with warriors that provides the foundation for the god’s characterization

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<sup>151</sup> See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 71 (1999), 139-66 (pp. 151-52)

<sup>152</sup> See Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir, ‘A Valiant King or a Coward? The Changing Image of King Hrólfr kraki from the Oldest Sources to *Hrólfs saga kraka*’ and Marianne Kalinke, ‘Transgression in *Hrólfs saga kraka*’, in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 28 (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, Institutionen för nordiska språk, 2003), pp. 141-56 (154) and 157-71 (158) respectively.

<sup>153</sup> See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Le Roi Chevalier’, p. 150.

in the *fornaldarsögur*, and Óðinn is consequently presented as the patron or foster-father of kings and heroes, his function apparently crystallizing into that of the folkloric donor figure, as defined by Propp in his morphological analysis of Russian folktales. This does not mean to say, however, that traditions concerning Óðinn's magical abilities, the extraordinary wisdom he possesses, and his status as god of poetry are completely excised from his representation in the *fornaldarsögur*, but where these traditions are incorporated, they are recast in terms more appropriate for their operation in the heroic world depicted in the genre. This is most obviously discernible in *Völsunga saga*, in which Óðinn is configured in primarily heroic terms as foster-father and patron of the Völsungar in such a way as to advance a socially conservative ideology prioritizing birth over ability and emphasizing the importance of noble descent as validation of heroic prowess and pre-eminence.

Various textual and conceptual strategies are employed in the *fornaldarsögur* to restrict the mythological operation of Óðinn in the heroic world beyond those traditions relating to battle. In *Völsunga saga*, for example, Óðinn is stripped of his eddic role as magical counsellor, and his educative function is limited to the provision of heroic counsel, as it is also in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, while the god's magical abilities elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature are transferred in *Völsunga saga* from Óðinn himself to the objects he employs or gives to his protégés, assimilating his magical capacity to the donor's gift-giving function and limiting the uses of his magic to the governance of heroic fate (pricking Brynhildr with the *svefnþorn* to punish her for awarding victory to the wrong hero in ch. 20, for example) and dynastic survival (the gift of the apple to Rerir in ch. 2, for instance). Elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, certain Odinic episodes are evidently based on established motifs and type-scenes, such as the Odinic aquatic encounter in *Sögubrot*, in which the encounter has a purely heroic function in determining the fate of a king, and mythological traditions are incorporated in the concentrated forms of allusion and generic

suggestion only to hint at the true identity of the Odinic figure Hǫrðr. In *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Óðinn is parodied at the same time as he functions as a *deus ex machina*, prompting Qrvar-Oddr to heroic action, while an evident association between Óðinn and the *íþróttir*, observable also in *Gautreks saga* and perhaps increasing under the influence of medieval romance and its focus on proper knightly conduct and behaviour, appears to have inspired the transference of Odinic roles, traits, and motifs from the god himself to Qrvar-Oddr and Jólfr. The influence of medieval romance from the continent is particularly evident in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, in which Odinic motifs are combined with the motif of *le bel inconnu* not to characterize Óðinn himself, but the conduct of a hero and his reintegration into society after a spell of madness, but this transference of Odinic roles, traits and motifs was perhaps inevitable given the consistent focus on Óðinn's governance of heroic and royal fate in all the *fornaldarsögur* considered in this chapter.

### Chapter 3

#### Regurgitating Mead: Odinic Patronage and the Heroic Poet in the *skáldasögur*

Broad similarities between depictions of poets in the *skáldasögur* have enabled scholars to isolate a common figure. Numerous commentators have argued that poets are typically dark and ugly, aggressive in their dealings with others, and notoriously inimical to social conventions and expectations. Their unruly nature and erratic behaviour have been attributed to the conceptual model provided by Óðinn, whose predilection for disguise and sometimes underhanded dealings with his protégés in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (see, for example, his various disguised appearances in *Völsunga saga*, discussed in the previous chapter, and his traitorous treatment of his former protégé Haraldr hilditönn in ch. 8 of *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*) could quite plausibly have encouraged an association with treachery and subterfuge.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, treachery is the central theme of the account of the myth of the mead of poetry provided in *Hávamál*, in which Óðinn's recuperation of the mead is presented in the context of betrayal, and it may therefore be the case that poets were especially associated with irascible and unpredictable behaviour because of this and similar versions of the myth of the origins of poetry.

The four sagas generally considered to be the core representatives of the *skáldasögur* are *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga*, and *Kormáks saga*, but these are often supplemented with *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* and *Fóstbræðra*

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<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Dorena Allen Wright, 'The Skald as Saga-Hero', *Parergon*, 6 (1973), 13-20, Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in *Egils Saga*', *Parergon*, 22 (1978), 3-12, Ursula Dronke, 'The Poet's Persona in the Skalds' Sagas', *Parergon*, 22 (1978), 23-28, Laurence de Looze, 'Poet, Poem, and Poetic Process in *Bjarnarsaga Hitdælakappa* and *Gunnlaugssaga Ormstungu*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 85 (1986), 479-93, and Laurence de Looze, 'Poet, Poem and Poetic Process in *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 104 (1989), 123-42.

*saga*, both of which feature poets as protagonists.<sup>155</sup> These last two sagas are stylistically and structurally distinct from the core group and are normally termed outliers, but the presentation of their protagonists is nevertheless essential in extrapolating medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian conceptions of the poet and his personality.<sup>156</sup> However, although the Odinic nature of poets can be observed in both core and outlier *skáldasögur*, it is not necessarily the case that each of these sagas engages with Odinic themes and motifs for the same purposes. Previous scholarship has very profitably reconstructed the Odinic nature of poets from the evidence of various sources, but the tendency to subsume representations of individual poets into a common conception of the poetic personality has served to exaggerate the extent to which certain poets are presented as Odinic, particularly Björn Hítðelakappi and Gunnlaugr ormstunga. Moreover, the employment of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs not related to Óðinn and the mead of poetry has been largely overlooked, even though there is considerable evidence to suggest that other mythological dimensions were brought to bear on the representation of poets in the *skáldasögur*, such as the use of the myth of Þórr's fight with the giant Hrungnir in *Kormáks saga*.

In this chapter, the two surviving accounts of the myth of the mead of poetry will be examined briefly to demonstrate their importance in skaldic verse, in which kennings and references drawing on the myth occupy a central place in poetic self-expression. On the basis of the Odinic kennings and references in verses incorporated in the *skáldasögur*, it is Egill Skalla-Grímsson who emerges as the quintessentially Odinic poet, and it is therefore

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<sup>155</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), pp. 119-276; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>156</sup> On the generic characteristics of the *skáldasögur*, including discussion of both core and outlier sagas, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definitions and Typical Features', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 27 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 25-49. See also the categorization of the *Íslendingasögur* into six groups according to the incorporation of skaldic verse in saga narrative presented in Guðrún Nordal, 'The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, 18 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 219-37.

unsurprising that the author of *Egils saga* makes consistent use of motifs and scenarios borrowed from the myth of the mead of poetry. As we shall see in the course of this chapter, there is direct correlation between the frequency and complexity of references to the mead of poetry in skaldic verses incorporated in an individual *skáldsaga* and the extent to which the protagonist of that saga is presented as an overtly Odinic figure, and this raises important questions concerning oral traditions about poets circulating prior to the composition of the *skáldasögur* and the interaction of these sagas with foreign models.

Aside from such traditionally Odinic motifs as blindness, ale-drinking, and vomiting, textual structures that might be considered fundamentally Odinic are also employed in many of the *skáldasögur*. Most notable of these are the incorporation of *lausavísur* (loose verses) and verses that may have been taken from pre-existing poems and sequences in primarily combative contexts and the prevalence of the *hólmganga* (going to the island), a formal duel functioning as the physical manifestation of verbal rivalry, as the apparently inevitable conclusion of poetic competition in the core *skáldasögur*. It is difficult not to notice the conceptual similarities between poetic competition and the exchange of wisdom in eddic poetry, the last of which is distinctly Odinic and generally involves an element of contest, and there is a case to be made for the complementary influence of Óðinn's roles as god of poetry and god of wisdom on the presentation of poetic contest in the *skáldasögur*. Moreover, the impact of the love triangle motif on the articulation of poetic rivalry cannot be underestimated, and there is evidence to suggest that the legendary relationship between a hero and *valkyrja*, as well as other female supernatural figures, such as swan-maidens, contributed to the depiction of the beloved woman as the inspiration of both poetry and battle. While Óðinn may have been the patron of poets and the art of poetry an Odinic gift, the analysis in this chapter makes clear that Odinic traditions were not the only influence on the representation of poets in saga literature; rather, Óðinn is one element of a mythological

complex also engaging with legendary heroes, *valkyrjur*, swan-maidens, and in the case of *Kormáks saga*, Þórr and the giants.

### *Skaldic Verse and the Mead of Poetry*

The myth of the mead of poetry is recounted in the eddic poem *Hávamál* and Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* and often forms the core of poetic self-expression in skaldic poetry. The myth is frequently referenced in skaldic verse by poets wishing to identify themselves with Óðinn, and poets present themselves not only as the religious adherents or protégés of the god, but also as his surrogates. The authors of the *skáldasögur* incorporated many verses attributed to their protagonists in their narratives, including those containing kennings and references to Óðinn and the myth of the mead of poetry, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that they took their cue from allusions to the poetic mead in incorporated verses and employed Odinic motifs and textual structures to present their poets as Odinic figures. Although various elements of the mythological complex surrounding Óðinn and poetry have been touched upon already in the previous chapter, it is worth summarizing the two accounts of the myth in full for the benefit of the present discussion.

The most detailed account of the myth of the mead of poetry is the one narrated by Bragi in chs 657-58 of *Skáldskaparmál*. According to Bragi, identified in ch. 26 of *Gylfaginning* as the god who knows most about poetry, the Æsir and the Vanir spat into a vat as a symbol of their truce following a dispute, perhaps identical to the first war in the world referenced by the *vǫlva* in vv. 21-24 of *Vǫluspá*. Eager for the spittle to be productive, the gods fashioned a man called Kvasir from it, who became renowned for his wisdom and travelled the world teaching its inhabitants. Eventually, Kvasir was killed by the dwarfs Fjalarr and Galarr, who mixed his blood with honey to produce mead sufficiently potent to

transform its drinker into a poet or wise man. In exchange for their lives, the mead was given as ransom to the giant Suttungr, whose parents were killed by Fjalarr and Galarr, and Suttungr stored the mead in a place called Hnitbjörg, where it was guarded by his daughter Gunnlōð. Óðinn, operating under the name Bolverkr, entered Hnitbjörg with the help of Suttungr's brother Baugi. He slept with Gunnlōð for three nights in return for three drinks of the mead, draining with each draught one of the three vessels in which the mead was stored. Transforming himself into an eagle, Óðinn flew back to Ásgarðr with the mead in his crop and regurgitated it in containers placed in the courtyard by the Æsir. During the journey, however, some of the mead was lost in faecal matter, when fear of being caught by Suttungr, who also took the form of an eagle in order to give chase, prompted Óðinn to defecate.

In Snorri's account of the myth in *Skáldskaparmál*, the mead of poetry figures in various liquid forms: spittle, blood, mead, vomit, and excrement. As Carol J. Clover has remarked, each of these forms constitutes 'a new adumbration' of the mead roughly corresponding with each cosmogonic station, and the transmutation of the mead from one liquid to another functions as an ontological metaphor conceptualizing knowledge as a liquid to be imbibed, a metaphor that Judy Quinn has shown operates widely throughout Old Norse-Icelandic literature.<sup>157</sup> The central concern in Snorri's account can be identified as the productive potential of the mead; regardless of whoever is in possession of the draught, the owner must effect some kind of transformation, and each class of mythological being adds something of its own to the brew. Although the storage of the mead in Hnitbjörg might be considered an unproductive use of the intoxicating drink, Jens Peter Schjødt has convincingly argued that this incubation period is a necessary stage in the development of the mead; rather than constituting a sterile period in the transmission of the drink, Schjødt suggests instead

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<sup>157</sup> Carol J. Clover, 'Skaldic Sensibility', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 93 (1978), 63-81 (p. 68) and Judy Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations, and their Implications*, ed. Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*, 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 183-226.

that its incubation is part of a mythological pattern according to which the realization of numinous knowledge is dependent on physical death and time spent in the underworld, here represented by Suttungr's mountain.<sup>158</sup>

The productivity imperative driving Snorri's account of the mead in *Skáldskaparmál* feeds directly into kennings and references drawing on the myth of the mead of poetry in skaldic verse, as we shall see later, but it is conspicuously absent from the account of the myth in *Hávamál*, which focuses on the recuperation of the mead and is silent on the subject of its origins. The highly selective account of the myth of the mead of poetry in vv. 104-10 of the poem (apparently also referenced in vv. 13-14 and 140) follows the story of Óðinn's frustrated attempts to sleep with Billingr's girl (vv. 95-102). The latter functions as an exemplum illustrating the fickleness of women towards men, and it is doubtless the case that the myth of the poetic mead serves as its antithesis, validating an assertion made earlier in the poem that men are fickle towards women (v. 91). Accordingly, the account focuses not on the mead itself, but on Suttungr's daughter Gunnlōð and her relationship with Óðinn, who appears to be the narrator in this section of the poem. Óðinn's liaison with Gunnlōð is narrated only summarily in Snorri's account of the myth in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 658), reduced simply to a sexual exchange, but the relationship is presented in *Hávamál* as a betrothal. In v. 104, Óðinn admits that he spoke to his advantage 'mǫrgom orðom' (with many words) in Suttungr's hall, the advantage presumably being securing his betrothal to Gunnlōð and the access this gave him to the mead, a draught of which is gifted to him by Gunnlōð 'gullnum stóli á' (from her golden throne) in v. 105. Óðinn goes on to admit that he gave Gunnlōð an 'ill iðgjöld' (poor reward; v. 105) in return for her 'heila hugar' (sincere heart) and 'svára sefa' (heavy spirit), and it is clear that his efforts in retrieving Óðrerir (the name of one of the vats in which the mead of poetry is stored in *Skáldskaparmál*, but perhaps

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<sup>158</sup> Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 170-71.

the name of the mead itself here), narrated in vv. 106-07, constitute the act of betrayal that makes Gunnlǫð weep (v. 110); indeed, Óðinn is said to have sworn a '[b]augeið' (ring-oath; v. 110), and his betrayal is therefore worsened by the implied charge of oath-breaking, frowned upon so heavily in Old Norse-Icelandic culture that the *vǫlva* sees those who swear false oaths wading in rivers of poison in Nástrǫnd in v. 39 of *Vǫluspá* as she narrates the events leading up to Ragnarǫk. Evidently, Óðinn's union with Gunnlǫð was not just intended to secure the drink given to him in consecration of the betrothal in v. 105 (compare Gerðr's similarly ceremonial invitation to Skírnir to drink the famous and ancient mead in vv. 16 and 37 of *Skírnismál*), but also to facilitate his theft of the mead in its entirety, and the god openly acknowledges his doubt as to whether he would have returned from being among the giants were it not for the role of Gunnlǫð (v. 108).<sup>159</sup> The mead itself, nowhere associated with poetry in *Hávamál*, is of little concern here, and the emphasis is placed instead on Óðinn's treacherous behaviour – 'hvæt skal hans tryggðum trúa?' (how can his word be trusted?; v. 110) – and the apparent imperative of female intervention in his acquirement of the mead.

Although *Skáldskaparmál* was written in c. 1225 and the extant redaction of *Hávamál* copied into the Codex Regius in c. 1270, the mythological complex associating Óðinn and the mead of poetry evidently dates much further back than the thirteenth century. Among the earliest references to the mead of poetry in the extant skaldic corpus are those preserved in verses by the ninth-century Norwegian poet Bragi Boddason. In one of these verses (v. 300b in *Skáldskaparmál*), Bragi enumerates a series of kennings and *heiti* to define the poet, including the kennings 'Gauts gjafirǫtuð' (Gautr's gift-getter) and 'Yggs ǫlbera' (Yggr's ale-

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<sup>159</sup> Svava Jakobsdóttir has argued that the account of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Hávamál* represents an altogether different story from the one told in *Skáldskaparmál* and that vv. 104-10 of the poem describe a religious ritual analogous to forms of a ceremony customary in ancient Ireland for the consecration of kings; it may therefore be the case that the mead of poetry was at one time considered a sacred and ceremonial drink as well as a drink capable of inspiring poetry and wisdom. At the same time, however, it is necessary also to entertain the possibility that the betrothal scenario originated with the poet of this section of *Hávamál*, the need to find an antithetical example to complement the story of Óðinn's attempts to sleep with Billingr's girl prompting the poet to re-imagine the relationship between Óðinn and Gunnlǫð. Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Gunnlǫð and the Precious Mead', in *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Acker and Larrington, trans. Katrina Attwood, pp. 30-57 (pp. 52-53).

bearer). The second of these refers most obviously to the mead of poetry by incorporating the noun *ǫl*, but adds to the complex the idea that a poet serves ale both to and for Óðinn, presumably by composing and reciting poetry. ‘Gauts gjafrotuð’ identifies the poet as recipient of the poetic mead from Óðinn, who in *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál* steals or reclaims the mead from the giants for gods and men. Since ‘gjafrotuð’ can be translated as ‘gift-finder’ as well as ‘gift-getter’, Bragi suggests that the poet is not passive in his receipt of Óðinn’s patronage, but must actively seek his gift and favour; moreover, by finding the gift of poetry in the sense of marshalling words and poetic devices in the composition of verse, the poet imitates Óðinn’s restorative role in contributing poetry to human culture.

Space does not permit exhaustive analysis of references to Óðinn and the mead of poetry in skaldic verse in its entirety, for that would be a completely different study to the present one, but the range of kennings for poetry can be quickly gleaned from those provided in *Skáldskaparmál* before discussion turns to the references to Óðinn and the poetic mead in the verses incorporated in the *skáldasögur* being considered in this chapter. According to ch. 658 of *Skáldskaparmál*, poetry can be called ‘feng Óðins ok fund ok drykk hans ok gjöf hans ok drykk Ásanna’ (Óðinn’s booty and find and his drink and his gift and drink of the Æsir), and Snorri adds to these in ch. 3 ‘Kvasis dreyra ok dverga skip, dverga mjöð, jötna mjöð, Suttunga mjöð, Óðins mjöð, Ása mjöð, fǫðurgjöld jötna, lǫgr Óðreris ok Boðnar ok Sónar ok fyllr, lǫgr Hnitbjarga...ok farmr...Óðins’ (Kvasir’s blood and ship of the dwarfs, mead of the dwarfs, mead of the giants, mead of Suttungr, mead of Óðinn, mead of the Æsir, father-payment of the giants, liquid of Óðrerir and Boðn and Són and fill, liquid of Hnitbjörg...and cargo...of Óðinn), as well as ‘sjár eða lǫgr dverganna’ (sea or liquid of the dwarfs), ‘hverlǫgr Óðins’ (Óðinn’s pot-liquid), and ‘far eða lið dverganna’ (vessel or boat of the dwarfs).<sup>160</sup> It

<sup>160</sup> According to Snorri, kennings describing poetry as the ship, vessel, or boat of the dwarfs derive from the similarity between the nouns *lið* and *líð* (ale), but it is perhaps more likely that such kennings originate from the dwarfs’ payment of the mead to Suttungr to save their lives in *Skáldskaparmál*. Suttungr punishes Fjalarr and Galarr for the murder of his parents by marooning them on a skerry below high-water level, where they would

should be noted that not only are all aspects of the myth of the mead of poetry as it is recounted in *Skáldskaparmál* referred to in kennings for poetry, but also that the mead is frequently defined by possession. Moreover, possession of the mead is not limited conceptually to possession by the gods or men, and kennings rather democratically attribute poetry to all classes of mythological being involved in the production of the mead in *Skáldskaparmál*. Although this may originally have been the inevitable result of the role attributed to gods, dwarfs, and giants in accounts of the myth, it is evidently the case that the concept of poetic ownership extended beyond allusion to Fjalarr, Galarr, and Suttungr, since skills of poetic composition are attributed to mythological beings besides gods in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Bragi Boddason's verse defining the poet, for example, is composed and recited in response to a verse defining a troll (v. 300a) declaimed by a 'tröllkona' (troll-woman) according to the context ascribed to it in ch. 54 of *Skáldskaparmál*, while in *Bergbúa þátr*, a giant recites a poem to two men sheltering in his cave, even using a kenning referring to the myth of the mead of poetry in v. 12 of the poem, understandably avoiding an Odinic kenning and choosing instead *Aurnis brunnr* (Aurnir's spring), Aurnir being the name of a giant according to v. 420 of a series of *þulur* recorded at the end of *Skáldskaparmál* in some manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* and metonymic here of the giants as a whole.<sup>161</sup> We should not be surprised, therefore, if mythological material not related to Óðinn is employed in the depiction of poets by the authors of the *skáldasögur*.

*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, the fictionalized biography of the tenth-century Icelandic poet Egill Skalla-Grímsson (c. 904-95), contains the most distinctively Odinic

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certainly have drowned when the tide came in; the dwarfs give the mead of poetry to Suttungr as compensation, and both parties are reconciled on these terms, so the mead saves the dwarfs from drowning in the same way as a ship. Óðrerir, Boðn, and Són are the names of the vats in which the mead of poetry is stored in *Skáldskaparmál*.

<sup>161</sup> John Lindow, 'Narrative Worlds, Human Environments, and Poets: The Case of Bragi', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, *Vägar till Midgård*, 8 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 21-25 and *Bergbúa þátr*, in *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Íslenzk fornrit*, 13 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), pp. 439-50.

poetry of all the *skáldasögur*, not only because of the employment of Odinic kennings and references, but also because of the sustained and sometimes tortured examination to which Egill subjects his relationship with Óðinn and poetry in *Sonatorrek*, one of three poems incorporated in the saga narrative, though not in all manuscripts.<sup>162</sup> Conventional allusions to the myth of the mead of poetry in the *lausavísur* incorporated in the saga include the kennings ‘niðjerfi Narfa’ (funeral-drink of the kin of Narfi) and *veig rógs ræsis* (drink of the lord of strife) in v. 24 and *Glaumr Gylfa grundar erðgróins* (Glaumr of the plain of Gylfi of the earth-grown one) in v. 54, while in v. 56, poetry is the *fors fallhadds stalla fúrs vinar* (waterfall of the long-haired friend of the altar-fire) and *orð arnar kjapta* (crop of the eagle’s jaw).<sup>163</sup> In *Höfuðlausn*, the first of the three poems incorporated in the saga, though not in the Mǫðruvallabók redaction, Egill’s allusions to the myth of the poetic mead are developed into the rhetorical trope of the poet performing for a king overseas. Written for King Eiríkr blóðøx (Blood-axe; c. 885-954) and recited in the narrative to save his head (for more on the Odinic nature of this context, see pp. ?-?), the sea of poetry is likened to the sea over which Egill has travelled to reach England: ‘Vestr fórk of ver,/en ek Viðris ber/munstrandar mar’ (West over the sea I sailed, and I carry the sea to the shore of Viðrir’s mind’; v. 1). Although it is possible to identify Eiríkr with Óðinn here, the shore of Óðinn’s mind being comparable to the shores of England, where Eiríkr is to be found, Egill perhaps also associates the king implicitly with the giant Suttungr; the decision to begin *Höfuðlausn* with a verse in which poetry is both a sea and the cargo carried by Egill over the sea in his ship is surely intended to draw a parallel between Egill’s own situation and the situation of the dwarfs in the account of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, for Egill is attempting to save his life

<sup>162</sup> *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), pp. ix-x.

<sup>163</sup> According to ch. 10 of *Gylfaginning*, Narfi is the name of a giant, the father of Nótt, while *rógs ræsir* is a kenning for Óðinn, the god of battle. The rather complicated *Glaumr Gylfa grundar erðgróins* is a kenning of the type *dverga skip*. Gylfi is the name of a sea-king according to v. 412 of *Skáldskaparmál*, which means his *grund* is the sea, and Glaumr is given as the name of a horse in v. 330; the horse of the sea is a ship, and the *erðgróinn* to whom the ship belongs is a dwarf, for the dwarfs are made by the gods ‘ór iqrðo’ (from the earth) according to v. 10 of *Völuspá*.

from Eiríkr's potential death sentence with poetry as the dwarfs successfully do in giving the mead of poetry to the giant Suttungr. Later in v. 2, Egill reiterates the Odinic nature of his role in bringing poetry to another country by claiming 'berk Óðins mjǫð/á Engla bjǫð' (I bear Óðinn's mead to the meadows of England), while in v. 19, the penultimate verse of the poem, Egill states 'hræðak munni/af munar grunni/Óðins ægi/of jǫru fægi' (I have stirred with my mouth from the depths of my mind Óðinn's sea about the artificer of battle).

In *Sonatorrek*, a poem written to commemorate the deaths of his sons, Egill subjects his relationship with Óðinn to intensely personal scrutiny, and we can assume that the grief shared by Egill and his divine patron for the premature loss of sons in tragic circumstances, Óðinn's son Baldr having been killed accidentally by his brother Hǫðr, prompted the pained examination of Odinic patronage we find in the poem. The opening of *Sonatorrek* reveals how difficult it is for Egill to compose poetry while in the grip of his grief; *Viðurs þýfi* (*Viðurr's* steal; v. 1) is beyond him, and it is difficult for him to pour forth (vv. 2 and 3):

fagnafundr  
Friggjar niðja,  
ár borinn  
ór Jǫtunheimum,

lastalauss  
es lifnaði  
á Nǫkkvers  
nǫkkva bragi.  
Jǫtuns hals  
undir þjóta  
Náins niðr  
fyr naustdyrum.

(the happy find of the kinsmen of Frigg, borne of ancient times from Jǫtunheimar,

faultless that which verse brought to life on the ship of Nǫkkver. Blood from the neck of the giant gushes beneath the boathouse doors of Náinn.)

In these two verses, Egill demonstrates how familiar he is with the specific details of the myth of the mead of poetry, referring not only to Óðinn's theft of the mead from Jötunheimar, but also to the way in which Fjalarr and Galarr saved themselves by giving the poetic mead to Suttungr and the murder of Suttungr's mother (the giant from whom the blood is gushing).<sup>164</sup> In v. 15, Egill refers to Óðinn's self-sacrifice on the boughs of Yggdrasill (see vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*) to present the god in his cosmological role as steward of the world, stating that it is rare to find a man to trust among those who live beneath the 'Elgjar galga' (gallows of Elgr), and the image of the world-tree is picked up again in v. 21, but this time to represent Egill's family tree, which the 'Gauta spjalli' (friend of the Gautar) once raised to the 'goðheim' (home of the gods). Egill explains in v. 22 how he was loyal to the 'geirs dróttin' (lord of the spear) before he ended friendship with the poet, evidently taking the death of his sons to be a sign that Óðinn has withdrawn his patronage, and in vv. 23 and 24 of the poem, Egill makes clear that his difficulty in turning away from the god who seems to have abandoned him is directly related to his poetic capabilities:

Blætka því  
bróður Vílis,  
goðjaðar,  
at gjarn séak,  
þó hefr Míms vinr  
mér of fengnar  
bqlva bætr,  
ef et betra telk.

Gøfumk íþrótt  
ulfs of bági  
vígi vanr

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<sup>164</sup> According to Snorri in ch. 657 of *Skáldskaparmál*, Fjalarr and Galarr were so tired of the weeping of Suttungr's mother after she had learned of the death of her husband Gillingr (drowned earlier by the two dwarfs) that Fjalarr lured her out through the door of the dwarfs' house, and Galarr dropped a millstone on her head from above the door, killing her in the doorway. Since Egill is expressing his grief in the poem, the allusion to the murder of Suttungr's grieving mother is particularly apt; indeed, Egill even uses her death in communicating how difficult it is for him to compose poetry, the blood gushing from the neck of the giant symbolizing the fact that poetry, which appears in the form of blood in Snorri's version of the myth of the mead of poetry, as we have seen, is not easily pouring forth from its proper place, the mouth of Egill.

vammi firrða  
 ok þat geð,  
 es ek gerða mér  
 vísa fjandr  
 af vélondum.

(I do not, therefore, worship with sacrifice the brother of Vili, lord of the gods, because I am willing, though the friend of Mímir has compensated me with redress for misfortunes, if I consider the better.

The enemy of the wolf accustomed to battle gave me the accomplishment that is without fault and that disposition, that I can reveal the enemies who plot against me with cunning.)

By calling Óðinn *ulfs bági*, Egill conjures the image of Ragnarøk, during which Óðinn will battle the wolf Fenrir (see ch. 51 of *Gylfaginning*), and we might see the poet's invocation of Óðinn as combatant at Ragnarøk as a reflection of the intense emotional turmoil the deaths of Egill's sons has caused; inasmuch as their loss stunts the male line of his family and so overwhelms him with grief that poetry is almost beyond him, Egill's situation constitutes a personal and emotional Ragnarøk comparable to the mythological Ragnarøk, whose first portent seems to have been the death of a son, Óðinn's son Baldr. At the same time, Egill's abandonment of Óðinn constitutes a religious Ragnarøk for both worshipper and worshipped, a severance of spiritual affiliations not long before the coming of Christianity that shares with the conversion verses incorporated in *Hallfreðar saga*, shortly to be discussed, an emphasis on the religious ties between Óðinn and the poet and its apparently instrumental role in securing poetic patronage.

In *Arinbjarnarkviða*, composed in honour of Egill's companion Arinbjörn Þórisson and present only in the Mǫðruvallabók version of the saga, we find yet more references to the mead of poetry. In v. 6 of the poem, poetry is called 'bólstrverð' (pillow-price), a reference to the fact that the price Gunnlǫð had to pay for sharing a bed with Óðinn was the mead of poetry, and later 'Yggs full/ýranda' (Yggr's flowing fill), an obviously sexual designation for the mead no doubt intended to complement the earlier reference to Óðinn's liaison with

Gunnloð. Egill declares in v. 13 that he would be undeserving of *Viðurs full* (Viðurr's fill) were he not to repay Arinbjörn for his favour, acknowledging not only that his poetic skills are a gift from Óðinn, but also that he is obliged to use those skills to compose praise poetry for those who deserve it. In v. 22, Egill praises the superlative generosity of Arinbjörn, who is called 'dolgr/Draupnis niðja' (enemy of the kinsmen of Draupnir), Draupnir being a ring belonging to Óðinn from which eight rings drip every ninth night. Because of his great munificence in bestowing gold upon his men, Arinbjörn is also said to be the 'søkunautr/Sónar hvinna' (adversary of the thief of Són), which rather unflatteringly suggests that Óðinn is a miserly ruler by comparison.

Although none of the verses incorporated in *Kormáks saga* engages with the Odinic nature of poetry and the poet to the same degree as the poems and verses in *Egils saga*, there is nevertheless an Odinic character to some of the verses included in the narrative. In v. 15, recited after Kormákr Ögmundarson has seen Oddr and Guðmundr Þórveigarson lying in wait to attack him as he enters the main room of the farm at Tunga, Kormákr makes clear that the obstacles preventing him from seeing Steingerðr will not stop him, claiming that he will not 'Yggs...lið leggjum' (give up Yggr's ale); the suggestion here is that Kormákr will continue to visit Steingerðr and compose poetry both about her and for her, and this apparently insatiable desire to compose poetry about Steingerðr is reiterated in the first *helmingr* of v. 24, uttered after the boat hired by Kormákr and his companions from Þórveig fills with water as they pursue Bersi following his marriage to Steingerðr:

At emk, Yggjar gøtva  
Ullr, at Svølnis fulli  
of reiði-Sif rjóða  
runns sem vífl at brunni.

(I am, Ullr of Yggr's clothing, at Svølnir's fill about the red carrying-Sif of the bush like a washing bat at a well.)

The productivity imperative present in the account of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* is encapsulated in the kenning ‘Gauta gildi’ (Gautr’s payment) in v. 67, which suggests that the poet is obliged to compose poetry for Óðinn in recompense for the gift of poetry, and the poet’s role in brewing mead for Óðinn is similarly referenced in v. 74, in which Kormákr calls himself *fægir Fjölnis veig* (artificer of Fjölfnir’s drink), while poetry is called *Aurreks drykkur* (drink of Aurrekr) in v. 81. In addition to kennings and references alluding to the myth of the mead of poetry, Kormákr also uses various names of Óðinn in kennings relating to battle and the accoutrements of war, as we see, for example, in the shield-kennings employed in vv. 35 and 80 and the warrior-kenning used in v. 85; moreover, in v. 82, recited after he has killed the Scottish *blótrisi* (sacrifice-giant) in ch. 27, Kormákr refers to the Valhöll-complex, stating that he would be drinking ‘öl at Óðins/í ǫndvegi’ (ale in the high-seat at Óðinn’s) if his sword had been of help to him in his fight with the giant.

As we would expect of Hallfreðr Óttarsson’s so-called conversion verses in *Hallfreðar saga* (vv. 9-13), the mythological references made in these verses, including those pertaining to Óðinn, are primarily concerned with the issue of religious transition. In v. 9, Hallfreðr reveals that he offered sacrifice to the ‘harra/Hliðskjalfar’ (lord of Hliðskjálfr), a kenning that invokes a kingly image of Óðinn ruling upon his high seat from which he can see into all the worlds (see chs 9 and 17 of *Gylfaginning*), while in v. 11, he abandons the ‘hrafnblóts goða nafni’ (name of the *goði* of the raven-sacrifice), returning to the presentation of Óðinn as cultic god and recipient of sacrifice also present in v. 9. The deceptive nature of paganism is suggested in v. 11 by the assertion that Óðinn repaid praise with falsehood and is reiterated categorically by the use of ‘dul Njarðar’ (Njarðr’s concealment) as a kenning for Hallfreðr’s former religion in v. 12, in which the poet also claims that Freyr, Freyja, and Þórr will be angry with him (contrasted with the love of Christ), and ‘grǫm’ (demons) ask mercy from Grímnir. In v. 13, Hallfreðr speaks of Óláfr’s coercion to convert to Christianity;

sacrifices are banned, men must ignore ‘flest...fornhaldin skop norna’ (most...of the long-held decrees of the *normir*), and Hallfreðr must pray to Christ. The only conversion verse that deals explicitly with poetry and its relation to Óðinn is v. 10, and it is worth considering this verse in its entirety to shed light on the difficulties of a pagan poet in the face of a new religion:

Öll hefr ætt til hylli  
 Óðins skipat ljóðum,  
 algildar mank, aldar,  
 iðjur várra niðja;  
 en trauðr, þvít vel Viðris  
 vald hugnaðisk skaldi,  
 legg ek á frumver Friggjar  
 fjón, þvít Kristi þjónum.

(All the race of men has composed poems for Óðinn’s favour (I remember the most worthy works of our kinsmen), but with reluctance, for well the poet was pleased with Viðrir’s rule, I place hatred on the first husband of Frigg, because we serve Christ.)

Hallfreðr’s reluctance to renounce Óðinn is rooted in his pervasive awareness of poetic tradition. Generations of poets have composed poetry for Óðinn in the hope of securing the god’s esteem, but Christianity forbids the worship of other gods and makes problematic, therefore, the traditional poetic concept of Odinic patronage. Hallfreðr’s struggle in this verse is as much to do with resituating the religious direction of his poetry and effecting a break from poetic precedent as it is to do with matters of belief; until now, he has been pleased with Óðinn’s sovereignty, presumably for the poetic skills with which he has been blessed, and it is clear from the first-person plural ‘þjónum’ that the poet’s hatred for the first husband of Frigg is not personal, but instead stems from his integration in a community that serves Christ: social pressure, rather than personal grievance, is the motivating factor in his conversion.

In spite of the consideration of Óðinn's poetic role in v. 10, Hallfreðr casts himself primarily as the converting religious adherent of an Óðinn-cult in the majority of the conversion verses; although poetry is the medium through which this conception of himself is expressed, Hallfreðr's Odinic role as poet is secondary to his status as coerced religious convert. Elsewhere in the saga, however, there are a couple of references to poetry similar to those we have seen in the verses incorporated in both *Egils saga* and *Kormáks saga*. In v. 2, for example, Hallfreðr refers to his composition of poetry with the bravado typical of the poets whose lives are narrated in the *skáldasögur*, exclaiming 'stærík brag' (I swell the poetry), the verb *stæra* (to swell) relating in one sense to the sea and therefore suggesting here a conception of poetry as liquid, and poetry is called *flaustr burar Austrar* (ship of Austri's son) in the Mǫðruvallabók version of v. 8.

*Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* are remarkable among the *skáldasögur* for the paucity of Odinic references in their incorporated verses. The only collocation of Óðinn with the mead of poetry in the verses of *Bjarnar saga* is in v. 32, in which Björn boasts that he brews the 'bjór' (beer) of Óðinn. Undoubtedly, Björn presents himself as Óðinn's brewer and conceives of his compositional practice in terms of fermentation, but the absence of other such references to the poetic mead in the poetry attributed to Björn in his saga suggests that his conception of himself as an Odinic poet did not exceed the merely formulaic; certainly, there is no evidence in the verses incorporated in *Bjarnar saga* to imply that the Odinic nature of the poet preoccupied Björn anywhere near as much as it did Egill. The remainder of the references to Óðinn in the verses of *Bjarnar saga* are concerned with his role as god of battle; in v. 25, the battle-kenning *Þundar gráp* (Þundr's tempest) is used, and Björn predicts that 'koma mun Yggr á eggjar/enn bragsmíðar kenni' (Yggr will yet send the skilful smith of poetry to battle) in v. 30. Although Björn refers to himself as *bragsmiðr* in this last quotation and apparently thinks of Óðinn as having some degree of control over his life, it is clear from

both the conventional nature of these lines and the narrative context of the verse that the invocation of the god here has little to do with his poetic capacity and is specifically concerned with his governance of the warrior's fate.

In the case of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the verses incorporated in the narrative are even less Odinic than the verses in *Bjarnar saga*; there are no references to the mead of poetry, unless one considers the alcoholic drinks associated with Helga in fagra (the Fair) by Hrafn in v. 12 and Gunnlaugr in vv. 14 and 20 as representing the poetic inspiration she provides, rather than the role of women as mead-bearers in the hall, and only a small number of Odinic references to warriors, such as *hríðmundaðar hyrjar Þundr* (Þundr of the sword-storm's fire) in v. 11 and 'sverð-Rögnir' (sword-Rögnir) in v. 24. It would be tempting to attribute the lack of references to Óðinn and the mead of poetry in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* to Björn and Gunnlaugr's status as Christian poets, in contrast to Egill and Kormákr, who are pagan poets, and Hallfreðr, who at least begins his career as a pagan poet. As was mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis (see p. ?), skaldic poets appear to have eschewed mythological kennings and references in their verses in the period following the conversion, and the paucity or absence of Odinic kennings and references in the verses of Björn and Gunnlaugr might be considered as being evidence of this, but the presence of references to so many other mythological figures, including the *valkyrja* Hlökk in v. 3 of *Bjarnar saga* and Þórr's son Móði in v. 4 of *Gunnlaugs saga*, suggests that this cannot be the case.<sup>165</sup> Perhaps we must conclude instead that the Odinic nature of the poet was simply of little concern to Björn and Gunnlaugr and therefore is distinctly underrepresented in their verses.

As the foregoing analysis of the poetry incorporated in the *skáldasögur* has shown, Egill is the Odinic poet *par excellence*, and the poetry attributed to him and incorporated in his saga suggests that the Odinic role of the poet was a matter of considerable preoccupation

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<sup>165</sup> Kari Ellen Gade, 'Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 61-95 (pp. 73-75).

for him; consequently, the representation of Egill in the prose passages of *Egils saga* is quintessentially Odinic, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter. The verses of *Hallfreðar saga* contain some Odinic references to the mead of poetry, but the prominence of the conversion verses in the saga makes clear that Óðinn's poetic patronage of Hallfreðr is to be viewed in the context of religious affiliation, while the small number of references to Óðinn and the mead of poetry in verses attributed to Kormákr in *Kormáks saga* are predominantly formulaic, never approaching the sustained examination of Odinic patronage we find in the verses of *Egils saga* or Hallfreðr's conversion verses. References to Óðinn in relation to poetry are minimal in the verses of *Bjarnar saga* and completely absent from the poetry incorporated in *Gunnlaugs saga*, unless one reads into the alcoholic drinks mentioned in vv. 12, 14, and 20 especially veiled allusions to poetic inspiration. The Odinic nature of the verses attributed to the poets whose lives are narrated in the *skáldasögur*, then, differs greatly in scope and degree, and we should therefore be careful not to exaggerate the extent to which some poets conceived of themselves in their poetry as Odinic surrogates.

### *Odinic Surrogates and Poetic Patronage*

As the extent to which verses attributed to historical poets in the *skáldasögur* offer an Odinic conception of the poet varies considerably, we should not be surprised to find that the extent to which the authors of the *skáldasögur* present their protagonists as Odinic figures in saga prose also varies widely. Just as the poetry attributed to Egill and Hallfreðr in their respective sagas demonstrates a very active Odinic conception of the poet, particularly in the case of Egill's verses, so too does their narrative representation in *Egils saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*. Unsurprisingly, Björn and Gunnlaugr, whose verses are distinctly lacking in the kind of Odinic self-stylization we see elsewhere in the verses of the *skáldasögur*, are not portrayed as

being especially Odinic figures; in fact, it seems that a different conception of the poet, what I shall call the heroic poet, lies behind their narrative representation, particularly in the case of Gunnlaugr. Kormákr is similarly represented as a heroic poet in *Kormáks saga*, but in this instance, the characterization of the poet aligns him with the god Þórr, specifically as the god appears in the myth of his duel with the giant Hrungnir.

In *Egils saga*, a series of chapters over the course of the narrative chart the development of Egill as an Odinic poet and incorporate themes and motifs borrowed from the myth of the mead of poetry. The first of these chapters is ch. 31, in which Egill's birth and early childhood is recounted, and the description of the young Egill provided in this chapter leaves the audience in no doubt that Egill will turn out to be a particularly troublesome man:

En er hann óx upp, þá mátti brátt sjá á honum, at hann myndi verða mjök ljótr ok líkr feðr sínum, svartur á hár. En þá er hann var þrjúvetur, þá var hann mikill ok sterkr, svá sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er váru sex vetra eða sjau; hann var brátt málugr ok orðvís; heldr var hann illr viðreignar, er hann var í leikum með qðrum ungmennum.

(And when he grew up, it could soon be seen of him that he would become very ugly and like his father, with black hair. And when he was three-years-old, then he was as big and strong as other boys who were six- or seven-years-old. He was soon talkative and word-wise. He was rather difficult to deal with when he was playing with other children.)

That Egill is 'málugr ok orðvís' from an early age is what we would expect of the future poet, and it does not take long for Egill to demonstrate his highly advanced linguistic skills. One spring, when Egill is three-years-old, Egill's maternal grandfather Yngvarr invites his son-in-law Skalla-Grímr and his household to a feast, after which he sets about preparing for the feast and brewing the ale. Egill is eager to go to the feast with his father, but Skalla-Grímr forbids him from attending on the grounds that he does not know how to behave when there is heavy drinking; apparently, the three-year-old is enough trouble when "...ódrukkinn." ("...sober."). After Skalla-Grímr and his company have left, Egill mounts a horse and rides

after them, arriving at Yngvarr's late in the evening when all the men are entertaining themselves by composing verses while drinking ale. As much as reciting verses may have been traditional entertainment while drinking at a feast, there is undeniably a deliberate allusion here to the conception of poetry as an intoxicating drink found in the myth of the mead of poetry (compare the poetry competition between Qrvar-Oddr and Sigurðr and Sjólfir in ch. 27 of *Qrvar-Odds saga* in the context of ale-drinking). Egill recites his very first verse and is rewarded with three shells and a duck egg by his grandfather, a reward that provides the material for his second verse recited later in the day, and the precocious poet proves that the way to behave when there is heavy drinking is to repay the host for his drink with verse. This episode is the first in a series of episodes in which ale is withheld from Egill, thereby constituting at the figurative level the inhibition of poetic composition, for which intoxicating liquor is required. As we shall see, such episodes suggest that a poet must work for his art and persevere in acquiring the source of his inspiration; right from the outset, then, Egill demonstrates that he possesses the proper attitude of a poet who will one day be pre-eminent, and this attitude is configured in undeniably mythological terms.

In ch. 43 of the saga, the adult Egill accompanies a man named Qlvir to collect the rents owed by the tenants of Qlvir's employer Þórir Hróaldsson. During the journey, they arrive at a farm owned by King Eiríkr and ask the steward Bárðr to stay there for the night, who shows them into a fire-room separate from the other buildings and serves them bread and butter and curds. Bárðr appears to regret not having any ale to serve them, but Qlvir and his company eat and drink what is given to them and settle down for the night. It turns out in the following chapter (ch. 44), however, that Bárðr has organized a feast for Eiríkr and his queen Gunnhildr in honour of a 'dísablót' (*dísir*-sacrifice) in the main room, and when the king learns that Qlvir's company are in the outside fire-room, he invites them into the feast to enjoy the plentiful ale brewed for the occasion and kept secret by Bárðr. Everyone present at

the feast drinks to excess, and Qlvir and his companions become increasingly intoxicated, with some of them vomiting both inside and outside the room. It is not vomit that spews from Egill's mouth, however, but poetry, and he castigates Bárðr in v. 8 for his deceit in withholding the ale; angered by Egill's scorn, Bárðr tells Gunnhildr that Egill's extraordinary thirst is bringing shame on them, and he and the queen attempt to contrive Egill's death:

Dróttning ok Bárðr blönduðu þá drykkinn ólyfjani ok báru þá inn; signdi Bárðr fullit, fekk síðan ǫlseljunni; færði hon Agli ok bað hann drekka. Egill brá þá knífi sínum ok stakk í lófa sér; hann tók við horninu ok reist á rúnar ok reið á blóðinu. Hann kvað:

Rístum rún á horni,  
 rjóðum spjöll í dreyra,  
 þau velk orð til eyrna  
 óðs dýrs viðar rota;  
 drekkum veig sem viljum  
 vel glýjaðra þýja,  
 vitum, hvé oss of eiri  
 ǫl, þats Bárðr signdi.

Hornit sprakk í sundr, en drykkurinn fór niðr í hálm.

(The queen and Bárðr then mixed the drink with poison and then carried it in. Bárðr made a sign over the drink, gave it afterwards to the serving-woman; she took it to Egill and asked him to drink. Egill then took out his knife and stuck it into his palm; he took the horn and carved runes on it and smeared them with blood. He spoke:

I carve runes on this horn, redden sayings with blood, I choose words for the tree of the ear-roots of the wild beast. We drain as much as we wish this drink from gleeful servants; let us find out how the ale that Bárðr signed pleases us.

The horn broke asunder, and the drink spilled down onto the straw.)

Egill's poetic talent, again configured in the context of withheld ale and subsequent ale-drinking, as in ch. 31, is combined in this episode with another typically Odinic skill. Not only is the acquirement of runic knowledge Óðinn's goal in sacrificing himself to himself on the world-tree in vv. 138-39 of *Hávamál*, but the god is also credited with having 'réð' (interpreted), 'reist' (carved), and 'hugði' (conceived) *hugrúnar* (thought-runes) in v. 13 of *Sigrdrífumál*. The Odinic nature of Egill, already demonstrated by the relationship presented

here between alcohol and poetic composition, in clear allusion to the myth of the mead of poetry, is therefore amplified by the poet's skills of runic magic, which Egill demonstrates again later in the saga when he employs his runic expertise to cure a woman named Helga of an illness caused by badly carved runes (ch. 72). In addition to the Odinic overtones readily apparent in ch. 44 of *Egils saga*, however, Siân Grønlie has noted that the shattering of the horn is taken from the Life of St Benedict in St Gregory the Great's *Dialogorum Libri IV*, in which some distinctly unchristian monks give Benedict a cup of poisoned wine, and the future saint causes it to shatter by making the sign of the cross over it.<sup>166</sup> As Grønlie demonstrates, this is only one of a number of episodes in *Egils saga* that contain motifs from hagiography, which include a further borrowing from Gregory's Life of St Benedict and parallels with events in St Jerome's *Life of St Hilarion* and the *Life of St Martin*, and she argues that 'the saga author traces the contours of a power exercised through language that saint and poet have in common' in adapting hagiographic motifs for the fictionalized biography of an Odinic poet.<sup>167</sup> We might see in this evidence of a wider desire to present Egill as a pagan version of a saint, his power coming from loyal worship of Óðinn as the Christian saint's power comes from loyal worship of God, or at least to elevate indigenous poets and poetic culture by demonstrating their conceptual similitude with saints and their miraculous powers.

Following the shattering of the poisoned horn, Egill heads for the door of the hall taking Qlvir with him, who is almost ready to pass out from drunkenness. Bárðr follows the men with a horn full of drink and asks Qlvir to drink a farewell toast, at which point Egill recites v. 10 of the saga, in which the kenning *regn Hávars þegna* (rain of the thanes of Hávar) is used alongside a description of Bárðr as *oddskýs regnbjóðr* (inciter of rain onto shields). Calling poetry rain allows Egill to draw on conceptual similarities with kennings

<sup>166</sup> Siân Grønlie, 'Saint's Life and Saga Narrative', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 36 (2012), 5-26 (pp. 13-14).

<sup>167</sup> Grønlie, 'Saint's Life and Saga Narrative', pp. 14-18 (p. 17).

describing battle as ‘veðr vápna’ (weather of weapons; see ch. 48 of *Skáldskaparmál*), as in the kenning ‘Hogna skúrir’ (showers of Hogni; v. 223 of *Skáldskaparmál*) in a verse by the tenth-century Icelandic poet Einarr skálaglamm (Bowl-tinkle), and the narrative context of v. 10 was evidently composed with an awareness of these similarities, for Egill proceeds to kill Bárðr in the doorway after reciting his verse just as Qlvir passes out: ‘fell hann dauðr niðr, en blóð hljóp ór undinni. Þá fell Qlvir, ok gaus spýja ór honum’ (he [Bárðr] fell down dead, and blood flowed from the wound. Then Qlvir fell and vomit gushed from him). Bárðr has proved himself to be an *oddskýs regnbjóðr* in both senses of the kenning, first of all prompting Egill’s recitation of v. 10 and then bringing upon himself the rain of battle by inciting his own deathblow; moreover, the description of Bárðr’s death and Qlvir’s passing out realizes literally the two meanings of the kenning *regn Hávars þegna*, the blood flowing from Bárðr’s wound being the liquid of battle and the vomit gushing from Qlvir being the liquid of poetry. The conceptual similitude of blood and vomit obviously derives from the myth of the mead of poetry, but the author of *Egils saga* extends the conceptual comparison to also include battle, picking up on the referential ambiguity of two kennings in v. 10 and rendering literally Egill’s riffing on their multivalence; indeed, even the other people at the feast are confused by the similarity of blood and vomit, believing at first that Bárðr and Qlvir have killed each other and are both lying in their own blood when they are discovered.

The culmination of episodes invoking the myth of the mead of poetry in *Egils saga* comes in chs 71 and 72, the overwhelmingly Odinic nature of which has been noted by a number of commentators.<sup>168</sup> In ch. 71, Egill and his men shelter from the snow at a farm owned by a man named Ármóðr. Ármóðr prepares a meal for his guests and has tables laid for them with large bowls of curds. Like Bárðr earlier in the saga, their host gives the

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<sup>168</sup> de Looze, ‘Poet, Poem and Poetic Process in *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*’, pp. 133-34 and Alison Finlay, ‘Pouring Óðinn’s Mead: An Antiquarian Theme?’, in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: The Proceedings of the Eleventh International Saga Conference, 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 85-99 (p. 92).

impression of being upset that there is no ale to serve them, but Egill and his men accept his hospitality without question and happily consume the curds. During the feast, Ármóðr's wife sends her daughter over to the table at which Egill is sitting to recite a cryptic verse (v. 44). The verse suggests that Ármóðr is withholding better provisions from his guests and forces their host to treat them to the full extent of his pantry. Among these provisions is an ale described as being 'sterkasta mungát' (of the strongest brew), and Egill and his company drink to excess, with the poet soon quaffing the ale of those men too incapacitated to finish drinking it in addition to his own. Eventually, Egill becomes so intoxicated that he can no longer drink at the same rate. He seizes Ármóðr, pins him to a post, and subjects him to a disgusting, but mythologically resonant, assault: 'þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun ok nasarnar ok í munninn; rann svá ofan um bringuna' (Egill disgorged a great flow of vomit, which gushed into Ármóðr's face, into his eyes and his nostrils and into his mouth; it poured thus down his chest). It is only after this assault that Egill recites the two verses attributed to him in this chapter.

Again, as in chs 31 and 44, we have the recitation of poetry in the context of ale-drinking, but the employment of the myth of the mead of poetry goes beyond this, for what we have in ch. 71 is a domestic representation of the myth in its key aspects. In withholding ale noted for its potency, Ármóðr functions as the human counterpart of Suttungr (as do Skalla-Grímr in ch. 31 and Bárðr in chs 43-44), who stores the mead of poetry in a secret place in both *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál*. The excessive strength of Ármóðr's brew equates to the poetic efficacy of the mead of poetry, and as the recipient of the ale, Egill becomes an Odinic surrogate, drinking every cup set before him just as Óðinn is said to have drained all three vats in which the mead of poetry is stored in *Skáldskaparmál*. If Ármóðr and Egill occupy the roles of Suttungr and Óðinn in this episode, Ármóðr's daughter can be aligned with Gunnlōð. In both *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál*, it is only through interaction

with Gunnlǫð, whether in the form of betrothal or sexual exchange that Óðinn is able to steal or reclaim the mead of poetry. The cryptic utterance of Ármóðr's daughter suggests the same imperative of female mediation, providing access to Ármóðr's ale 'sterkasta mungát', and it is particularly appropriate that the recitation of a verse bestows upon Egill the intoxicating liquor he requires to compose poetry: verse begets ale, ale begets verse. Egill's vomit, akin to Óðinn's regurgitation of the mead once back in Ásgarðr in the *Skáldskaparmál* account of the myth of the mead of poetry, is both real and figurative, being vomit and poetry simultaneously; indeed, it is only after his intoxication and vomiting that Egill recites his first verse in this chapter, boasting that he has repaid Ármóðr for his deceit with his *kinnalá* (cheeks' surf), a kenning equally applicable to Egill's vomit and his commemoration of that vomit in the spew of poetry. By transposing the myth of the mead of poetry to the domestic sphere, the saga author not only elevates Egill to the mythological sphere in lending mythological resonance to Egill's actions, but also converts the myth into an embarrassing family drama, exploiting the comic potential of Suttungr as a father thwarted by his own daughter.

The Odinic colouring of ch. 71 is continued in ch. 72, in which Egill bursts into the chamber where Ármóðr is sleeping with his wife and daughter the morning after his vomiting with the intention of killing him (ch. 72). Heeding the pleas of Ármóðr's wife and daughter, Egill spares his host's life and decides instead to disfigure him for his deceit in a manner resonant with Odinic imagery: 'sneið Egill af honum skeggit við hǫkuna; síðan krækði hann fingrinum í augat, svá at úti lá á kinninni' (Egill cut the beard from him to the chin; afterwards, he hooked out one of his eyes with his finger, so that it lay out on the cheek). As we saw in the previous chapter of this thesis, Óðinn is commonly depicted as a one-eyed man, evidently based on a myth alluded to in v. 28 of *Völuspá*, in which the *völva* claims "...[a]lt veit ek, Óðinn,/hvar þú auga falt:/í inum mæra Mímisbrunni..." ("...I know all,

Óðinn, where you hid the eye: in the famous well of Mímir...”). Although the reason for Óðinn’s sacrifice of his eye is not given in *Völuspá*, an account of Óðinn’s sacrifice in ch. 15 of *Gylfaginning* states that Óðinn gave his eye in return for a drink from the well of Mímir, a source of wisdom and knowledge, presumably hoping to acquire the wisdom residing in the well. The inclusion of the motif of the single eye in an episode following a chapter in which a domestic transposition of the myth of the mead of poetry is presented suggests that the author of *Egils saga* wishes to invoke the Odinic nature of both poetry and wisdom, and we might interpret the loss of Ármóðr’s eye as a sign of the wisdom he has recently acquired in his dealings with Egill: never cross an Odinic poet. At the same time, the disfigurement of Ármóðr functions as Egill’s Odinic calling card, forever a reminder of the humiliation Ármóðr has suffered at the hands of an Odinic surrogate, and the additional loss of Ármóðr’s beard can be seen as a motif of emasculating beardlessness similar to that found in chs 20, 35, 41, 44, and 91 of *Brennu-Njáls saga*.<sup>169</sup>

As we saw in the previous section, the Odinic role of the poet is of a status secondary to that of Odinic religious affiliations in the verses attributed to Hallfreðr Óttarsson and included in his saga, and the Odinic motifs incorporated in the narrative of *Hallfreðar saga* are similarly marshalled in the interests of its overwhelmingly religious theme. In ch. 5 of the saga, Hallfreðr’s transition from pagan poet to Christian convert begins with a parallel drawn between Óðinn and a missionary king. While anchoring off Agðanes, Hallfreðr and his companions hear that Óláfr Tryggvason has replaced Hákon jarl as ruler of Norway, bringing with him a new religion and new laws. The crew vows to give money to Freyr if they get a wind to Sweden or to Þórr or Óðinn if they reach Iceland, but they are forced to sail into Trondheim and anchor in the harbour called Flagði when they receive no wind at all. A mighty wind blows up overnight and makes it impossible for the anchors to hold, prompting a

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<sup>169</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954); all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

crew of thirty men to sail out to Hallfreðr's ship. The captain of the crew, a man described as 'mikill vexti' (large in build), warns Hallfreðr and his men that they are anchored in dangerous waters and offers to guide them to safe harbour, but before this can be done, the stormy weather forces the captain of the rescue boat to break off his conversation with Hallfreðr and save the day:

Hallfreðr mælti: "Hvat heitir þú?" Hann segir: "Ek heiti Akkerisfrakki." Ok er þeir töludusk þetta við, þá gekk í sundr akkerisstrenginn, en sá er í stafninum sat, kastaði sér þegar fyrir borð ok kafaði eptir strengnum í storminum ok náði þegar; var þá upp dregit akkerit.

(Hallfreðr said: "What are you called?" He says: "I am called Akkerisfrakki (Anchor-spear).") And while they were talking to each other, then the anchor-rope broke asunder, but the man who sat in the prow immediately cast himself overboard and dived after the rope in the storm and caught it at once; then the anchor was pulled up.)

Although this at first appears to be a very straightforward episode demonstrating the superiority of Óláfr and the Christian God over the main deities of Icelandic and Scandinavian paganism, who prove ineffectual in providing a hospitable wind, Óláfr is in fact also presented as a superior substitute for Óðinn in particular. In the previous chapter, evidence of a type-scene termed the Odinic aquatic encounter was set forth in a discussion on the hostile verbal contest between King Ívarr and his foster-father Hǫrðr in ch. 3 of *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*. The aquatic nature of Hallfreðr and Óláfr's first meeting bears some resemblance to this type-scene, particularly as it appears in *Sögubrot*, and other Odinic commonplaces, for not only does their encounter occur on boats anchored in the harbour and involve Óláfr diving into the sea, but the king also assumes a false name, calling himself Akkerisfrakki, and answers the verse Hallfreðr recites after the anchor has been recovered (v. 5) with a reciprocating verse of his own (v. 6).<sup>170</sup> In her translation of *Hallfreðar saga*, Diana

<sup>170</sup> The end of v. 5, 'hvar es Akkerisfrakki?' (where is Akkerisfrakki?), is answered at the end of v. 6 with the similar formulation 'hér es Akkerisfrakki.' (here is Akkerisfrakki.). If these verses existed prior to the composition of the narrative and were not composed by the saga author especially for the anchor-scene, it may

Whaley renders the name Akkerisfrakki as ‘Anchor-Fluke’, the noun *frakka* (spear) being taken quite rightly as denoting the teeth of the anchor.<sup>171</sup> Although this translation helps with comprehension, it removes from the compound the rather subtle Odinic overtones of its second element, for the name means literally ‘Anchor-spear’ and therefore combines two nouns denoting emblems of Christ and Óðinn respectively: the anchor and the spear. The Odinic motifs and type-scene employed here, particularly the literal meaning of Akkerisfrakki, establish Óláfr and Óðinn as the representative figureheads of their respective religions, as does the association between Óðinn and Óláfr Tryggvason noted in the analysis of *þættir* dealing with the status of the stories and traditions of the pagan past in Chapter 1. The religious status of Hallfreðr, at this point still a pagan, but baptized at the end of the chapter, is therefore conceived of as being dependent on the outcome of a struggle between two patrons, Óðinn and Óláfr, Óláfr being presented in Odinic terms to draw out the parallels between him and Óðinn as religious figureheads and to present the king as the fitting replacement of the one-eyed god.

Odic elements of characterization can also be discerned in ch. 6 of the saga, in which Hallfreðr recites the conversion verses (discussed in the previous section of this chapter) in the context of a verbal exchange with Óláfr. The exchange between Hallfreðr and Óláfr is essentially a contest, in which the king expresses his objection to the pervasive paganism of Hallfreðr’s compositions and challenges the poet to compose poetry more acceptable to Christian sensibilities. The contest is structured according to the alternating utterances of Hallfreðr and the king, each of the verses recited by the poet being met with

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be that they were originally a single verse, perhaps constituting a sequence of verses detailing the first conversation between Hallfreðr and Óláfr and either making repeated use of similarly formulated questions and answers or employing the question of v. 5 and answer of v. 6 as a refrain. Given what was said in the previous chapter about the eddic resonance of the exchange between King Ívarr and his foster-father Hǫrðr in ch. 3 of *Sögubrot*, we might suppose that this verse sequence, if it existed, was intended to emulate the question-and-answer format so prominent in eddic poetry, particularly those poems in which Óðinn is an interlocutor.

<sup>171</sup> *The Saga of Hallfred the Troublesome Poet*, trans. Diana Whaley, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 1, pp. 225-53 (ch. 5).

Óláfr's criticism and the imperative to compose another verse, as in Óláfr's response to v. 9: 'Konungr mælti: "Allill vísa, ok bœt yfir."' (The king said: "A very bad verse, and now make atonement for it.'). The interrogative and competitive format of the exchange between Hallfreðr and the king, especially as it follows the Odinic rescue scene in ch. 5, is reminiscent of eddic wisdom dialogues and contests, in most of which Óðinn is a participant, as he is in *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, and *Baldurs draumar*. Of course, the nature of the contest in *Hallfreðar saga* is very different; whereas the subject matter contested in eddic wisdom dialogues and contests is chiefly cosmological, the exchange between Hallfreðr and Óláfr tests both Hallfreðr's poetic skills and the extent to which skaldic poetry, which commonly incorporates allusions to ostensibly pagan stories in the form of kennings, can be adapted for Christian expression. But we can still see in the persistent challenges made by Óláfr to compose a more acceptable verse the influence of the interrogative framework of the wisdom contest, in which the challenger questions his opponent at length in the hope of asking a question to which he or she does not know the answer, as in the case of the unanswerable question in v. 54 of *Vafþrúðnismál*; indeed, we might consider Óláfr's primary intention to be to challenge Hallfreðr's poetic prowess to such an extent that skaldic verse proves ultimately incapable of lending itself to Christian expression, but Hallfreðr manages to mollify the king in the end. The author of *Hallfreðar saga* has borrowed a scenario traditionally associated with Óðinn to develop the Odinic characterization of Óláfr begun in ch. 5, with Hallfreðr being impelled to compose poetry to satisfy his new Christian patron as he once was obliged to compose it for his former pagan patron.

The most Odinic episode of *Hallfreðar saga* occurs later in ch. 6, in which King Óláfr orders Hallfreðr to visit the recalcitrant heathen Þorleifr inn spaki (the Wise). After Hallfreðr is falsely accused of keeping a Þórr-amulet in his money-bag by a man named Kálfr, Óláfr sends his poet to Þorleifr's farm with the instruction to either kill or blind him, apparently as

punishment for his refusal to accept Christianity. After reaching a forest close to Þorleifr's farm, Hallfreðr leaves the men who have travelled with him behind and prepares to meet Þorleifr alone; before approaching Þorleifr, Hallfreðr dresses in 'stafkarls gørví' (beggar's gear), puts 'lit' (colour) on his eyes, and turns his eyelids backwards, adopting an appropriately Odinic disguise for his encounter with the pagan. Hallfreðr walks up to Þorleifr's farm and to the mound on which Þorleifr is sitting, the poet identifying himself as a 'fátækr maðr' (poor man) when Þorleifr greets him and asks for his name. Þorleifr says very little in response to Hallfreðr's identification of himself as a 'fátækr maðr', but asks instead a series of apparently random questions, which Hallfreðr answers easily: '...spyr hann margs um lond eða hafnir. Hann leysti ór ollu fróðliga' (...he asks of many things about lands and harbours. He [Hallfreðr] acquitted himself knowledgeably from all this). Even though the questions and answers concerning lands and harbours are not narrated, the dialogue between Hallfreðr and Þorleifr and the intervening saga narrative can be seen as constituting a prose wisdom contest and corresponding structurally to Clover's tripartite division of the *senna* in *Hárbarðsljóð* into 'preliminary', 'central exchange', and 'conclusion'.<sup>172</sup> The 'preliminary' of the contest is the identification scene, the 'central exchange' is the very brief narration of Þorleifr's questions about lands and harbours, and the 'conclusion' comprises Þorleifr's speech concerning the dreams he has had of Hallfreðr, indicative of his growing suspicion as to the true identity of the 'fátækr maðr', and his final realization that his opponent is none other than Hallfreðr himself. After Þorleifr's realization of Hallfreðr's true identity, the two men begin to wrestle; they roll down the mound, and Hallfreðr manages to get on top of

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<sup>172</sup> The wisdom contest bears many formal similarities to the *senna*, which Antje G. Frotscher defines as 'an exchange of speeches which forms an antagonistic, person-oriented, in some way formalized verbal contest', and while Frotscher notes the prevalence of verse *sennur* in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, she also argues that no definition offered thus far by critics 'actually precludes the existence of prose verbal duels'; by the same token, there is no reason why wisdom contests could not also have taken prose form, despite the prevalence of wisdom contests in verse. Antje G. Frotscher, 'The War of the Words: a History of Flyting from Antiquity to the Later Middle Ages' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2003), pp. 4 and 128-29 and Carol J. Clover, 'Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce', *Scandinavian Studies*, 51 (1979), 124-45.

Þorleifr, after which Hallfreðr disfigures him: ‘hann setti hæl á augat Þorleifi ok hleypði ór honum auganu’ (he set his heel into the eye of Þorleifr and thrust the eye out of him).

Responding to Þorleifr’s pleading, however, Hallfreðr decides to leave him the other eye, for which Þorleifr promises to come to Hallfreðr’s aid if he should ever need it, which he does later in ch. 11 of the saga, in which Þorleifr secures Hallfreðr’s pardon from the death sentence of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson, who wishes to put the poet to death for maiming Þorleifr.

As with Ármóðr’s disfigurement in ch. 72 of *Egils saga*, the blinding of Þorleifr functions very much as an Odinic signature, but its import is no longer primarily poetic. After allowing Þorleifr to keep his other eye, Hallfreðr is evidently concerned to make sure he has two eyes to present to King Óláfr on his return to court as proof that he has carried out the king’s command. Hallfreðr’s companion Jósteyninn persuades the poet not to kill Kálfr, the man who falsely accused Hallfreðr of keeping a Þórr-amulet in his money-bag earlier in the chapter, on their way home from Þorleifr’s; instead, Hallfreðr pokes out one of Kálfr’s eyes, evidently feeling that a wicked, albeit Christian, man has escaped punishment for his treachery, while an honourable, albeit pagan, man has been injured: “‘Eigi hefir hér at høgum verit til skipt; góðr drengur er meiddr, en mannfýlan lifir...’” (“Justice has not been apportioned here; a good man is maimed, but a worthless man lives...”). Hallfreðr presents the two eyes to Óláfr, who knows that they do not both belong to Þorleifr, but the king allows the matter to rest there, perhaps feeling himself that Hallfreðr’s actions were justified. The two eyes Hallfreðr claims on his mission, one pagan and the other Christian, represent on one level the incomplete conversion that the poet has undergone; although he may have been baptized, Hallfreðr’s perspective is half-Christian, half-pagan, demonstrated by the sympathy he still feels for the pagan Þorleifr and his hostility towards the Christian Kálfr. At the same time, however, the Odinic motif of the single eye brings with it the association with wisdom deriving from the myth of Óðinn’s sacrifice of his eye to acquire wisdom from the well of

Mímir. There is perhaps a suggestion here that there is something of heathendom worth retaining that can match the religious value of Christianity, that a man should retain one pagan ‘eye’ alongside his other Christian ‘eye’, each of these eyes together symbolizing the benefit of a hybridized worldview; in this context, the very curious detail of Hallfreðr turning the eyelids inside out, a motif I have not come across elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, presumably signifies that the eye-sockets are ripe for implantation, and the saga author has him acquire both a pagan and a Christian eye to use as his own. If we consider Þorleifr and Kálfr as representative adherents of their respective religions, we are perhaps to consider Kálfr’s dishonourableness in falsely accusing Hallfreðr of possessing a Þórr-amulet as being characteristic of a deficiency in Christians that can be remedied with an admirable attribute associated here with a pagan worldview: there is wisdom in the honour of heathens.

Whereas the Odinic motifs incorporated in *Egils saga* seem primarily to serve aesthetic ends in charting Egill’s development as a supremely Odinic poet in terms borrowed from the myth of the mead of poetry, the Odinic content present in the prose of *Hallfreðar saga* is employed to explore the relationship between paganism and Christianity and the nature of religious conversion. Distinctive of *Hallfreðar saga* is the concerted use of Odinic motifs and textual structures relating to Óðinn’s position as god of wisdom, rather than god of poetry, evidenced not only by the motif of the single eye, realized in a much more developed way than it is in ch. 72 of *Egils saga*, but also by the influence of the interrogative framework of the wisdom dialogue or contest on the context ascribed to Hallfreðr’s conversion verses and in the episode detailing Hallfreðr’s interaction with Þorleifr. *Hallfreðar saga* is not the only saga considered in this chapter in which Odinic motifs relating to wisdom are employed, however, for we also see the use of the head-loss motif in some of the other *skáldasögur*, which in *Vafþrúðnismál* is incorporated in the context of a wisdom contest (see v. 19 of the poem, in which Vafþrúðnir suggests that he and Óðinn wager their heads on their wisdom).

The most notably Odinic incarnation of this motif occurs in ch. 32 of *Bjarnar saga*, in which Björn Hítðælakappi is ambushed and attacked by his poetic rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson and his men. For a long time, Björn defends himself from his many assailants using only a pair of shears, but eventually, Þórðr delivers Björn's deathblows and the body parts Björn loses in the fight subtly allude to the myth of the mead of poetry and suggest an association with the head-loss motif:

Nú er þat sagt, at Þórðr hjó til Bjarnar, ok beit af honum þjóhnappana, ok fellr Björn þá. Þórðr vill þá eigi láta hoggva á milli ok hæggr af Birni hofuð í ǫðru hoggvi...

(Now it is told that Þórðr struck at Björn and cut the buttocks from him, and then Björn falls. Þórðr does not want to pause between blows and strikes the head from Björn with the other blow...')

In the account of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, Óðinn both regurgitates and defecates the mead. By slicing off Björn's buttocks and head, Þórðr removes from the poet the two orifices from which poetry was delivered to the gods and men, preventing *in toto* both speech and poetry, as well as the dissemination of wisdom only possible if a man can keep his head. After beheading Björn, Þórðr attaches Björn's head to his saddle-straps and allows it to hang there, but his companion Dálkr thinks it unnecessary to give further offence to Björn's kinsmen. As if the episode were not Odinic enough, the author amplifies the Odinic resonance of Björn's death by incorporating some ravens evidently taken from the reference to ravens in v. 38 in the saga narrative. As Þórðr and his companions are riding away with Björn's head, these ravens fly towards them, and the author presents the sight as having prompted Þórðr to compose v. 38:

Hvert stefni þér, hrafnar,  
hart með flokk enn svarta?  
Farið ljóst matar leita

landnorðr frá Klifsandi;  
 þar liggir Björn, en Birni  
 blóðgögl of skör stóðu;  
 þollr hné hjalms á hjalla  
 Hvítings ofar lítlu.

(Where are you going, ravens, so quickly with your black troop? You are clearly going to seek food north-east of Klifsandr: there lies Björn, and blood-geese are standing by Björn's head; the fir-tree of the helmet fell a little higher up on Hvítingshjalli.)

Of course, the raven is one of the beasts of battle that traditionally appear in both Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic literature to feast on the corpses of the slain, and Þórðr does say in his verse that they are flying in search of food, but it is significant that the birds are said to be standing by Björn's head rather than eating it. If the ravens to which Þórðr refers are interpreted as Odinic representatives, the ravens Huginn and Muninn being two of the familiars of Óðinn according to ch. 38 of *Gylfaginning*, it may be that Þórðr is deliberately playing with the semantic range of the noun *matr* and that the *matr* the birds seek is not in fact meat, but speech or poetry. According to v. 20 of *Grímnismál*, Óðinn's ravens 'Huginn oc Muninn fliúga hverian dag/iormungrund yfir' (Huginn and Muninn fly over the earth every day), and Snorri adds in ch. 38 of *Gylfaginning* that Óðinn finds out about what is happening in the world when they return at dinnertime as a result, for the ravens 'segja í eyru honum öll tíðindi þau er þeir sjá eða heyra.' (speak into his ear all the news that they see or hear.'). It may be that the author has taken the ravens from v. 38 and incorporated them as a detail in the saga prose to suggest that these ravens are more than the mere carrion-eaters that traditionally grace the battlefield and have in fact been sent by Óðinn to bring back news of the fate of his poet; indeed, this is not the only occasion on which ravens appearing in prose seem to be representatives of Óðinn, for Hákon jarl Sigurðarson makes a sacrifice and interprets the two ravens flying over him as a sign that Óðinn has accepted his sacrifice in ch.

27 of Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla* and a raven brings a healing leaf to Sigmundur, Óðinn's protégé, in ch. 8 of *Völsunga saga*.<sup>173</sup>

Of course, there is an obvious discrepancy between v. 38 and its prose context, for the verse suggests that Björn's head remains where it fell to be surrounded by ravens, but the prose clearly states that Þórðr attaches the head to his saddle-straps and rides away with it, later throwing it at Björn's mother Þórdís. We might attribute the discrepancy to the saga author's desire to accentuate the connection between Björn losing his head and the head-loss motif by drawing greater attention to the head, particularly since this motif appears to have been commonly associated with poets. Most obviously, Egill's recitation of *Höfuðlausn* in ch. 60 of *Egils saga* is intended to persuade King Eiríkr to let the poet keep his head, a head which is later said to be incredibly large and capable of withstanding the blows from an axe (ch. 86). The motif is also employed with added Odinic resonance in ch. 82 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, in which Grettir's killer Þorbjörn ǫngull (Fish-hook) cuts Grettir's head from his corpse and preserves it by placing it 'í salt' (in salt). The allusion here is to Óðinn's preservation of Mímir's head, which he 'smurði urtum' (anointed with herbs) in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga* and thereby preserved Mímir's capacity to speak after he had been decapitated by the Vanir. The myth of Mímir's head-loss demonstrates that the motif was less concerned with the physical loss of the head than with the consequent prevention of sententious speech (compare the mistake of Hamðir and Sǫrli in *Hamðismál* in not cutting off Jǫrmunrekkr's head and thereby preventing him from issuing the command to stone the brothers; see vv. 26-28), and its employment in relation to poets in *Bjarnar saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Grettis saga*

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<sup>173</sup> Lilla Kopár has discussed the Odinic associations of figures depicted with birds on their shoulders in Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture, which in some cases, as in that of a figure depicted on a fragment of a cross shaft from Kirklevington, North Yorkshire, may be representations of Óðinn with his ravens perched on his shoulders, perhaps relaying the news they have brought him. The ravens standing by Björn's head in v. 38 may be treated as a similar image. Lilla Kopár, *Gods and Settlers: The Iconography of Norse Mythology in Anglo-Scandinavian Sculpture*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 25 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), pp. 113-15.

functions as a poignant reminder that human poets, unlike Mímir, do not continue to speak and recite poetry after death; even if their verses live, the source of those verses does not.

The violent end of Björn at the hands of his poetic rival Þórðr is emblematic of a movement from poetic rivalry to physical violence found generally in the *skáldasögur*. The incorporation of *lausavísur* and verses that may have been taken from longer poems and sequences existing prior to the composition of the *skáldasögur* frequently situates verses in the context of competition, suggesting a prevailing conception of poetry as being fundamentally combative; moreover, the prevalence of the *hólmganga* as the apparently inevitable conclusion of poetic and romantic rivalry in the core *skáldasögur* implies that speech is often the prelude to physical violence, a truism so well-known that it is formulated proverbially in v. 73 of *Hávamál*: ‘tunga er höfuðs bani’ (the tongue is the slayer of the head).<sup>174</sup> This dynamic is present widely in eddic poetry, and there is reason to believe that Óðinn was particularly associated with the inherently combative nature of dialogue owing to his frequent appearance as participant in the wisdom dialogues and contests of eddic poetry. The obvious hostility between Óðinn and the *vǫlur* in *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, for example, was noted in the previous chapter, and Carolyne Larrington has suggested that *Vafþrúðnismál*, in which Óðinn defeats and presumably claims the head of the giant Vafþrúðnir, is mimetic of the physical conflict between the gods and the giants that will erupt at Ragnarök.<sup>175</sup> The competitive nature of the exchange between Hallfreðr and Óláfr in ch. 6 of *Hallfreðar saga*, in which the conversion verses are recited, has already been discussed, and the head-loss motif employed in ch. 60 of *Egils saga* in the context ascribed to the recitation of *Höfuðlausn* suggests that poetry can be as strong a blow as the thrust of a sword in defending a man from harm.

<sup>174</sup> Formal duels occur six times in *Kormáks saga* (Kormákr is a participant in only four of these), once in *Hallfreðar saga* (though in this case circumvented by the intervention of King Óláfr in a dream), and three times in *Gunnlaugs saga* (two of which are between the poetic rivals).

<sup>175</sup> Carolyne Larrington, ‘*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*: Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography’, in *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Acker and Larrington, pp. 62-77 (pp. 67-68).

It is in *Bjarnar saga*, however, that the unarticulated challenge a verse surreptitiously presents is most overtly recognized. In responding to v. 4 of the saga, which is recited by Þórðr, Björn declares: “‘Hafa villtu enn þann bragarháttinn sem fyrr meir’” (“You want to have this metre of poetry more, as before”); ever the competitor, Björn replies to the verse with one similarly composed in *fornyrðislag* (old story metre), but goes beyond this by also employing the technique of epanalepsis, answering Þórðr’s enveloping ‘Út skaltu ganga’ (Out you must go) with his own enveloping ‘Hér munk sitja’ (Here I will stay). Evidently, the challenge offered by a verse or a request for a verse is to reciprocate in kind, just as a combatant in a duel must answer his opponent blow for blow, and this is a sentiment echoed by a number of the other *skáldasögur*. In ch. 4 of *Kormáks saga*, for example, Kormákr answers Narfi’s coinage ‘ketils... ormar’ (snakes of the pot) in v. 11 by including the compound ‘ketilormar’ (pot-snakes) in v. 14, while in ch. 6 of *Hallfreðar saga*, King Óláfr challenges Hallfreðr to compose a verse with the word ‘sverð’ (sword) in every line, which the poet then goes on to do.

In addition to verses being recited as an unarticulated challenge to reciprocate, poetry is often used in the *skáldasögur* to openly insult an opponent. This type of poetry is known as *níðvísur* (insult-verses), a form of poetic libel punishable under Icelandic law; such verses can contain accusations of aberrant sexual practices, as we see, for example, in v. 19 of *Bjarnar saga*, in which Þórðr implies Björn sodomized a calf when he lifted it by ‘hala kollu’ (the cow’s tail), as well as boasts and charges of cowardice, as in v. 28 of *Kormáks saga*.<sup>176</sup> Even if these *níðvísur* go unanswered at the time of their first recitation, the insults they transmit accumulate and are likely to be frequently repeated by word-of-mouth, as ch. 20 of *Bjarnar saga* makes clear. In ch. 29 of *Bjarnar saga*, it is suggested that poetic rivalry can only continue for so long before the hostility built up by *níðvísur* must be discharged by

<sup>176</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre, The Viking Collection, 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 15-16, 28-32, and 79-81.

violence. In this chapter, both Björn and Þórðr must recite every verse they have composed about each other at an attempted settlement, which functions as a kind of legally sanctioned second-order contest. The saga author admits that only some of these verses were *áheyrligr* (suitable to hear), indicating the extremity of the insults contained in the *níðvísur* of the two rivals, but it turns out in the end that Björn has composed only one more verse than Þórðr. It appears at first that a settlement will be reached by Þórðr being permitted to compose another verse about Björn to make them even, but Björn cannot stand to be outdone by his rival and responds with a further verse of his own. Neither Björn nor Þórðr will ever better the other in verse, for a verse always invites a response, and the only way to defeat an opponent once and for all is to move away from verbal contest to physical violence; indeed, as we have seen, the competition between Björn and Þórðr is resolved only by Björn's violent death in ch. 32.

As much as the combative contexts frequently ascribed to the recitation of verses in the *skáldasögur* may have been influenced by the competitive and characteristically Odinic frameworks of wisdom dialogues in eddic poetry, it is also possible that they were influenced by the tradition of the heroic *sennur*, which Antje G. Frotscher defines as 'an exchange of speeches which forms an antagonistic, person-oriented, in some way formalized verbal contest'.<sup>177</sup> Although *Lokasenna* is perhaps the most famous *senna* in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is the *sennur* incorporated in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (vv. 32-46), *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (vv. 12-30), and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (vv. 19-24) that offer the closest analogues to the combative exchanges of poetry in the *skáldasögur*. In each of these eddic poems, a *senna* incorporating sexual insults similar to those contained in the *níðvísur* recited in the *skáldasögur* (see, for example, Guðmundr's accusation that Sinfjötli was the 'brúðr Grana' (the bride of Grani) in v. 42 of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*) takes place prior to violence, and we might consider the presentation of Björn Hítðelakappi in

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<sup>177</sup> Frotscher, 'The War of the Words', p. 4.

*Bjarnar saga*, in which the combative nature of poetic exchange and its position as the precursor of violence is so foregrounded, as we have seen, to be evidence of a conception of the poet as hero, rather than as an Odinic surrogate.

The case for the representation of some poets in the *skáldasögur* as heroic poets, rather than Odinic surrogates, becomes more compelling if we consider the position of the love triangle as the defining feature of the core *skáldasögur*. Although Bjarni Einarsson considered the theme of thwarted love and erotic components in the core *skáldasögur* to have derived from the continental models, Theodore M. Andersson has been willing to admit the status of skaldic love poetry and biographies of poets as ‘indigenous Icelandic forms’ and acknowledges the influence that native mythological and legendary material may have had on the development of the love triangle in the *skáldasögur* alongside traditions filtering through from the Continent, noting in particular the influence of the Brynhildr legend.<sup>178</sup> The love triangle involving Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Gunnarr Gjúkason, and Brynhildr Buðladóttir in the legendary traditions pertaining to the Vǫlsungar is naturally the love triangle that comes most immediately to mind (it certainly does for Hrafn in *Gunnlaugs saga*, who reveals in v. 12 that he has dreamed of his rival Gunnlaugr killing him in bed in what is clearly intended as a comparison of his own situation to the context of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani’s murder in bed according to one version of the legend), but we might in fact widen the influence to include material relating to the relationship between the hero and a *valkyrja* more generally, for it seems on the basis of the three Helgi-poems that a love triangle may have been a standard element of this relationship in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.<sup>179</sup> In vv. 18-19 of *Helgakviða*

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<sup>178</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur: Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1961), ‘The Lovesick Skald: A Reply to Theodore M. Andersson (*Mediaeval Scandinavia* 1969)’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 4 (1971), 21-41, and *To skjaldesagaer: en analyse af ‘Kormáks saga’ og ‘Hallfreðar saga’* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1976) and Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Skalds and Troubadours’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 2 (1969), 7-41 (p. 41) and ‘Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 3: The Love Triangle Theme’, in *Skaldsagas*, ed. Russell Poole, pp. 272-84 (pp. 280-84).

<sup>179</sup> On the variant traditions relating to the death of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, see the concluding prose passage in *Brot af Sigurðarkviða*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, II, pp. 324-28 (p. 328).

*Hundingsbana I*, the first task with which Helgi Hundingsbani is charged by the *valkyrja* Sigrún is to challenge to battle Høðbroddr, to whom she has been betrothed, or seize her from him; similarly, in v. 16 of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Sigrún implicitly dares Helgi to contend with Høðbroddr by mentioning that she has been betrothed to someone she does not wish to marry and instead loves Helgi, who naturally embarks on a mission against Høðbroddr. Each of these poems suggests that in some versions of stories detailing the relationship between a hero and *valkyrja* a love triangle requiring the hero to kill the *valkyrja*'s suitor in order to win her patronage, both martial and sexual, was a central element of the hero-*valkyrja* complex.

It has to be admitted that there is a certain degree of conceptual similarity between the way in which heroes are inspired to perform heroic deeds by their *valkyrja* (see, for example, the way in which Sváva prompts Helgi Hjörvarðsson's heroic career by naming him and telling him where he can find an excellent sword in vv. 6-9 of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*) and poets are inspired by their beloved women to compose verses about them and addressed to them, even if their poetry very quickly becomes more to do with besting their rivals than impressing their lovers. Indeed, there are verbal exchanges between the poet and his beloved women in both *Hallfreðar saga* and *Kormáks saga* in which poetry is recited in an attempt to impress the beloved woman in the same way that a hero might attempt to impress his *valkyrja* with heroic deeds. In ch. 9 of *Hallfreðar saga*, Hallfreðr returns to Iceland and visits his rival Gríss's shielings with some companions. Kolfinna Ávaldadóttir, the object of Hallfreðr's affections, and a group of other women are out at the shielings and reluctantly give the men food and shelter. After the men have eaten, Hallfreðr reveals that it is his intention to sleep with Kolfinna, and the two of them share a bed for the night. As they lay in bed together, Hallfreðr asks Kolfinna what kind of love there is between her and Gríss. She assures him that everything is well between her and her husband, but Hallfreðr refuses to believe her,

claiming that the verses she has composed about Gríss suggest otherwise. Kolfinna denies that she has composed these verses and demands to hear them, after which Hallfreðr recites a series of scurrilous stanzas, which not only insult Gríss, but also attempt to flatter Kolfinna. In v. 18, for example, Hallfreðr describes Kolfinna as being ‘sem ǫlpt á sundi’ (like a swan swimming), juxtaposing this very beautiful image with the grotesque one of a sweaty Gríss. As Kolfinna knows, the verses that Hallfreðr recites as Kolfinna’s have been composed by Hallfreðr himself with the intention of showing off his poetic skills and winning her favour, specifically in the narrative context of these verses, her sexual acquiescence. The same framework is employed for the incorporation of vv. 59-62 in *Kormáks saga*, which are recited by Kormákr to Steingerðr while the two share a bed for the night in ch. 19. As is the case with the aforementioned episode from *Hallfreðar saga*, these verses are intended to seduce, but rather than compose insulting verses about her husband, Kormákr decides instead to flatter Steingerðr. Steingerðr, however, is distinctly unimpressed with his efforts and provides a curt response to each of Kormákr’s verses not dissimilar to the disgruntled replies of Óláfr Tryggvason to Hallfreðr’s conversion verses, such as her reaction to v. 61: ‘Steingerðr kvazk eigi vilja háð hans’ (Steingerðr said that she did not want his mockery). Of course, Kormákr is unperturbed by Steingerðr’s responses and interprets the negative reception of each verse as a challenge to compose something more persuasive, entertaining the hope that Steingerðr is simply testing his poetic prowess a little more before she will consent to sexual intercourse.

The beloved women of the poets whose lives are recounted in the core *skáldasögur* are the catalysts of both poetic conflict and physical violence between the rivals for their hands and in this way closely resemble the *valkyrjur* who inspire their protégés to feats of battle in the three Helgi-poems. It is therefore not improbable that the relationship between the hero and a *valkyrja*, with its love triangle motif and concept of heroic patronage, had a hand in the development of the love triangle motif in the core *skáldasögur* and the concept of

poetic patronage offered by the beloved woman. Nowhere do we find more conclusive evidence of this than in *Gunnlaugs saga*, in which mythological and legendary motifs relating to the *valkyrja* and the very similar figure of the swan-maiden is incorporated in the saga narrative to characterize Gunnlaugr not as a particularly Odinic surrogate, but as a heroic poet.<sup>180</sup> The first evidence of this comes in ch. 2 of the saga, in which Þorsteinn Egilsson has a disturbing dream inside his booth at the local *þing*-site and wakes up in distress. Although initially reluctant to divulge the dream to his companion Bergfinnr, a Norwegian staying with Þorsteinn who ‘hendi mikit gaman at draumum’ (took great delight in dreams), Þorsteinn provides a full account of it on the way home that begins as follows:

“Þat dreymði mik, at ek þóttumk heima vera at Borg ok úti fyrir karldurum, ok sá ek upp á húsin ok á mœninum álpt eina væna ok fagra, ok þóttumk ek eiga, ok þótti mér allgóð...”

(“I dreamed this, that I seemed to be home at Borg and standing outside in front of the men’s doors, and I looked up at the house and at a fine and beautiful swan on the roof-ridges, and I thought I owned her, and she seemed to me perfectly good...”)

The swan attracts the attention of two eagles, each of which wishes to court the beautiful bird. The two eagles fight for possession of the swan and are both killed in the battle, while the swan remains perched on the roof ‘hnipin mjök ok daprlig’ (greatly distressed and downcast). Afterwards, a hawk arrives and sits beside the swan; it is gentle with her, and the two birds fly off together in the same direction. Þorsteinn dismisses the birds as symbols of winds blowing in from the direction of their flight, but Bergfinnr believes they represent the *fylgjur* (accompaniers) of people: the swan signifies Þorsteinn’s unborn daughter Helga in fagra and the eagles two noble men who will fight to the death for love of her, while the hawk betokens a third man who will marry her. The representation of the *fylgjur* of two poets as eagles is

<sup>180</sup> On the swan-maiden, see A. T. Hatto, ‘The Swan-maiden: A Folk-tale of North Eurasian Origin?’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 24 (1961), 326-52 and Anne Burson, ‘Swan-maidens and Smiths: A Structural Study of *Völundarkviða*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 55 (1983), 1-19.

particularly appropriate, for Óðinn transformed himself into an eagle to fly back to Ásgarðr with the poetic mead in his crop; indeed, there may even be an attempt here to render summarily and symbolically the myth of the mead of poetry, the two eagles fighting over the swan being comparable to the two eagles (Óðinn and Suttungr) contesting possession of poetry in the account of the myth in *Skáldskaparmál*. At the same time, however, the representation of Helga's *fylgja* as a swan functions as the first in a series of allusions aligning her with the figure of the swan-maiden.

In ch. 11 of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the identification of Helga and Gunnlaugr with the swan-maiden and her lover is reiterated in the narrative context constructed for vv. 19 and 20. One morning at the *alþingi*. Gunnlaugr and his brother Hermundr go to wash themselves in the *Øxará*. At the same time, several women make their way to the opposite bank of the river, and among them is Helga in fagra. When Hermundr asks Gunnlaugr if he has spotted the object of his affections, the poet replies in the affirmative and recites the following verse (v. 19):

Alin vas rýgr at rógi,  
runnr olli því Gunnar,  
lög vask auðs at eiga  
óðgjarn, fira þornum;  
nú eru svanmærrar síðan  
svört augu mér bauga  
lands til lýsi-Gunnar  
lítilþorrf at títa.

(The woman was born to bring strife to the children of men: the tree of Gunnr started all of that. I was madly eager to possess the log of riches; now, from this moment on, my black eyes are insufficient to gaze at the swan-splendid light-Gunnr of the ring-land.)

The adjectival compound *svanmærr* functions in the first instance as a description of Helga's exceptional beauty, but its comparison of Helga to a swan and the fortuitous phonological correspondence between *mærr* and *mær* (maiden) suggests that the compound is also

intended to conjure the image of the swan-maiden. Certainly, the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* interpreted the compound in this way, constructing a narrative context for the verse that borrows the aquatic setting common in folktales detailing the relationship between the swan-maiden and her lover. Finding swan-maidens by a body of water is a common feature of the swan-maiden tale-type (T56.3); usually, the swan-maiden removes her garments to bathe and is spotted by a young man, who prevents her from flying away by stealing her clothes (the source of her ability to fly) and marries her (B652.1, D361.1, K1335, N716, and T16).<sup>181</sup> There is no reference to a river or bathing in either v. 19 or v. 20, which is also incorporated here, suggesting that the saga author invented this episode and its riverside setting to activate the conceptual and phonological allusion to the swan-maiden he himself brought to bear on his interpretation of v. 19.

Our most valuable evidence for a version of the swan-maiden folktale known in medieval Iceland is the account of the tale provided in the eddic poem *Vǫlundarkviða*.<sup>182</sup> In the prose introduction to *Vǫlundarkviða*, Vǫlundr and his brothers Slagfiðr and Egill come across three women, whose names are Hlaðguðr svanhvít (Swan-white), Hervor alvitr (All-wise), and Qlrún Kjársdóttir, spinning linen on the shore of Úlfsjár. The women's 'álftarhamir' (swan's garments) lie nearby, but regardless of this and the epithet of Hlaðguðr, the narrator identifies them not as swan-maidens, but as *valkyrjur*. The same conflation of the swan-maiden and *valkyrja* can also be found in chs 6 and 7 of *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, in which Hrómundr's enemy Helgi inn frækni (the Brave) enjoys the patronage of his mistress Kára, who flies over the battlefield 'í álfarham' (in the form of a swan; ch. 6) working magic to aid Helgi in the fight; unfortunately for Helgi, he raises his sword so high during the battle that he accidentally chops off one of Kára's swan-legs, killing her and

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<sup>181</sup> Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk-tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books and Local Legends*, rev. and enl. edn, 6 vols (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955-58).

<sup>182</sup> *Vǫlundarkviða*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 428-37; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

bringing to an end the protection she provided in battle.<sup>183</sup> Moreover, the *valkyrja* Brynhildr Buðladóttir speaks from her throne ‘sem álftr af báru’ (like a swan on a wave) in ch. 27 of *Völsunga saga*, which similarly suggests the conflation of the *valkyrja* with the swan-maiden.

According to the introduction of *Völundarkviða*, the brothers and the women live together for seven years, after which the women fly off to go to battle (typical behaviour of a *valkyrja*, as we see in the three Helgi-poems) and do not return; a slightly different turn of events is narrated in v. 3 of the poem, in which the brothers and the women live together for seven years, the women suffer in the eighth, and the couples are parted through ‘nauðr’ (necessity) in the ninth, the women going off ‘ørlög drýgia.’ (to fulfil destiny.). The ‘álptarhamir’ are something of a blind motif in *Völundarkviða*, for the brothers are not said to steal the garments and thereby prevent the three *valkyrjur* from flying away, but it may be the case that the story of Völundr and his brothers and the swan-maiden tale-type generally were so well-known that complete narration of the details was unnecessary. Situating the composition and recitation of v. 19 by a river in which men and women are bathing on opposite banks suggests that the compound *svanmærr* evoked for the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* the story of the swan-maiden, prompting him to cast the verse’s focus on Gunnlaugr’s longing gaze in mythico-legendary terms; the poet’s longing gaze is drawn into alignment with the gaze of the young man who watches bathing women in the swan-maiden tale-type, an alignment amplified by the focus on Helga’s eyes in v. 20, which Gunnlaugr claims will bring grief to both of them (N716).<sup>184</sup> The outcome of a relationship with a swan-maiden is inevitably

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<sup>183</sup> *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 405-22.

<sup>184</sup> The verse incorporated as v. 20 in *Gunnlaugs saga* appears also as v. 3 in *Kormáks saga*, but while the verse is recited on the occasion of Gunnlaugr’s last sighting of Helga in *Gunnlaugs saga*, Kormákr recites the verse on the occasion of his first sighting of Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga*. Russell Poole has argued that the match between v. 20 and its prose context in *Gunnlaugs saga* is imperfect because Gunnlaugr claims in the verse that Helga’s gaze will cause grief later, even though the grief of the two thwarted lovers has already come to pass by this stage in the narrative; on this basis, he concludes that the verse is incorporated more appropriately in *Kormáks saga* as a composition expressing love at first sight and the distress that this love will later cause. This ignores, of course, the fact that Hrafn challenges Gunnlaugr to a duel in Norway shortly after the recitation of v. 20, and the later grief caused by Helga can therefore be interpreted as the death of both Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in the later duel; moreover, the incorporation of v. 20 in the same context as v. 19, which is intended to activate

tragic, leading always to the departure of the swan-maiden and consequent grief of her male lover; the parallel drawn between this tale and the situation of Gunnlaugr and Helga leaves us in no doubt that their love for each other will have a similarly tragic end, but the tragedy is inverted in the case of the poet and his lover, for the possibility of a relationship between the two of them is ultimately denied not by the departure of Helga, but by the death of Gunnlaugr.

The final and most poignant adaptation of a motif borrowed from the swan-maiden tale-type is the cloak gifted to Gunnlaugr by King Aðalráðr in ch. 7, which resembles the ‘álptar-hamir’ of the swan-maiden. In ch. 11, Gunnlaugr gives the cloak to Helga during the wedding feast of Svertingr Hafr-Bjarnarson and Húngerðr Þórroddsdóttir, and she becomes fixated on this cloak after news of Gunnlaugr’s death in his duel with Hrafn in Norway reaches Iceland in ch. 13:

Þat var helzt gaman Helgu, at hon rekði skikkjuna Gunnlaugsnaut ok horfði þar á lǫngum. Ok eitt sinn kom þar sótt mikil á bæ þeira Þorkels ok Helgu, ok krǫmðusk margir lengi. Helga tók þá ok þyngð ok lá þó eigi. Ok einn laugaraptan sat Helga í eldaskála ok hneigði höfuð í kné Þorkatli, bónda sínum, ok lét senda eptir skikkjunni Gunnlaugsnaut. Ok er skikkjan kom til hennar, þá settisk hon upp ok rakði skikkjuna fyrir sér ok horfði á um stund. Ok síðan hné hon aprt í fang bónda sínum ok var þá ørend.

(That was the greatest pleasure to Helga, that she unfolded the cloak Gunnlaugsnautr (Gunnlaugr’s Gift) and looked at it there for a long time. And on one occasion, a great sickness came there to the farm of Þorkell and Helga, and many suffered with it for a long time. Then Helga also became ill, but did not lay down. And one Saturday evening, Helga sat in the fire-room and laid her head in her husband Þorkell’s lap and sent for the cloak Gunnlaugsnautr. And when the cloak came to her, then she sat up and spread out the cloak in front of her and looked at it for a while. And afterwards she fell back into the arms of her husband and was then dead.)

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sustained parallels with the swan-maiden tale-type, and the common focus of the two verses on eyes and gazing, central to the swan-maiden tale-type, demonstrates that the inclusion of v. 20 at this point in the saga is no less appropriate than its incorporation as v. 3 of *Kormáks saga*. Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk Literature* and Russell Poole, ‘Verses and Prose in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*’, in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 758 (New York: Garland, 1989), pp. 160-84 (pp. 170-71).

There is an interesting gender reversal here, for the cloak belongs not to the woman in the relationship, as the garments do in the swan-maiden tale-type, but to the man. The usual outcome of the swan-maiden tale-type is that the swan-maiden eventually reclaims her stolen garments and is able to fly away from her husband, but in the inverted version of the tale we have here, Gunnlaugr does not reclaim his cloak, which remains with Helga after Gunnlaugr's death as a constant reminder of the relationship that never came to fruition. The adaptation of this motif, along with the other motifs in the saga borrowed from the swan-maiden tale-type, imbue the love of Gunnlaugr and Helga with a sense of mythico-legendary fatalism, the ultimately unrealized relationship between the two lovers being presented as inevitably tragic as the relationship between the swan-maiden and her lover. Moreover, as a treasure acquired in the course of Gunnlaugr's travels abroad, we might also see the cloak as a means of critiquing the wide-ranging travel necessitated by a poetic career or by desire for fame and fortune and the temporary abandonment of relationships back in Iceland: Hrafn would never have been able to pretend that Gunnlaugr was dead if the poet had been in Iceland.

As we have seen in this section of the chapter, only Egill and Hallfreðr are consistently presented as Odinic figures in the prose of their respective sagas, but this does not mean to say that they are presented as being Odinic for the same reasons; in fact, the Odinic resonances of events in the life of Egill serve to catalogue his development into the supremely Odinic poet we see in chs 71 and 72 of *Egils saga* in terms borrowed from the myth of the mead of poetry, while the Odinic characterization of Hallfreðr and King Óláfr in *Hallfreðar saga* is geared towards the exploration of the relationship between paganism and Christianity and the nature of religious conversion. With the exception of the Odinic motifs employed in his death-scene in ch. 32 of *Bjarnar saga*, Björn Hítðælakappi is not presented as a particularly Odinic poet and instead resembles those heroes who engage in heroic *sennur*

as the prelude to violence, for the combative context of poetic exchange and its status as the precursor of violence is foregrounded in his saga. The conception of the heroic poet becomes much more compelling when we consider the influence of the relationship between a hero and *valkyrja* on the relationship between the poet and his beloved woman and the centrality of the love triangle motif in the core *skáldasögur*; nowhere is this influence demonstrated more conclusively than in the depiction of the relationship between Gunnlaugr and Helga in *Gunnlaugs saga*, which features motifs from folktales about swan-maidens, frequently conflated with *valkyrjur* in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, to present Gunnlaugr as a heroic poet and imbue his love for Helga with a sense of mythico-legendary fatalism.

#### *Kormákr and Þórr*

In spite of the Odinic references in the verses attributed to Kormákr in *Kormáks saga*, there is very little in the saga narrative to suggest that the author was especially concerned with characterizing Kormákr as an Odinic poet. Nowhere do we find equivalents of the overtly Odinic episodes present in either *Egils saga*, such as Egill's Odinic disfigurement of Ármóðr in ch. 72, or *Hallfreðar saga*, such as Hallfreðr's blinding of Þorleifr inn spaki in ch. 6, and there is certainly no verse in the saga to rival the thoughtful examinations of Odinic patronage in Egill's *Sonatorrek* or v. 10 of *Hallfreðar saga*. However, while Odinic motifs may not be incorporated in the saga narrative, native mythological motifs are not entirely absent from the prose. There is considerable evidence to suggest that a concerted effort has been made to align Kormákr instead with the god Þórr, and the author borrows multiple motifs from the myth of Þórr's fight with the giant Hrungrnir to characterize Kormákr as the quintessential hero.

The most detailed account of Þórr's duel with the giant Hrungrnir appears in ch. 17 of *Skáldskaparmál*. While Þórr is away in the east fighting trolls, Óðinn rides Sleipnir into Jötunheimar and meets the giant Hrungrnir, with whom the god wagers his head that there is no horse as good as Sleipnir in Jötunheimar. Angered by Óðinn's boasting, Hrungrnir chases him on his own horse Gullfaxi, which he claims must be a 'myklu stórfetaðra hest' (much swifter horse), and rides straight into Ásgarðr, where the gods invite him into the hall for a drink. After Hrungrnir becomes intoxicated, he threatens to move Valhøll to Jötunheimar, bury Ásgarðr, and kill all the gods except Freyja and Sif, who he will take home with him, forcing the gods to call on Þórr. Þórr returns to Ásgarðr and is furious to find that a giant has been invited into the hall for a drink under Óðinn's protection, but because Hrungrnir does not have his weapons with him, Þórr and the giant arrange to meet at a later date for a duel. On the appointed day, Þórr is accompanied by his companion Þjálfi and Hrungrnir by Møkkurkálfi, a clay man of enormous size with a mare's heart made by the giants apparently to assist Hrungrnir to defeat Þórr; it is said, however, that Møkkurkálfi is terrified and wets himself when he sees Þórr, ultimately proving useless in the duel and quickly dispatched by Þjálfi. Hrungrnir is tricked by Þjálfi, who tells the giant Þórr will arrive by an underground route, into standing on his shield, leaving himself unguarded against the god's frontal assault. Þórr throws his hammer Mjöllnir at the giant, and Hrungrnir throws his whetstone; the two weapons meet in mid-air and the whetstone breaks, one piece falling on the ground, from which all whetstone rocks come, and another lodging itself in Þórr's head and causing him to fall. Hrungrnir is killed by Mjöllnir, which shatters his skull, and falls forwards so that his leg lies across Þórr's neck. Only Þórr's three-years-old son Magni has the strength to lift Hrungrnir's leg off his neck, and Þórr rewards him with Hrungrnir's horse Gullfaxi, although Óðinn says he is wrong to give the horse to the son of a giantess (Magni's mother is the giantess Járnsaxa) and not his own father. At home, a sorceress called Gróa chants spells to

remove the whetstone from Þórr's head, and when it seems likely that she will be successful, Þórr repays her by telling her that he carried her husband Aurvandill back from Jötunheimar in a basket and made a star out of his frozen toe; on learning that her husband will soon be home, Gróa is so happy that she forgets her spells, and the whetstone remains in Þórr's head.

The story of Þórr's duel with Hrungrnir is told also in vv. 14-20 of *Haustlǫng*, but in this version of the myth, only Þórr's journey to the duel and the duel itself are recounted; the instigation of the whole affair by Óðinn is omitted or simply absent, as is the involvement of Þjálfi and Mǫkkurkálfi, and the removal of the whetstone from Þórr's head is only suggested in v. 20. Although the differences between the two main accounts of the myth are significant, the core detail of Hrungrnir standing on his own shield, present in both accounts, was evidently well-known in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, for a shield can be referred to in skaldic poetry in terms 'fóta Hrungrnis er hann stóð á skildi' (of the feet of Hrungrnir when he stood on the shield) according to ch. 49 of *Skáldskaparmál*; indeed, Kormákr himself uses the kenning *stallr Hrungrnis fóta* (pedestal of Hrungrnir's feet) to denote a shield in the first *helmingr* of v. 15. This is not the only reference to the duel between Þórr and Hrungrnir in the verses incorporated in *Kormáks saga*. Following the failure of Þorvarðr Eysteinnsson to turn up for the duel to which he himself challenges Kormákr in ch. 21, Kormákr recites a verse on the subject of Þorvarðr's cowardice (v. 66) and incorporates a reference to the myth of Þórr's fight with Hrungrnir in the second *helmingr*:

hringsnyrtir þarf hjarta  
 'hafær' í sik fœra,  
 þó's men-Gunnar manni  
 meira vant, ór leiri.

(the half-mad ring-polisher needs to plant a heart in himself, though the man of necklace-Gunnr is wanting more, out of clay.)

The heart of clay Kormákr recommends to Þorvarðr is an adaptation or variation of the materials from which Møkkurkálfi is made in the account of the duel between Þórr and Hrungrnir in *Skáldskaparmál*, and in light of Møkkurkálfi's terrified urination, the reference lends the perfect mythological resonance to the cowardice of Þorvarðr. Although there are only two references to this myth in the verses attributed to Kormákr in his saga, they were instrumental in suggesting a mythological parallel with which to inflect the representation of Kormákr, and we will now turn to the three major elements of *Kormáks saga* indebted to the myth of Þórr's fight with Hrungrnir: (a) Kormákr's aversion to magic; (b) Bersi's *lyfsteinn* (healing-stone); and (c) Kormákr's death at the hands of a giant.

Kormákr's most notable personality trait in the saga is his uncompromising suspicion of and disrespect for magic, which goes far beyond his hatred of the sorceress Þórveig, who casts a curse preventing Kormákr and Steingerðr from enjoying each other when the poet orders her to move out of the district without compensation for his killing of her sons (ch. 5). In ch. 9, for example, Kormákr ignores the conditions of use for the enchanted sword Sköfnungr stipulated by Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, and the magic of the sword proves less effective than it otherwise would have been in his duel with Bersi in ch. 10. Although Sköfnungr cuts off the tip of Bersi's sword Hvítungr, the tip of the blade scratches Kormákr's thumb and blood falls on the duelling-cloak, this being one of the ways in which the obligation to fight is nullified according to duelling laws. Moreover, a notch is taken out of the blade of Sköfnungr when it hits the magical shield gifted to Bersi by Þórveig in ch. 8, and no amount of sharpening will restore it (ch. 11; there are parallels here with Gróa's failure to remove the whetstone from Þórr's head after the duel with Hrungrnir); indeed, the notch becomes bigger, perhaps symbolic of the permanent and increasing damage magic will cause to Kormákr's life, not only through Þórveig's curse, but through his own stubborn refusal to adhere to magical prescriptions.

Later in the saga (ch. 22), Kormákr's mother Dalla advises him to seek the magical assistance of Þórdís spákona (the Prophetess) before his duel with Þorvarðr Eysteinnsson, who has already paid Þórdís to make him invulnerable to weapons. Although reluctant to resort to magic, Kormákr visits the prophetess and asks for her help, and Þórdís tells him to stay for the night so she can make him invulnerable to weapons too. During the night, Þórdís attempts to work her magic on Kormákr by feeling under the bedclothes near his head and sacrificing three geese on the intended site of his duel with Þorvarðr, but Kormákr interrupts her twice during the process and apparently interferes with the efficacy of the magic: according to Þórdís, the magic of Þórveig's curse might have been broken if she had slaughtered the third goose "...svá at engi vissi." ("...so that no one knew about it."). Kormákr replies that he does not believe in such things and rejects a later offer from Þórdís to make him unrecognizable. In the subsequent duel, neither Kormákr's nor Þorvarðr's sword works, but Kormákr wins the duel despite his sabotage of Þórdís's magic by delivering a blow so powerful that he breaks Þorvarðr's ribs and incapacitates him. The episode's underlying 'moral', so to speak, is that victory by brute strength alone is preferable to magical advantage, a heroic view we might consider to be represented by Þórr in his duel with Hrungrnir.

If we were to argue that Kormákr is presented as an Odinic figure in his saga, Kormákr's aversion to magic would be the most difficult aspect of his character to explain, for as we have seen in Chapters 1 and 2, Óðinn is credited with extensive magical abilities in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and his surrogates might therefore be expected to share his appreciation of the magical arts; certainly, his protégés are not above accepting Óðinn's magical items in *Völsunga saga*. If we instead see Kormákr as a poet modelled on Þórr, specifically as the god is represented in accounts of his duel with the giant Hrungrnir, the poet's hatred of magic can be attributed to the treacherous use of sorcery to create Mǫkkurkálfi and the failure of Gróa's spells to magically remove the whetstone from Þórr's

head. As John Lindow has noted, Þórr is sometimes outdone by magic in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, noting in particular the sorcerous trickery with which he is duped in his dealings with Skrímir and the contests in which he participates in the hall of Útgarðaloki (see chs 45-47 of *Gylfaginning*); the magical creation of Mǫkkurkálfí by the giants to assist Hrungr in his duel with the god in *Skáldskaparmál* is certainly an attempt to defeat Þórr with sorcery, even if their efforts are unrewarded, and the failure of Gróa's spells to remove the piece of Hrungr's whetstone from Þórr's head leaves a permanently embarrassing reminder of a fight in which Þórr was not only injured, but also incapable of freeing himself from the weight of Hrungr's corpse, something we would not expect of the god responsible for keeping down giant numbers (see v. 23 of *Hárbarðsljóð*) and characterized by the power of his hammer-blows (see, for example, v. 23 of *Hymiskviða* and vv. 31-32 of *Þrymskviða*).<sup>185</sup> On the basis of myths in which Þórr encounters and is outdone by magic, therefore, it seems logical to assume that the god had a reputation as the magician's dupe, perhaps even that he was associated generally with an anti-magical stance, and this turbulent relationship with magic is likely to have influenced the anti-magical stance of Kormákr in his saga, prompted partly by Kormákr's allusions to the duel between Þórr and Hrungr in vv. 15 and 66. Moreover, we may suppose that Þórr distracting Gróa from her enchantments in *Skáldskaparmál* constitutes some contravention of magical propriety, there being a prohibition against interfering with magical practitioners in the act of sorcery, and Þórr may therefore be emblematic here of the magical saboteur. Kormákr occupies precisely this role in failing to adhere to the conditions attendant on the proper use of Skoðnungr and disrupting the sacrificial practices of Þórdís, and the alignment of the poet with Þórr thus becomes even closer.

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<sup>185</sup> John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 288, and *Hymiskviða*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 1, pp. 399-407.

The motivation behind Kormákr's aversion to magic appears to be rooted in a sense of heroic propriety and fair play, and it is notable in this respect that Kormákr's breaches of magical ordinance in the saga occur always in the context of a duel; rather than winning fights by trickery and magic, he wishes to win on the basis of his own strength. This tactic may not always be successful for him, as in his duel with Bersi in ch. 10, but reliance on his own strength works out in his later duel with Þorvarðr, and its status as Kormákr's last duel in the saga suggests that the poet's uncompromising suspicion of magic is justified in the end. As E. O. G. Turville-Petre has observed, there are a number of saga heroes who are presented as godless men; rejecting the worship of pagan gods, these men rely on their own strength and include even the legendary King Hrólfr kraki and his champions, who never sacrificed to gods and instead depended on their own *mátt* (might) and *megin* (main).<sup>186</sup> Of course, Kormákr has not completely given up pagan religious practices (he ritualistically kills a bull following his victory in the duel with Þorvarðr in ch. 22, for example), but he certainly seems to be characterized as a warrior who relies on his own strength in rejecting the use of magic. In discussing godless men, Turville-Petre suggests that Christian writers in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia may have 'made more of them than history justified', it being better from their perspective 'to believe in no god than to bring sacrifice to stocks and stones, idols and demons.'<sup>187</sup> As much as Kormákr's depiction as a self-reliant hero may have been motivated by the enjoyment afforded by a cantankerous, swashbuckling hero, we might see his alignment with Þórr as being not only a reflex of the popular aesthetic employment of Þórr as a model for heroes elsewhere in the literature of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, as he was for Thorkillus in Book 8 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and Þorsteinn bæjarmagn (House-might) in *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*, but also as an attempt to reduce Kormákr's pagan aspects and present him more acceptably for a Christian audience in terms of the noble heathen; the poet

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<sup>186</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, ch. 14.

<sup>187</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 264.

may not have entirely given up pagan practices, but his rejection of magic and reliance on his own strength demonstrates that he is at least heading in the right direction.<sup>188</sup> As a god perhaps representative of such heroic self-reliance, particularly in Snorri's account of his duel with Hrungrnir, in which the magically-animated Møkkurkálfi proves to be useless, Þórr offers the perfect mythological lens through which to conceive of Kormákr.

Although Hrungrnir's whetstone is not borrowed unchanged by the author of *Kormáks saga*, we can perhaps detect its influence in Bersi's *lyfsteinn*. According to ch. 9 of the saga, the *lyfsteinn* goes together with Bersi's sword Hvítingr, and it proves to be the only effective cure (in ch. 13) for the horrific injury Bersi sustains in his duel with Steinarr in ch. 12. Of course, the whetstone used by Hrungrnir in his fight against Þórr causes an injury that Gróa attempts to heal by magic, whereas Bersi's *lyfsteinn* itself has healing properties, but there is unarguably a connection in both stories between stones and the themes of healing and suffering. Moreover, Steinarr's removal of the *lyfsteinn* from around Bersi's neck during their swimming contest in ch. 12 to ensure that things go worse for Bersi in their subsequent duel with each other suggests that Bersi is powerless without his *lyfsteinn* in the same way that Hrungrnir is powerless to prevent his own death by Mjöllnir once the hammer has destroyed his whetstone.<sup>189</sup>

The final and most obvious parallel to the myth of Þórr's fight with Hrungrnir appears in ch. 27 of *Kormáks saga*, in which Kormákr is killed by a giant apparently worshipped by the Scots who runs out at him from the woods:

þá kom at Kormáki ór skógi blótrisi Skota, ok tóksk þar atgangr harðr. Kormákr var ósterkari, en risinn trollauknari. Kormákr leit til sverðs síns, ok var rennt ór slíðrum.

<sup>188</sup> Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen'.

<sup>189</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell has suggested that the whetstone is a symbol of authority and leadership in Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic literature and that the breaking of Hrungrnir's whetstone signifies 'the broken power of his race against Þórr's hammer.' The theft of Bersi's *lyfsteinn* is similarly demonstrates his powerlessness without it. Stephen A. Mitchell, 'The Whetstone as Symbol of Authority in Old English and Old Norse', *Scandinavian Studies*, 57 (1985), 1-31 (p. 19).

Kormákr seildisk til ok hjó risann banahögg. Risinn lagði þó svá fast hendr at síðum Kormáks, at rifin brotnuðu, ok fell Kormákr ok risinn dauðr ofan á hann, ok komsk Kormákr eigi upp.

(then from the woods came the sacrifice-giant of the Scots, and a hard struggle began. Kormákr was the weaker, but the giant had more of a troll's strength. Kormákr searched for his sword, but it had slipped from its scabbard. Kormákr stretched out his hand for it and struck the giant his death-stroke. In spite of this, the giant grasped with his hands Kormákr's sides so firmly that the ribs broke, and Kormákr fell and the dead giant on top of him, and Kormákr could not get up.)

The term 'blótrisi' is a *hapax legomenon*, appearing only here in *Kormáks saga*, and suggests an association between giants and pagan religious practices. Of course, Kormákr is himself a pagan, but as we saw earlier, his persistent mistrust and sabotage of pagan magical rituals and practices suggest that he is to be considered as heading some way towards being a noble heathen, who refuses to engage with pagan practices and prefers instead to rely on his own strength; as such, the practising heathendom of the Scots is to be seen as the direct opposite of Kormákr's non- or partially practising heathendom.<sup>190</sup> Having the dead *blótrisi* fall on top of Kormákr in the same way that the dead Hrungrir falls on top of Þórr, then, is not only intended to accentuate Kormákr's alignment with Þórr, but also to express something of the less morally blameworthy nature of his pagan religious affiliations. Practising heathendom is configured as an antagonistic giant, while non-practising heathendom is represented by a protagonist aligned with Þórr, thereby conceptualizing the distinction between two types of heathen in terms of the antagonism existing between Þórr and the giants and recuperating in the process mythological traditions concerning the heroic exploits of the defender of the gods.

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<sup>190</sup> Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen'.

## Conclusion

Of all the *skáldasögur* considered in this chapter, it is an outlier that demonstrates concerted use of Odinic themes and motifs in the representation of its protagonist. A series of episodes drawing on aspects of the myth of the mead of poetry in *Egils saga* present the poetic ascent of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, beginning with his fledgling compositions at the age of three in the context of ale-drinking and culminating in the transposition of the myth in its entirety to the domestic sphere in an appropriately Odinic poetic apotheosis. The sustained characterization of Egill as an Odinic surrogate in his saga is obviously inspired by the pervasively Odinic content of his poetry, especially the two poems *Höfuðlausn* and *Sonatorrek*. Given the survival of two such monumental Odinic works, it is likely that Egill was considered to be an Odinic figure in oral tradition soon after his death and that the author of *Egils saga* took his cue from oral material in producing a narrative in which Egill arguably becomes the archetypal Odinic poet. Hallfreðr Óttarsson is similarly presented in Odinic terms in *Hallfreðar saga*, as is King Óláfr Tryggvason, but here the characterization is not employed to explore the Odinic role of the poet; rather, it is used to examine the relationship between paganism and Christianity and the nature of religious conversion.

Verbal contests in the *skáldasögur* are not only mimetic of violence, but precede it, and the incorporation of verses that might never have appeared together previously in related sequences and dialogic contexts advances the fundamentally combative nature of poetic composition. The example of distinctively Odinic eddic wisdom dialogues and contests may have encouraged the incorporation of verses in primarily combative contexts, but it is also likely that the tradition of the heroic *senna* had some impact on the fundamentally competitive nature of poetic exchange in the *skáldasögur*; certainly, Björn Hítðelakappi's involvement in such combative exchanges is especially foregrounded in *Bjarnar saga*, and if

we admit the influence of the heroic *senna* on these exchanges, it may be that Björn is conceived of in his saga as being as much a heroic poet as an Odinic one.

The figure of the beloved woman functions in the *skáldasögur* in a similar way to the *valkyrja*. In particular, the capacity of the beloved woman to inspire both poetry and battle replicates the relationship dynamic of the hero and *valkyrja*, who inspires her protégé to acts of heroic prowess, and the love triangle motif common to the core *skáldasögur* may have been influenced by the love triangle that appears to have been a standard element of some versions of stories detailing the relationship between the hero and *valkyrja*, at least as far as the evidence of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* suggests. The author of *Gunnlaugs saga* was especially influenced by mythological and legendary traditions relating to the patronage of heroes by supernatural female figures such as the *valkyrja* and presents the tragic love of Gunnlaugr and Helga in the context of a relationship between a hero and a swan-maiden (conflated with the figure of the *valkyrja*), providing three different episodes drawing on the central motifs of the swan-maiden tale-type. The allusion to the swan-maiden tale-type may be subtle, but the motifs borrowed from the folktale are enough to imbue *Gunnlaugs saga* with a sense of mythico-legendary fatalism and present Gunnlaugr as a heroic poet, rather than an Odinic surrogate.

Despite the Odinic references in verses attributed to Kormákr Ógmundarson in *Kormáks saga*, it is the myth of Þórr's fight with the giant Hrungrnir that provided the necessary motifs to lend a mythological dimension to the figure of the poet, suggesting that the mythological conception of the poet and his personality was freer than has been previously thought. Kormákr is presented less as an Odinic figure than as a legendary hero who relies, like Þórr, on his own strength, resembling in more muted form the heroes of the *fornaldarsögur* who similarly depend on their own might and main, such as King Hrólfr kraki and his champions in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The decision to align Kormákr with Þórr by

incorporating motifs from the myth of the god's fight with Hrungrir was evidently inspired by kennings and references in the verses attributed to Kormákr in his saga, and we may suppose that these verses might once have belonged to a *flokkr* or *drápa* in which sustained engagement with the myth of Þórr's fight with Hrungrir formed the mythological core of the poem.

## Chapter 4

### In the Company of Giants: Survivals of Jötunheimar in the Sagas

As was noted in the Introduction, the gods of Old Norse myth share their world with a whole host of other mythological beings. Chief among these beings after the Æsir are the giants, and scholars have focused primarily on the opposition between gods and giants expressed in certain Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts.<sup>191</sup> Particularly influential in this respect has been Margaret Clunies Ross's examination of what she terms 'negative reciprocity' between the two races, according to which resources are withheld from the giants by the gods while they themselves have access to whatever they want.<sup>192</sup> Certainly, 'negative reciprocity' can be seen to operate in a number of Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts and is frequently configured as an act of bride-theft, with giants attempting to acquire the goddesses withheld from them by the Æsir. The goddess Freyja, for example, is not only the desired bride of the giant Þrymr in *Þrymskviða*, but also part of the payment demanded by the giant builder for the completion of building work in ch. 42 of *Gylfaginning*. In *Skáldskaparmál*, the giant Þjazi is killed for kidnapping Iðunn, events alluded to also in *Grímnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, and *Lokasenna*.

Scholarly focus on an oppositional binary between the gods and the giants is hardly surprising given the predominantly deicentric perspective adopted in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, most of which concentrate on the actions and intentions of the Æsir, and this deicentric perspective has an undeniably forceful manifestation in Þórr's position as defender of the gods and humans against the giants (see, for example, v. 23 of *Hárbarðsljóð*

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<sup>191</sup> Katja Schulz, *Riesen: von Wissenshütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda und Saga*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten, 20 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004), pp. 58-59 and 86-93.

<sup>192</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, ch. 4.

and chs 17 and 18 of *Skáldskaparmál*).<sup>193</sup> Arguably, however, the oppositional binary between the gods and the giants has been overstated, for there is also evidence of cooperation and compromise between the two races. A number of the gods, for example, willingly engage in sexual relationships with giantesses to acquire desirable resources or achieve some kind of union, including Óðinn, who sleeps with the giantess Gunnlōð for three nights to reclaim the mead of poetry (see vv. 13-14 and 104-10 of *Hávamál* and chs 657-58 of *Skáldskaparmál*), and Freyr, whose ultimately coercive seduction of the giantess Gerðr through his emissary Skírnir is recounted in the eddic poem *Skírnismál* and ch. 37 of *Gylfaginning*. In the story of Baldr's death in ch. 49 of *Gylfaginning*, Baldr's funeral is attended by a 'mikit folk hrímþursa ok bergrisar' (great company of frost-giants and mountain-giants), and the Æsir are forced to rely on the giantess Hyrrokkin to launch Baldr's funeral ship. The goddess Freyja has no choice but to extract genealogical information from the giantess Hyndla so that her protégé Óttarr may prove a claim to inheritance in *Hyndluljóð*, and the Æsir are prepared to compensate the giantess Skaði for killing her father Þjazi with marriage to one of the gods, even if the offer of compensation is made entirely on their own terms (see ch. 656 of *Skáldskaparmál*).

As we shall see in the course of this chapter, the portrayal of giants in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* similarly indicates a much less oppositional binary between the gods and the giants or between the giants and the humans who take the place of the gods in saga literature. Certainly, giants are sometimes presented as monstrous enemies who must be killed by heroes, particularly in the *fornaldarsögur*, as we see, for example, in the case of the monstrous giants of *Qrvar-Odds saga* (chs 5-6), but their monstrosity is complicated by the resemblances between giant and human society (see, for example, the giant wedding banquet in ch. 15 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* and the presentation of giant

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<sup>193</sup> Schulz, *Riesen*, pp. 91-92.

society, complete with lawman, in chs 15-16 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*) and the positive interactions between giants and humans elsewhere in saga literature (see, for instance, the role of the giant Dofri as the foster-father of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (c. 850-932) in ch. 1 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in which Bárðr Snæfellsáss is also fostered by Dofri, and ch. 12 of *Kjalnesinga saga* and the ultimately thwarted, but genetically productive, romantic relationship between Ketill hængr (Trout) and Hrafnhildr in chs 3-4 of *Ketils saga hængs*).<sup>194</sup> Even within the same saga, different types of giants are presented, with the monstrous giants of *Qrvar-Odds saga* (chs 5-6) coexisting with the affable Hildir (ch. 18).

The implications of this much less oppositional binary between gods or humans and giants for our understanding of Old Norse myth are great, suggesting as it does that the cognitive utility of giants was not limited to configuring the antagonistic other, and for that reason, the various incarnations of giants in a selection of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* will be considered in this chapter in relation to the ideological implications of their use and characterization. In the first section of this chapter, interactions between the giant and human worlds will be explored in some of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, including discussion of descent from giants and the importance of giants and their descendants as figures representative of anti-social and individualistic tendencies. The employment of giant descent as an ideological construct in the opening chapters of *Orkneyinga saga* to conceive of the political periphery will also be examined, and analysis of *Orkneyinga saga* will be extended through consideration of the way in which giants and their realms are used generally in Old Norse-Icelandic literature to signify alternative and decentralizing ideologies and explore other worlds with other ways. It is my contention that the less oppositional binary between gods or humans and giants that we see in both Old

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<sup>194</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslensk fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), pp. 1-44; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

Norse-Icelandic mythological texts and saga literature is indicative of a much less oppositional binary between these races in the mythological traditions of pre-Christian Iceland.

*Giants, Humans, and their Progeny*

In 1987, Lotte Motz investigated the different types of giants presented in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and attempted to connect the various names for the giants as a group (*jötnar*, *troll*, *þursar*, and *rísar*) to specific types of giant (the lord and guardian of nature, the mythical magician, the hostile and monstrous being, and the heroic or courtly giant).<sup>195</sup> Her delineation of the giants into distinct types on philological grounds is rather suspect, not least because the various names for giants are deployed interchangeably in our extant texts, as scholars such as Ármann Jakobsson and Katja Schulz have observed, but her article is particularly useful in its recognition of the many configurations of members of the giant race evidenced in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the various qualities they possess.<sup>196</sup> As is to be expected given the instances of god-giant antagonism in some Old Norse myths, a common aspect of the portrayal of giants in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* is their status as antagonistic other. Their otherness is frequently represented by physical or social aberration (see, for example, the monstrous creature Grettir fights and kills in ch. 66 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, the *tröllkona* who is ‘svört sem bik’ (as black as pitch) in ch. 5 of *Ketils saga hængs*, and the giants and trolls whose genitalia are showing in ch. 11 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, ch. 1 of *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, and ch. 4 of *Hálfðanar saga Brǫnufóstra*), but that otherness is tempered by the simultaneous depiction of

<sup>195</sup> Lotte Motz, ‘The Families of Giants’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987), 216-36.

<sup>196</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: *Bárðar saga* and its Giants’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 1-15 and Schulz, *Riesen*, ch. 2.

the social world these giants inhabit, which is recognizably human.<sup>197</sup> In ch. 5 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, for example, the chieftain of a group of giants sends one of his giantesses to attack Qrvar-Oddr and his companions. Her antagonistic otherness is represented physically in her appearance as well as in her enormous strength, for she is described as being ‘mikil vexti ok illilig, svá at þeir þóttust ekki kvikvendi slíkt sét hafa’ (very large and hideous-looking, so that they thought that they had never seen a living being like her) and shakes the ships of Qrvar-Oddr and his men to the point of breaking. The chieftain of the giants himself and his wife are described in ch. 6, in which Qrvar-Oddr and his companion Ásmundr infiltrate the cave in which the giants live, and their ugly appearance, which is even more monstrous than the giantess sent by the chieftain in the previous chapter, is similarly employed to signify their antagonistic otherness:

Peir ganga á land upp ok koma at helli einum, ok brann þar eldr. Þeir nema þar staðar ok sjá, at tröllum er skipat á báða beki. Þar sat dólgr í háseti. Sá var bæði mikill ok illiligr. Hann hafði hár mikit ok svart sem tálknfanir. Hann var nefljótr ok eygðr illa. Kona sat it næsta honum. Frá báðum er sagt um yfirlit, er frá öðru er.

(They go ashore and come to a cave, and a fire was burning there. They take up a position there and see that giants are seated on both sides of the benches. There sat a fiend in the high seat. This man was both large and ugly. He had a great quantity of hair, and it was as black as strips of whale-bone. He had an ugly nose and eyes of a nasty-looking kind. His wife was sitting next to him. To describe the appearance of one of them is to describe the appearance of both of them.)

The animalistic nature of the giant chieftain’s hair suggests that there is something bestial about his ugly appearance, and this can be attributed no doubt to the affinities between giants and the natural and animal worlds elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, which Motz has examined.<sup>198</sup> The giant chieftain is a composite figure, being human, giant, and animal,

<sup>197</sup> In ch. 4 of *Hálfðanar saga Brønufostra*, two trolls have genitalia protruding from their faces, constituting both physical and social aberration. *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 183-98; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>198</sup> Lotte Motz, ‘Gods and Demons of the Wilderness: A Study in Norse Tradition’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 99 (1984), 175-87.

and can be seen as representative not only of the antagonism between races, but also of the conceptual overlap between them and the worlds which they inhabit. Indeed, the overlap represented by the giant chieftain and his retainers is signified also by their abode, which takes the form of the mountain cave traditionally conceived of as the proper home of a giant (see, for example, the passage quoted below from ch. 6 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*), but imitates a human hall on the inside with a burning fire, high seat, and benches (the similarity between the human hall and the giant's cave is implied frequently in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, including in *Grettis saga* (ch. 66), *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (ch. 1), *Ketils saga hængs* (ch. 2), *Kjalnesinga saga* (chs 13-14), *Sörla saga sterka* (ch. 3), and *Yngvars saga víðförla* (chs 5-6), and is also suggested by ll. 1512a-17 of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*).<sup>199</sup> No matter how monstrously ugly and antagonistic these giants may be, they are representative of an alternative world operating in parallel to the human, in this case, a potentially hostile world hidden away in caves, but nonetheless there to be discovered. These giants may well be antagonistic and anti-social to other races, particularly the human race, but the domestic scene inside the cave demonstrates that they are at least social to each other in ways consonant with human sociability.

The early antagonistic interaction of Örvar-Oddr with these giants can be seen as both an attempt to characterize Örvar-Oddr as being a little like the giants himself, capable of withstanding their strength in combat (as he does in his defeat of the giantess sent to attack him by the giant chieftain in ch. 5), and also as preparation for the introduction of Örvar-Oddr's most formidable adversary Ögmundr, whose role is developed in the longer version of *Örvar-Odds saga* to the extent that he becomes the primary antagonist of the saga.<sup>200</sup>

Ögmundr makes his first appearance in ch. 13, and the initial description of Ögmundr and his

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<sup>199</sup> *Sörla saga sterka* and *Yngvars saga víðförla*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, III, pp. 367-410 and II, pp. 423-59 respectively and *Klaeber's 'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburg'*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

<sup>200</sup> Fulvio Ferrari, 'Gods, Warlocks and Monsters in the *Örvar-Odds saga*'.

men leaves us with no doubt that there is something distinctly unhuman about them, yet at the same time, something unarguably human:

Svá var sagt frá yfirlitum þessa manns, at hann var svartr á hárslit, ok hekk flóki ofan yfir andlitit, þar sem topprinn skyldi vera, en alls ekki var at sjá til andlitsins nema tennr ok augu. Þá hefir hann átta menn með sér, er þannig váru í yfirbragði. Þá bitu engi járn. Þeir váru líkari jötnum en mönnum fyrir vaxtar sakir ok illsku.

(So it was told about the appearance of this man, that he was black-haired, and matted hair hung down over his face where the forelock should be, and there was nothing at all to see of his face except the teeth and eyes. At that time, he has eight men with him, who were the same in appearance. No weapon could bite them. They were more like giants than men because of their size and wickedness.)

While Qgmundr's appearance is ugly and his affinity with giants indicative of something fundamentally unhuman, it is clear that he is ugly in a different way from the giant chieftain and his wife described in ch. 6. Qgmundr's appearance exhibits none of the animalistic traits of the giant chieftain and his wife, but instead an exaggerated form of normal human features: matted, wildly unkempt hair, which appears to cover his entire face, and excessively prominent teeth and eyes. Later in the saga (ch. 19), Rauðgrani, who is identified with Óðinn in ch. 23, reveals that Qgmundr is the son of a human sorcerer and a giantess (whose physical appearance is described in both chs 19 and 20 in terms similar to those of the giant chieftain and his wife in ch. 6), indicating that his uncertain status as human or non-human is the result of his half-human, half-giant parentage. There is something distinctly unhuman in Qrvar-Oddr's own ancestry, for the hairy cheek of Qrvar-Oddr's father Grímr is said to have been caused by Grímr's mother Hrafnhildr, referred to as a 'tröll' (troll) in chs 3-4 of *Ketils saga hængs*, looking out from under the covers during his conception and seeing a notably hairy Finn (*Qrvar-Odds saga*, ch. 1), introducing something of the unhuman in the characterization of Grímr, which may well have been passed on to his son Oddr; indeed, the Finnar are associated with the practice of magic in their involvement in the creation of Qgmundr, and it

is not illogical to assume that the influence of Finnish magic is to be found in Grímr's hairy cheek, particularly since it is said to be invulnerable to iron in ch. 3 of *Ketils saga hængs*.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, Qrvar-Oddr's grandfather Ketill hængr is the son of a man named Hallbjörn hálftröll (Half-troll), whose epithet may be indicative of giant descent and therefore suggest that the whole family of the Hrafnistumenn has giant ancestry (see ch. 1 of *Ketils saga hængs*). The similarly unconventional conceptions of Qrvar-Oddr and Qgmundr, particularly Qgmundr's creation by the Permians to exact vengeance on Qrvar-Oddr for his earlier dealings with them, are clearly intended to highlight the affinities between the two champions, as is their recognition of the non-human aspects of each other following their evenly matched performances during their first battle, in which Qrvar-Oddr admits that he seems to be fighting demons rather than men and Qgmundr thinks that both he and Qrvar-Oddr are more like trolls than men (compare the characterization of Beowulf in *Beowulf*, who, in possessing the strength of thirty men in the grip of his hand (ll. 378b-81a), resembles the antagonist Grendel, capable of carrying off thirty retainers in his first assault on Heorot (ll. 120b-23a)).<sup>202</sup> Qgmundr as the descendant of both humans and giants, even more so than the pure giants of chs 5 and 6, is employed to deliberately blur conceptual boundaries, the giant attributes of Qgmundr mirroring those of the saga's protagonist Qrvar-Oddr. In this case, the conceptual category of giant is being invoked in relation to the representation of a legendary hero to communicate his superior prowess in comparison to the average warrior. Qrvar-Oddr is not only a human warrior, but something more, and the fact that he belongs both to the human world and the world of giants and magic is conceptualized not only by

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<sup>201</sup> As is observed in Chapter 5, the Finnar are often credited with magical abilities.

<sup>202</sup> On this and other links between Beowulf and the monsters he fights, see Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf'-manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 31-33.

means of his similarities to Ógmundr, but also of his constant wanderings between the human world and the world inhabited by giants: giants and heroes are the same, but different.<sup>203</sup>

In Chapter 3 of this thesis, it was noted that the unruly nature and erratic behaviour of certain poets in the *skáldasögur* have been attributed by some scholars to the conceptual model provided by Óðinn, a god frequently depicted as treacherous and capricious in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (see Chapter 2). As we have seen, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, in particular, is presented as the quintessentially Odinic poet in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, and ideas about his belligerent and quarrelsome nature could quite plausibly have derived from his distinctly Odinic associations. However, it is just as likely that Egill's aggressive temperament and anti-social tendencies are implicitly connected to his distant maternal ancestry, which suggests partial descent from giants through his great-grandmother Hallbera. According to ch. 1 of *Egils saga*, Hallbera, the mother of Egill's grandfather Kveldúlfr, was the sister of Hallbjörn hálftröll, whose epithet, as we have already seen, suggests that he was descended from giants or trolls on one side of his family and possibly that he took after the giant side of his family. Indeed, this supposition becomes even more likely in light of the familial connection between Hallbera's descendants and the Hrafnistumenn, who brought into alignment with giants in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Ketils saga hængs*, and *Qrvar-Odds saga*.

Certainly, Kveldúlfr and his son Skalla-Grímr, Egill's father, are presented in the saga as being in possession of notable characteristics and extraordinary abilities that may well be derived from giant ancestry, and we can therefore attribute Egill's own behaviour and temperament as much to the genes he inherited from Hallbera through Kveldúlfr and Skalla-Grímr as to the influence of his Odinic associations. In ch. 1 of *Egils saga*, for example, it is noted that Kveldúlfr becomes 'styggur' (bad-tempered) in the evenings and that people

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<sup>203</sup> This interaction between the human and giant worlds is also central in *Ketils saga hængs* and *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, suggesting a long-standing connection between giants and the Hrafnistumenn that in all likelihood originated in oral tradition.

claimed he was a ‘mjök hamrammr’ (great shape-shifter), presumably because of his nocturnal mood-swings. Shape-shifting is an ability attributed to both giants and gods in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The giant Þjazi, for example, appears in the form of an eagle in the story of his theft of Iðunn in ch. 656 of *Skáldskaparmál*, as does the giant Suttungr when he chases Óðinn in the account of the god’s reclamation of the mead of poetry in ch. 658 of *Skáldskaparmál*. Moreover, the ability to shape-shift is a skill naturally attributed to the offspring of giants, as is suggested by the transformations of Loki, whose father Fárbauti is identified as a giant in ch. 33 of *Gylfaginning*, into a mare and a salmon in *Gylfaginning* (chs 42 and 50), a falcon in *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 656), and a fly in *Sqrla þátrr eða Heðins saga ok Høgna* (ch. 2).<sup>204</sup>

The author of *Egils saga* also takes great pains to emphasize how much Kveldúlfr’s son Skalla-Grímr takes after his father, thereby focusing entirely on the line of descent stemming from Hallbera (note also that Kveldúlfr’s father Bjálfi is named in the genealogy of Kveldúlfr in ch. 1, but no more information is provided about him as it is for Hallbera). Skalla-Grímr is described as being ‘svartr’ (black) and ‘ljótr’ (ugly) and resembling Kveldúlfr in both appearance and character, clearly distinguishable from his handsome and good-tempered brother Þórólfr, who takes after his mother’s side of the family. Later in the saga (ch. 20), the saga author once again stresses Skalla-Grímr’s strong family resemblance to his father in terms of his physique, strength, complexion, and character, and this is surely a deliberate attempt to point back from Skalla-Grímr through Kveldúlfr to the partially giant descent of Kveldúlfr’s mother. Although the saga author is silent on whether or not Hallbera

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<sup>204</sup> The inheritance of these magical abilities from giant ancestry becomes more likely in view of the shared power of the Hrafnistumenn, who share a familial connection with Hallbera and her descendants, to use magic to ensure good sailing weather (see, for example, ch. 2 of *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and ch. 15 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*), which they presumably inherited from their giant descent through Hallbjørn; certainly, giants are credited elsewhere in the sagas with the ability to control the weather, as we see, for instance, in ch. 12 of *Hálfðanar saga Brønufostra* and ch. 16 of *Sturlaug’s saga starfsama*. *Sqrla þátrr eða Heðins saga ok Høgna* and *Sturlaug’s saga starfsama*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, I, pp. 365-82 and III, pp. 105-60 respectively; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

and Hallbjörn were full siblings, it can be assumed that they shared giant parentage on the basis of the giant-like attributes inherited by Hallbera's son Kveldúlfr (the dark complexion, superior strength, bad temper, and shape-shifting abilities) and passed on to Skalla-Grímr. Indeed, the likelihood of giant ancestry becomes more certain when Skalla-Grímr and his friends arrive at the court of King Haraldr in ch. 25. Not only do his companions Þórir and Þorgeirr, both brothers, have the epithets 'þurs' (Giant) and 'jarðlangr' (Earth-long) respectively, but also a retainer informs Ólvir, another of the king's men, that 'líkari eru þeir þursum at vexti ok sýn en mennskum mǫnnum' (they are more like giants than human beings in size and appearance; compare the assertion that Ógmundr and his companions are more like giants than men in ch. 13 of *Orvar-Odds saga*).<sup>205</sup> The giant ancestry of Kveldúlfr, Skalla-Grímr, and, therefore, Egill Skalla-Grímsson can be associated with their distinctly anti-social, or perhaps anti-monarchist, and individualistic tendencies, indicated most notably by the family's bad relationship with King Haraldr inn hárfagri, but also by such conduct and behaviour as Skalla-Grímr's frenzied killing of Egill's foster-mother Þorgerðr in ch. 40 of *Egils saga* and sinking of his silver in a marsh in ch. 58 and Egill's desire to disrupt proceedings at the alþingi by scattering his silver there and watching the participants fight over it in ch. 85. The attribution of giant ancestry to Kveldúlfr and his descendants to conceptualize their rocky relationship with King Haraldr, whose ambition to bring the whole of Norway under his sovereignty leads ultimately to Kveldúlfr's decision to leave Norway, dispossessed of his former rights as chieftain, and settle in Iceland. Kveldúlfr's state of dispossession is thus presented as being parallel to the dispossession of the giants, who were overthrown by the gods and stripped of their preeminent place in the cosmos as the first created race by the formation of the world from the corpse of the first giant Ymir (vv. 40-41

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<sup>205</sup> Clunies Ross has noted the chthonic nature of the giants in Old Norse mythology, and it may be that the epithet 'jarðlangr' is intended to present Þorgeirr as being giant-like by invoking not only traditions relating to the tallness or largeness of giants, but also those detailing their associations with the earth, particularly since his brother is nicknamed 'þurs' and suggests that the pair have giant ancestry. On the chthonic nature of the giants, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, pp. 55-56.

of *Grímnismál* and ch. 8 of *Gylfaginning*); indeed, v. 3 of *Völuspá* may even suggest the presence of some kind of giant settlement prior to the creation by the gods if ‘Ymir byggði’ (Ymir made a settlement) is taken at face value. In this context, the actions of Kveldúlfr and his descendants may be anti-social, but it is certainly not the case that these attributes are presented negatively; rather, giant ancestry serves to accentuate these characters’ status as ‘larger-than-life’, and it is clear from *Egils saga* that Kveldúlfr and his descendants are to be admired for their rugged individualism and resistance to authority.

The cognitive utility of giants in helping to configure social or political dispossession explains the frequency with which humans who are somehow dispossessed are brought into alignment with the giants, whether through the attribution of giant descent or otherwise. In *Gautreks saga*, for example, the traditional mythological narrative of bride-theft by a giant, as we see, for example, in Þjazi’s abduction of Iðunn in ch. 656 of *Skáldskaparmál* and Þrymr’s attempt to secure Freyja as his bride in *Þrymskviða*, is employed in two stories of bride-theft to highlight the social dispossession of male suitors who fall foul of the families of their intended brides. The influence of bridal quest romance from the continent no doubt also contributed to these two stories, but the identification of the thief as a giant in the first story and as the son of a giant in the second can perhaps be regarded as evidence of the greater influence of native material on these narratives.<sup>206</sup> The first story, which details the theft of a woman by a giant, is to be found in ch. 3 of *Gautreks saga*:

Stórvirkir hét maðr; hann var sonr Starkaðar Áludrengs. Starkaðr var hundvíss jötunn. Hann tók ór Álfheimum Álfhildi, dóttur Álfs konungs. Álfr konungr hét þá á Þór, at Álfhildr skyldi aftr koma. Þá drap Þórr Starkað, en flutti Álfhildi heim til föður síns, ok var hún þá með barni. Hún fæddi son þann, er Stórvirkir hét, er áðr er nefndr.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>206</sup> On bridal quest romance in medieval Iceland, see Marianne Kalinke, *Bridal-quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica*, 46 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>207</sup> According to Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, the similarity between *hund* (many; very) and *hundr* (dog) gave ‘a bad sense’ to the adjective ‘hundvíss’, which is ‘esp. used of giants and partly as a term of abuse’ in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. This is perhaps indicative of a general affinity between the giant and animal worlds in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, something we saw also in the description of the giant chieftain

(There was a man named Stórvirk; he was the son of Starkaðr Áludrengr. Starkaðr was a very wise giant. He abducted from Álfheimar Álfhildr, the daughter of King Álfr. King Álfr called then on Þórr, that he should bring back Álfhildr. Then Þórr killed Starkaðr, and brought Álfhildr home to her father, and she was then with child. She gave birth to a son, who was called Stórvirk, who is named earlier.)

The involvement of Þórr in this incorporated narrative demonstrates the longevity of mythological traditions casting the god in the role of giant-killer. In particular, Þórr's role as defender of goddesses abducted by giants or intended as the brides of giants (or dwarfs, if Þórr's success in preventing the marriage of his own daughter Þrúðr to the dwarf Alvíss in *Alvíssmál* is anything to go by) is activated in this story, a role he occupies in *Þrymskviða* and on multiple occasions in *Gylfaginning* (see, for example, the story of the giant builder in ch. 42). Although Starkaðr's victim Álfhildr is a human abducted from the human world, the presence of the noun *álfr* (elf) in her name and that of her father, as well as the inevitable collocation of Swedish Álfheimar with the mythological Álfheimr, land of the *ljósálfar*, encouraged by the explicit presence of a mythological figure in the god Þórr, may be intended to connect Álfhildr with the attributes credited to the *ljósálfar*.<sup>208</sup> According to Snorri in ch. 17 of *Gylfaginning*, the *ljósálfar* live in Álfheimr and are distinguished from the blacker-than-pitch *svartálfar* (black-elves) in that they are 'fegri en sól sýnum' (fairer than the sun in appearance), suggesting that Álfhildr may be similarly beautiful. Indeed, this seems even more likely given the fact that her son Stórvirk is noted as being 'svart á hár' (black-haired), perhaps inherited from his giant father and invoking the opposition of light and dark in its juxtaposition with the mythological connotations of the noun *álfr* (compare the black hair of Ogmundr in *Orvar-Odds saga* and the description of Skalla-Grímr Kveldúlfsson, who has giant ancestry, as being 'svartr' (black) in ch. 1 of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*). Moreover,

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in ch. 6 of *Orvar-Odds saga*. Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 292.

<sup>208</sup> On elves in their Old Norse-Icelandic context, see Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 8 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), ch. 1.

it is said in v. 5 of *Grímnismál* that *Álfheimr* was gifted to Freyr by the gods as ‘tannfé’ (tooth-payment) in ancient days, suggestive of a connection between Freyr, the *ljósálfar*, and fertility and of a triangulation of *Álfhildr* with the beautiful *ljósálfar* and the god of fertility in the story of Starkaðr’s bride-theft. The implication is that *Álfhildr* is not simply beautiful and fertile, but mythologically so, an implication made more credible by the fact that *Álfhildr* is pregnant with the child of a giant on her return to *Álfheimar*. Þórr’s killing of the giant Starkaðr, then, is apparently motivated by the threat posed by his theft to the proper transaction of women and the fertility they possess, as is precisely the threat when a giant attempts to acquire a goddess in a mythological narrative.<sup>209</sup>

In ch. 7 of *Gautreks saga*, however, what was earlier presented as a story of bride-theft by the giant Starkaðr is revealed by Þórr in the course of his cursing of Starkaðr Stórvirksson, the grandson of the giant Starkaðr *Áludrengr*, to have been a consensual relationship between Starkaðr and *Álfhildr*:

Þá tók Þórr til orða ok mælti: “Álfhildr, móðir föður Starkaðs, kaus föður at syni sínum hundvísan jötun heldr en Ásaþór, ok skapa ek þat Starkaði, at hann skal hvárki eiga son né dóttur ok enda svá ætt sína.”

(Then Þórr began to speak and said: “Álfhildr, the mother of Starkaðr’s father, chose as the father of her son a very wise giant rather than Ásaþórr, and I ordain this for Starkaðr, that he shall have neither son nor daughter and that his family shall end in this way.”)

This revelation transforms Þórr’s role in the murder of Starkaðr *Áludrengr* from defender of brides to spurned and vengeful suitor. The author has invoked the traditional mythological paradigm of the thieving giant who abducts a goddess only to deconstruct it and transform what is bride-theft in the eyes of Þórr and the human world into a consensual relationship between a giant and a human woman. The same transformation is activated in the second

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<sup>209</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, for example, notes that the giant builder’s desire to possess Freyja, the sun, and the moon is a direct assault on the fertility of the gods. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 177.

story of bride-theft in ch. 3 of *Gautreks saga*, this time bride-theft by Stórvirkr, the son of Starkaðr Áludrengr and Álfhildr. That Stórvirkr is stronger and taller than other men is a sign that he takes after his giant father, and further evidence of Stórvirkr's giant-like nature is provided by the fact that he follows in his father's footsteps by taking a bride for himself, which is viewed as both bride-theft and a consensual relationship by the characters featuring in the story.

According to ch. 3 of *Gautreks saga*, Stórvirkr takes Unnr, the daughter of Earl Freki of Hálogaland, and makes a home with her on the island of Þruma, a territory given to Stórvirkr by King Haraldr of Agðir, presumably in recompense for Stórvirkr's defence of Haraldr's territories. The settled life enjoyed by Stórvirkr and Unnr, however brief, suggests that this is not a clear-cut story of bride-theft. Fjõri and Fýri, the sons of Earl Freki and brothers of Unnr, who burn down Stórvirkr's farm ostensibly to avenge the slight on their family honour by his abduction (in their eyes) of their sister, are clearly displeased by Stórvirkr's actions, but the settlement of the couple on Stórvirkr's island implies that Unnr consented to their relationship (although no mention of Starkaðr and Álfhildr settling down together is made in the account of their relationship, Álfhildr's pregnancy may well suggest that they did settle, particularly since a son (named Starkaðr after his grandfather) born to Stórvirkr and Unnr is the outcome of their settled life; omission of this detail in the account concerning Starkaðr Áludrengr and Álfhildr is perhaps part of the author's plan of representing the ideological imperative of keeping the transaction of women in marriage under patriarchal control so that it may then be deconstructed). This interpretation of the relationship between Stórvirkr and Unnr becomes more plausible in light of Fjõri and Fýri's burning to death of their sister as well as Stórvirkr. Had this been a simple rescue mission like Þórr's rescue of Álfhildr, the brothers would have surely killed Stórvirkr only and brought their sister back with them to Hálogaland, but their murder of their sister suggests that their

actions are as much to do with punishing their sister for her shameful and unauthorized choice in men as with avenging the dishonour brought upon them by Stórvirkr. In these stories of ‘bride-theft’, a giant and the son of a giant are employed to activate the common mythological narrative pattern of a giant stealing or attempting to acquire a goddess without permission, no doubt to function as an ideological construct embodying the patriarchal imperative of controlling the transaction of women. The author only sets up this construct, however, to dismantle it, allowing him to give expression to the marginalized perspective of the ‘bride-thief’, here configured as a giant and the son of a giant, who may be, as these two stories demonstrate, a man denied the woman he loves by patriarchal conservatism and forced to relieve his consequent dispossession by having a relationship with his lover without her family’s consent (compare the giant-descended Björgólfr’s forceful acquisition of Hildiríðr in ch. 7 of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*).

In *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, an association between giants and dispossession is suggested in its author’s representation of paganism and its displacement by Christianity. *Bárðar saga* is unique among the *Íslendingasögur* for its sustained interest in giants, trolls, and their descendants. Especially interesting is the presentation of the giant-descended Bárðr as the locally active protective spirit of the people of Snæfellsnes, and in ch. 6 of the saga, Bárðr’s elevation to near-godhead seems dependent on his removal of himself from human society and his consequent position, in a way similar to the conceptually blurred giants and giant-like characters in *Orvar-Odds saga*, as a mediatory figure:

Eptir þetta hvarf Bárðr í burtu með allt búferli sitt, ok þykkir mönnum sem hann muni í jöklana horfit hafa ok byggt þar stóran helli, því at þat var meir ætt hans at vera í stórum hellum en húsum, því at hann fæddist upp með Dofra í Dofrafjöllum; var hann tröllum ok líkari at afli ok vexti en mennskum mönnum, ok var því lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Bárðr Snjófellsáss, því at þeir trúðu á hann nálíga þar um nesit ok höfðu hann fyrir heitguð sinn; varð hann ok mörgum in mesta bjargvættur.

(After that, Bárðr disappeared, taking with him all his household possessions, and it is thought by people that he must have vanished into the glaciers and lived there in a large cave, because it was more likely for his family to live in large caves than houses, because he had been brought up with Dofri in Dofrafjöll; he was also more like trolls than human beings in strength and size, and consequently his name was lengthened, and he was called Bárðr Snæfellsáss, because they almost worshipped him there on the headland and established him as the god to whom they made vows; he also became a helping-spirit to many in the greatest need.)

In this passage, the description of Bárðr is formulated in terms similar to those used of Skalla-Grímr Kveldúlfsson in *Egils saga* and Qgmundr in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, who are also noted as being more like giants or trolls than humans, and it would seem therefore that this formulation was conventional when describing the appearance and attributes of those descended from giants. Bárðr's retreat from human society and his time spent between the human world and the mountains, caves, and glaciers, which are clearly presented as the proper habitations of giants, trolls, and all manner of similar beings in the passage quoted above, transforms him into a mediatory figure connecting the known and knowable human world with the unknown and unknowable domain of the giants, recognition of which by the people of the Snæfellsnes peninsula may have prompted their elevation of Bárðr to near-godhead. If the caves and glaciers are symbolic of the alternative world of the giants operating in parallel to the human world, Bárðr is symbolic not only of the potential for communication between conceptually distinct worlds and the races inhabiting them, but also of the beneficial nature of such traffic. As the author notes in the passage above, many in the greatest of need were helped by Bárðr as the result of their petitions.

The beneficial nature of communication between the giant and human worlds is demonstrated in *Bárðar saga* by the fostering of characters by giants, including Bárðr, whose role as foster-father is presented as an extension of his position as the protective spirit of Snæfellsnes (Bárðr himself is fostered by the mountain-dwelling Dofri, also identified as the foster-father of King Haraldr inn hárfagri, whom he is said to have helped become king of

Norway in ch. 1). In ch. 10, for example, it is said that Bárðr taught his charge Oddr the law, and in ch. 11, he instructs Skeggi's son in the matters of both law and genealogy, and it is likely that the idea that a giant may act as foster-father derives from mythological traditions concerning the wisdom of giants. Óðinn may be the god of wisdom in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, but the wisdom of giants is on an equal footing with, perhaps even superior to, the wisdom of the one-eyed god. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example, the giant Vafþrúðnir, with whom Óðinn competes in a contest of mythological lore, is noted for his all-encompassing wisdom (vv. 1, 5, 34, and 42), while in *Hyndluljóð*, the giantess Hyndla is in possession of extensive genealogical knowledge (vv. 12-28). The giant brother of Óðinn's mother Bestla is gifted with magical knowledge, which he apparently imparted to Óðinn (see v. 140 of *Hávamál*), and the *völva* in *Völuspá* was raised by giants (see v. 2), from whom she presumably acquired her knowledge of past, present, and future. Bárðr's instruction of his charges in matters of law, however, reveals an especially Icelandic construction privileging legal knowledge as a form of wisdom prerequisite for social success. As a people with no monarchy to administer the law and enforce legal decisions before their capitulation to the Norwegian crown in 1262, the Icelanders relied upon the establishment and maintenance of law by successive chieftains and lawspeakers, and it was crucial for these mediators of the law to dispense of their duties efficiently and effectively.<sup>210</sup> In Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, for example, the establishment and administration of the law are presented as the major preoccupations of the settlement period, and the wisdom of the legally adept is portrayed nowhere more clearly than in Ari's account of the conversion.<sup>211</sup> In this account (ch. 7), the heathen lawspeaker Þorgeirr Þorkelsson acts as mediator in the conflict between the incompatible laws of paganism and Christianity when Iceland is on the verge of

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<sup>210</sup> On the legislative and judicial system in Iceland, see Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001), ch. 9 and William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), ch. 7.

<sup>211</sup> See *Íslendingabók*, in *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, 1, pp. 1-28.

conversion, sagely declaring “...es vér slítum í sundr löginn, at vér monum slíta ok friðinn...” (“...if we tear apart the law, we shall also tear apart the peace...”) and advocating the adoption of Christianity and its law. In light of the conversion of Bárðr’s son Gestr through the intervention of King Óláfr Tryggvason (chs 17, 20, and 21) and Bárðr’s blinding of Gestr as punishment for his abandonment of the old faith and conversion (ch. 21), it may be that Bárðr and other giants and trolls living in Iceland (such as those present at the feast in ch. 13) are representative of heathen Icelanders, to whom, at least as far as can be told from *Íslendingabók*, the law represented the highest form of wisdom prior to the knowledge of God. Indeed, this supposition is rendered even more likely by Bárðr’s decision to leave Norway for Iceland because of the tyranny of King Haraldr (ch. 2), expressly identifying the giant-descended Bárðr as one of the heathen settlers of Iceland (see also the *blótrisi* in ch. 27 of *Kormáks saga*, another giant representative of heathendom, ch. 1 of the Hauksbók version of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in which Guðmundr of Glæsisvellir, king of Jötunheimar, is a great heathen eventually elevated to godhead by his subjects, and ch. 9 of *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, in which toasts are drunk to Þórr and Óðinn in the hall of the giant Geirrþóðr).<sup>212</sup> In this context, the author of *Bárðar saga* can be seen as employing mythological traditions relating to the giants to explore the alternative religious world preceding the arrival of Christianity and suggest a parallel between the displacement of the giants by the gods and the displacement of pagans by Christians.

In ch. 8 of *Bárðar saga*, Bárðr’s status as god-like protective spirit is presented by means of the inversion of the traditional mythological paradigm casting Þórr as the defender of gods and humans against the giants. A troll-woman and shape-shifter named Hetta, who deals cruelly with both humans and animals, kills much of the livestock belonging to a man called Ingjaldr, noted as the most daring of fishermen. When Ingjaldr confronts Hetta after

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<sup>212</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in *Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Thieles bogtrykkeri, 1892-96), pp. 350-69.

pursuing her into a mountain, Hetta saves herself by telling Ingjaldr in a verse how to find a fishing bank with plentiful fish in recompense for his slaughtered livestock. The day after his meeting with Hetta, Ingjaldr goes out rowing, and the narration of his fishing trip resembles the story of Þórr's fishing trip in his attempt to catch the Miðgarðsormr as it is told by Snorri in ch. 48 of *Gylfaginning*. The relevant passage from each of these texts is given below, first, that from *Bárðar saga*, and thereafter, that from *Gylfaginning*:

Annan dag eptir reri Ingjaldr á sjó ok var einn á skipi ok rær allt þar til, er frammi var fjallit ok svá nesit. Heldr þótti honum lengra en hann hugði. Veðr var gott um morgininn. En er hann kom á miðit, var undir fiskr nógr. Litlu síðar dró upp flóka á Ennisfjalli, ok gekk skjótt yfir. Þar næst kom vindr ok fjúk með frosti. Þá sá Ingjaldr mann á báti, ok dró fiska handstinnan; hann var rauðskeggjaðr. Ingjaldr spurði hann at nafni; hann kveðst Grímr heita. Ingjaldr spurði, hvárt hann vildi ekki at landi halda. Grímr kveðst eigi búinn, – “ok máttu bíða, þar til er ek hefí hlaðit bátinn.” Veðr gekk upp at eins ok gerði svá sterkt ok myrkt, at eigi sá stafna í milli. Tapat hafði Ingjaldr önglum sínum öllum ok veiðarfærum; váru ok árar mjök lúnar. Þóttist hann þá vita, at hann mundi ekki at landi ná sakir fjölkynngis Hettu ok þetta mundu allt hennar ráð verit hafa. Kallaði hann þá til fulltings sér á Bárð Snæfellsás. Tók Ingjaldr þá fast at kala, því at drjúgum fyllði skipit, en frýss hvern ádrykk, þar er kominn var. Ingjaldr var vanr at hafa yfir sér einn skinnfeld stóran, ok var hann þar í skipinu hjá honum; tók hann þá feldinn ok lét yfir sik til skjóls; þótti honum sér þá vísari dauði en líf.

(The following day, Ingjaldr rowed out to sea and was alone in the ship and rows all the way until he was far from the mountain and also the headland. It seemed to him rather farther than he had thought. The weather was good during the morning. And when he came to the bank, there was plenty of fish under there. A little later, a cloud drifted up from Ennisfjall, and it quickly travelled over. Next, there came a wind and a snowstorm with frost. Then Ingjaldr saw a man in a boat, and he pulled in fish strongly; he was red-bearded. Ingjaldr asked him his name; he said he was called Grímr. Ingjaldr asked whether he did not wish to head to land. Grímr said he was not ready “and you must wait here until I have filled the boat.” The weather rose up at once, and it became so stormy and murky that a man could not see from the prow-end to the other. Ingjaldr had lost all his fish-hooks and fishing tackle; the oars were also very battered. He seemed then to know that he would not reach land because of Hetta's witchcraft and believed that all of this had been her doing. He called then for help for himself from Bárð Snæfellsáss. Ingjaldr was then becoming freezing cold because the boat was filled with a substantial amount of water and each wave froze as it came into the boat. Ingjaldr was accustomed to have over him a large skin cloak, and it was there in the boat with him; he took the cloak then and pulled it over himself for shelter; it seemed to him then that death was more certain than life.)

Hafði þá Hymir út skotit nokkvanum. Þórr gekk á skipit ok settisk í austrúm, tók tvær árar ok røri, ok þótti Hymi skriðr verða af róðri hans. Hymir reri í halsinum fram ok

sóttisk skjótt róðrin. Sagði þá Hymir at þeir vǫru komnir á þær vǫrtir er hann var vanr at sitja ok draga flata fiska, en Þórr kvezk vilja róa myklu lengra, ok tóku þeir enn snertiróðr. Sagði Hymir þá at þeir vǫru komnir svá langt út at hætt var at sitja útar fyrir Miðgarðsormi. En Þórr kvezk mundu róa eina hríð ok svá gerði, en Hymir var þá allókátr.

(By that time, Hymir had launched the boat. Þórr got into the boat and set himself down in the baling-seat, took two oars and rowed, and he seemed to Hymir to be fast with his rowing. Hymir was rowing forward in the bows and the rowing progressed quickly. Then Hymir said that they were come to the fishing-grounds where he was accustomed to sit and catch flat fish, but Þórr said that he will row much further, and they took up another spurt of rowing. Then Hymir said that they were come so far out that it was dangerous to sit fishing further out because of the Miðgarðsormr. And Þórr said he will row for a while and did so, but Hymir was then very unhappy.)

The fishing trips of both Ingjaldr and Þórr involve rowing out further than intended or desired into the dangerous regions of the deep sea, marked in the passage from *Bárðar saga* by Ingjaldr's observation that the fishing bank is farther out than he thought and in the passage from *Gylfaginning* by the fairy-tale-like alternation of Hymir's statements that he and Þórr have rowed out far enough and Þórr's that he wishes to go out a little farther (see also *Qrvar-Oddr's* rowing with the giant Hildir in ch. 18 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, which is similarly modelled on the story of Þórr's fishing trip). Both fishing trips are presented as being dangerous, Ingjaldr's because of his rowing out to the wild domains of the deep sea and the witchcraft of Hetta, which has stirred up the bad weather, and Þórr's because of his close proximity to the location of the Miðgarðsormr. Moreover, the water flowing into the boat and freezing during Ingjaldr's fishing trip finds its mythological parallel in the sea flowing into the boat of Þórr and Hymir as Þórr struggles to reel in the Miðgarðsormr. Conclusive evidence of the modelling of the story of Ingjaldr's fishing trip on the story of Þórr's fishing trip is provided by the mention of suspicions relating to the true identity of Grímr: 'þykkir mönnum sem þat muni Þórr verit hafa' (it is thought by people that it must have been Þórr). The giant Hymir, who arguably saves the day by cutting Þórr's fishing line and prevents the Miðgarðsormr from being unleashed in Snorri's telling of the encounter, has his counterpart

in the giant-descended Bárðr, who responds to Ingjaldr's petition for help and rescues him from his dangerous situation. Whereas the action of Hymir in cutting Þórr's fishing line is portrayed negatively, particularly since Hymir's fear and cowardice are emphasized and Þórr quickly punishes him with a blow from his hammer Mjöllnir, the action of Bárðr in rescuing Ingjaldr from Þórr is clearly presented as the proper response, inverting the mythological paradigm of Þórr the defender and the giant antagonist to establish Bárðr the descendant of giants as the defender of humans against the gods. In presenting Bárðr as a god-like saviour, the author of *Bárðar saga* engages in mythological game-playing to subvert traditional paradigms and present the story of the giants from their own rather than a deicentric perspective. If we consider Bárðr to be representative of a pagan Icelander, the inversion of the traditional paradigm of Þórr as defender of gods and humans can be seen instead to present Þórr as the nefarious enemy of humans, thereby attributing the wickedness of paganism to the gods, rather than pagans themselves. The employment of mythological traditions relating to the giants in *Bárðar saga*, then, can be seen as a strategy for recuperating Iceland's pagan past and exploring sympathetically its extraordinary characters and eventual displacement by Christianity.

### *Political Peripheries*

Despite the differences between traditions relating to the creation of the world preserved in *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Völuspá*, all traditions agree that the giants are the dispossessed primordial race. Their dispossession is represented elsewhere not only by their relations with the gods, who perpetuate a system of 'negative reciprocity' in their dealings with the giants, but also by their habitation of isolated locations far-removed from

the centralized settlement of the gods, whether mountains, forests, the north, or the east.<sup>213</sup> In the opening chapters of *Orkneyinga saga*, mythological traditions concerning the dispossession of the giants are invoked in the detailing of the giant ancestry of the earls of Orkney, and the dispossession of the giants is employed in the formation of an ideological construct relating to the inheritance of rulership and the disputed ownership of Orkney.

It was common practice for poets and historiographers in medieval Scandinavia to include the names of legendary and mythological figures in the genealogies of ruling dynasties. Anthony Faulkes has traced the development of the Old Norse-Icelandic genealogy, or *langfeðgatal* (list of paternal ancestors), through several clearly defined stages, beginning in pre-literary times with poems and other genealogical texts tracing the descent of ruling families to legendary dynastic founders such as Yngvi and Skjöldr and culminating in genealogies incorporating names from the Bible and classical mythology alongside the names of the Norse gods. According to Faulkes, it had become customary to include the names of the Norse gods in genealogies by the twelfth century, with Óðinn, chief of the gods and patron of heroes, emerging as the most fashionable dynastic progenitor, credited in the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda* with fathering royal houses in both Europe and Scandinavia (see Chapter 1). Descent from the gods or from illustrious ancestors was proof of sovereignty, serving not only to assert the primacy of an individual ruler or dynasty, but also to integrate the pagan past and the Christian present.<sup>214</sup>

In the opening chapters of *Orkneyinga saga*, however, the genealogy ascribed to the earls of Orkney traces their descent not to the gods, but to the giants, and we are therefore presented with a much less straightforward rationale for descent from mythological and legendary figures than we find elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (in chs 2-10 of *Ynglinga saga*, for example). According to ch. 1 of the saga, the earls of Orkney were

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<sup>213</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, ch. 4 and Ármann Jakobsson, 'Where Do the Giants Live?'.  
<sup>214</sup> Anthony Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11 (1978-79), 92-125.

descended from a king called Fornjótr, who ruled over Finland and Kvenland and had three sons: Hlér, who was also called Ægir, Logi, and Kári (the same origin-legend is also used in ch. 1 of *Hversu Noregr byggðist* and ch. 1 of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*).<sup>215</sup> Although none of these figures is identified as such in the saga, references to Fornjótr and his sons elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature suggest that they were giants. Both Fornjótr and Ægir are listed as giants in a collection of *þulur* recorded at the end of *Skáldskaparmál* in some manuscript versions of Snorri's *Edda* (vv. 419 and 421 respectively), and in chs 46-47 of *Gylfaginning*, Logi appears as the personification of fire in the court of the giant Útgardaloki and is presumably a giant himself. Logi's association with fire is noted also in ch. 1 of *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, as is the association of Hlér with the seas and Kári with the winds, and it is likely that these associations are related to the elemental affinities often ascribed to the giants elsewhere (in v. 37 of *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example, Hræsvelgr, a giant in the shape of an eagle, is said to stir up the winds by beating his wings). Indeed, *ægir* and *hlér* are included in *Skáldskaparmál* as *heiti* for the sea and *logi* as a *heiti* for fire (chs 61-62), while the wind can be referred to by the kennings *son Fornjóts* (son of Fornjótr) and *bróður Ægis ok elds* (brother of Ægir/the sea and of fire) and fire by the kennings *bróður vinds og Ægis* (brother of the wind and of Ægir/the sea; *Skáldskaparmál*, chs 27-28). At the very least, the sons of Fornjótr are personifications of the elements, perhaps configured in giant terms to assimilate their combative nature to the oppositional role of the giants in some Old Norse myths. This certainly seems to be the case with Ægir, who hosts feasts for the gods in *Lokasenna* and ch. 33 of *Skáldskaparmál*, but does not appear to be counted as one of them, for the gods must travel from their own halls to the hall of Ægir for these feasts, in all likelihood a movement from the realm of the gods to the realm of the giants and, as Judy

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<sup>215</sup> *Hversu Noregr byggðist* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 75-87 and III, pp. 1-73 respectively; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

Quinn has suggested, an attempted rapprochement between the gods and sea-giants.<sup>216</sup> On the basis of these references, we can consider Fornjótr and his sons to have been giants, and the earls of Orkney, at least as far as *Orkneyinga saga* is concerned, are therefore descended not from the gods, but from the giants.<sup>217</sup>

The ideological implications of descent from the giants in *Orkneyinga saga* can be inferred from the antagonism between the gods and the giants in Old Norse myth. As was mentioned earlier, Clunies Ross has examined the state of ‘negative reciprocity’ that exists between the gods and the giants in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, according to which the gods deny the giants access to goddesses and other resources, sometimes resorting to deceit and oath-breaking to retain and increase their wealth and supremacy.<sup>218</sup> The giants frequently challenge the centralizing tendencies of the Æsir and attempt to steal or win the resources withheld from them, in particular, goddesses desired as brides. By contrast, the gods often venture into Jötunheimar to steal resources from the giants and sleep with their women, both of which occur in the myth of the mead of poetry recounted in *Hávamál* (vv. 13-14 and 104-10) and *Skáldskaparmál* (chs G57-58), in which Óðinn sleeps with the giantess Gunnlǫð to reclaim the mead of poetry for gods and humans. Moreover, as we saw in the previous section of this chapter, the Æsir’s rise to power in the cosmos is effected at the giants’ expense. Throughout Old Norse myth, then, the giants are always the dispossessed party, excluded from the wealth and supremacy enjoyed by the gods and met with deception at every turn.

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<sup>216</sup> Judy Quinn, ‘Mythologizing the Sea: The Nordic Sea-Deity Rán’, in *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Institutions, Intersections*, ed. Tim Tangherlini, The Wildcat Canyon Advanced Seminars: Mythology, 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: North Pinehurst Press, 2014), pp. 71-97.

<sup>217</sup> For more detailed discussion of Fornjótr and his sons and the use of the origin-legend associated with them in Snorri’s *Edda*, see Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Snorri Sturluson’s Use of the Norse Origin-legend of the Sons of Fornjótr in his *Edda*’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 98 (1983), 47-66. For analysis of this origin-legend as it appears in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘Absent Mothers and the Sons of Fornjótr: Late-Thirteenth-Century Monarchist Ideology in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 14 (2004), 133-60.

<sup>218</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, ch. 4.

One of the recurrent themes of *Orkneyinga saga* is the threat of dispossession. Throughout the saga, possession of Orkney is contested by successive generations. Brothers fight against brothers for their share, or more than their share, of the earldom, and all this in the context of Orkney's resistance to the crowns of Scotland and Norway. The brief account of Fornjótr and his sons, which would have relied on the medieval audience or reader of *Orkneyinga saga* to have known pre-existing traditions casting these legendary figures as giants, serves to align the struggle for Orkney with the struggle of the giants against the gods and subtly prefigures, for those already in the know, the generations of conquest and defeat to be narrated in subsequent chapters. In particular, the earls of Orkney resist the centralizing tendencies of Norway in the same way that the giants resist the centralizing tendencies of the gods. The combative temperament of many of the earls is presented, albeit implicitly, as having originated in the generally combative nature of the giants from whom they are descended, represented in *Orkneyinga saga* by three giants associated elsewhere with the elements. The relationship between the elements, especially the relationship between the sea and the wind, could be configured in combative terms and the decision to trace back the ancestry of the earls of Orkney to Hlér/Ægir, Logi, and Kári in particular, most probably a decision not made by the author of *Orkneyinga saga*, but a tradition inherited by him, depends on prior knowledge of their elemental associations to underscore the connotations of combat and opposition already arising from their identification as giants.

It is important to note that the elemental affinities of Hlér/Ægir, Logi, and Kári and their oppositional overtones are presented within a fraternal framework, perhaps to indicate sibling rivalry. If this rivalry can only be inferred from references to the three giant brothers outside *Orkneyinga saga*, it is explicit in the story of Nórr and Górr, who are descended from Kári through Frosti, Snær inn gamli, and Þorri (chs 1-3). When their sister Gói is kidnapped, Nórr searches the mainland for her, conquering as he goes, while Górr searches the islands

and skerries. When the two brothers meet up again, the land is divided between them, Nórr keeping the mainland, named Nórvagr (Norway) after its conqueror, and Górr receiving the islands and skerries. Nórr's supremacy is secured and his sister's kidnap resolved by the exchange of Góí in marriage for the sister of Hrólfr Svaðason, Góí's kidnapper, negotiations from which Górr is conspicuously absent. In many ways, Górr is the dispossessed brother, having to content himself with the islands while his brother rules the mainland and gains for himself a wife (there is no second sister for Górr to exchange in marriage, and although he has two sons, there is no mention of a wife). Presumably, this sense of dispossession motivates the aggressive attacks of the sons of Górr, who according to the saga were 'ofstopamenn miklir' (very overbearing men; ch. 3), on the sons of Nórr, in which the rivalry of fathers is expressed through the violence of sons. It is little wonder, then, that the earls of Orkney, whose lives are dominated by the threat of dispossession, are descended not from Nórr, but from Górr.

The rivalry of Nórr and Górr adds another dimension to the ideological implications of descent from giants and fraternal strife already brought into play by the brief account of Fornjótr and his sons. Sibling rivalry is now related specifically to the ownership of land, and it is significant that Nórr's supremacy in Norway is guaranteed by a marriage exchange. In the early stages of their search for Góí, Nórr and his men dispatch the enemies who bar their way with little difficulty, owing largely to Nórr's formidable magical abilities, abilities often attributed to giants in Old Norse myth and presumably inherited by their descendants (as was noted earlier, Óðinn admits that he was taught nine spells by his mother's giant brother in v. 140 of *Hávamál*). As the journey continues, however, Nórr's magic becomes less and less effective, having very little power over King Sókni, although both he and his men are defeated in the end. When Nórr fights Hrólfr Svaðason, his sister's kidnapper, neither Nórr nor Hrólfr can be wounded, no matter how long the struggle goes on, and Nórr's magic has

clearly lost its potency. The difference between previous enemies and Hrólfr lies in Hrólfr's descent. He is the son of the giant Svaði and is presumably in possession of the same magical abilities as Nórr, both of whom are impervious to the other's attacks. The only option is to settle the matter of the kidnap through a marriage exchange, and this is particularly appropriate in the light of Nórr's descent from the giants, who are decentralized in the Old Norse mythological world by the Æsir's refusal to allow giants to marry goddesses. Marriage negotiations between Nórr and Hrólfr are successful because they are of the same giant descent, and it is likely that the settlement of Norway as it is presented in *Orkneyinga saga* invokes the motif of *hieros gamos*, in which Nórr's marriage to Hrólfr's sister stands for his marriage to the land he has now conquered (compare Freyr's relationship with Gerðr in *Skírnismál* and ch. 37 of *Gylfaginning*).<sup>219</sup> Nórr's long struggle for possession of Norway prefigures the long struggle for possession of Orkney, especially since Norway is divided up between his sons after his death, just as Orkney is frequently divided, conquered, and divided again.

Descent from the giants is employed as an ideological construct in *Orkneyinga saga* to initiate the pattern of fraternal strife which motivates the action of the saga (compare the link between the mythological origin-legend provided in chs 2-10 of *Ynglinga saga* and Norway's contested possession suggested by Snorri in *Heimskringla*; see Chapter 1). Sibling rivalry between the earls of Orkney is imagined as deriving ultimately from the ancient rivalry of their ancestors Hlér/Ægir, Logi, and Kári, whose fraternal relationship is configured elsewhere in oppositional terms. The rivalry of their descendants, the brothers Nórr and Górr, is related specifically to the ownership of land and marriage exchange, providing an origin myth invoking *hieros gamos* and prefiguring the contested possession of Orkney and generations of fraternal strife. In Old Norse myth, the giants are frequently the

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<sup>219</sup> Dronke, 'Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*' and Mitchell, 'För Scírnis as Mythological Model'. On the *hieros gamos* motif and its position in the ideology of rulership, see Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi*.

dispossessed party in their dealings with the gods, and it seems that the earls of Orkney inherited their struggle against dispossession from their ancestors, albeit on a national and international, rather than cosmic, level. The genealogy of the earls of Orkney in the opening chapters of *Orkneyinga saga* serves to formulate an ideological construct, created layer by layer with the account of each generation, starting first with Fornjótr and his sons and elaborated by the story of Nórr and Górr. Within this construct, the themes of giant descent, fraternal strife, and the threat of dispossession are triangulated, providing an ideological model for integrating the rulers and communities of the Viking diaspora into the wider Scandinavian world and conceiving of the political periphery.<sup>220</sup>

The cognitive utility of giants in conceiving of the politically peripheral or displaced was evidently a powerful motivating factor in the inclusion of giant or giant-descended characters in saga literature. In addition to the attribution of giant ancestry to the politically peripheral earls of Orkney in *Orkneyinga saga*, we have already considered the implicit association between Kveldúlfir's displacement in Norway and his giant ancestry in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. In *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, a giant is similarly incorporated in an episode exploring the politically peripheral, in this instance the legal status of the outlaw Grettir Ásmundarson. Throughout the saga, Grettir is harboured from his enemies by numerous characters, but is unable to stay anywhere for very long. In ch. 61 of the saga, however, Grettir finds temporary and relatively stable solace from his outlawry in a beautiful valley called Þórisdalr, which is inhabited by the giant Þórir and his daughters. Þórisdalr is

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<sup>220</sup> Ian Beuermann has suggested that eschewing descent from the gods in chs 1-3 of *Orkneyinga saga* 'seems to convey a sense of the Orkney earls' self-esteem and pride together with an impression of distinctness' and is intended to present an alternative genealogy just as prestigious as that of the Norwegian royal house, but at the same time distinct from it. He notes, however, that claiming descent from the giants is a 'double-edged sword' because of the inferior status of the giants in comparison with the gods in Old Norse myth. I would argue, however, that the inferior status of the giants is being re-presented as the alternative and peripheral, but equally powerful, status of the earls of Orkney in relation to that of the Norwegian royal house. Ian Beuermann, 'Jarla sagnar Orkneyja: Status and Power of the Earls of Orkney according to their Sagas', in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, ed. Gro Steinsland et al., The Northern World, 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 109-61 (pp. 116 and 117).

described as an idyllic landscape of peace and plenty and doubtless constitutes an imagined paradise existing not just in parallel with, but also within, the real world:

Grettir fór þar til, er hann fann dal í jöklinum, langan ok heldr mjóvan, ok lukt at jöklum öllum megin, svá at þeir skúttu fram yfir dalinn. Hann komsk ofan í einhverjum stað; hann sá þá fagrar hliðir grasi vaxnar ok smákjör; þar váru hverar, ok þótti honum sem jarðhitar myndi valda, er eigi lukðusk saman jöklarnir yfir dalnum. Á lítill fell eptir dalnum ok sléttar eyrar báðum megin. Lítill var þar sólargangr, en þat þótti honum ótal, hve margr sauðr þar var í dalnum; þat fé var miklu betra ok feitara en hann hefði þvílíkt sét.

(Grettir travelled on from there until he found a valley in the glaciers, long and rather narrow, and enclosed by the glaciers on all sides, so that they jutted out over the valley. He came down in a certain place; he saw then beautiful slopes growing with grass and brushwood; there were hot springs there, and it seemed to him that the heat from the earth must be the cause that it was not completely covered by the glaciers above the valley. A little river flowed through the valley and level banks on both sides. The course of the sun was little there, and it seemed to him uncountable how many sheep there were in the valley; those sheep were much better and fatter than any he had seen the like of before.)

The paradisaal landscape described here is a distinctively Icelandic creation, complete with enclosing glaciers, grassy slopes, hot springs, and sheep.<sup>221</sup> The hyper-fertility of the valley is quite distinct from the barren caves and glaciers ascribed to Bárðr in *Bárðar saga*, and it is clear that a different conception of the giant as steward of the natural world and master of agriculture is being activated in the figure of Þórir (Arinnefja and her daughter Skinnnefja are the stewardesses of a similarly idyllic valley full of ‘geitfé ok feita hafra’ (she-goats and fattened he-goats) in *Jötunheimar* in ch. 5 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, perhaps suggesting a popular tradition ascribing paradisaal pastoral landscapes to the giants, though in this instance the valley functions very much for the two giantesses as a matriarchal refuge from Arinnefja’s brothers Gautr and Hildir, both of whom are contending for rulership of their father’s kingdom (see ch. 14 of the saga)); indeed, Mary Sandbach has suggested that Þórir and his daughters have affinities with the *landvættir* (land-

<sup>221</sup> Mary Sandbach, ‘Grettir in Thórisdal’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 12 (1937-45), 93-106 (p. 100).

spirits), protective beings that guard the land (see, for example, ch. 33 of Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in which some *landvættir* take the form of giants).<sup>222</sup> Although Þórir appears perfectly happy in his valley, its isolation from the centre, from the human world, taps into the dispossession of giants in Old Norse myth. In this instance, however, the dispossessed status of giants is being used to characterize Grettir, who in his outlawry is socially dispossessed, and in the end he is even dispossessed of the solace Þórir's valley provides for him. After a time, Grettir can bear to stay in the valley no longer, no doubt because the company of the giant Þórir and his daughters does not fulfil his need for human company. Þórisdalr might be an idyllic alternative world away from the centre offering Grettir some respite, as well as positive social relationships with Þórir and his daughters, but it reminds him only of his exclusion from human society, being fit only for the company of giants.

In a number of *fornaldarsögur*, an adventure into the world of the giants often finds the hero in the midst of political turmoil, and he proves to be instrumental in resolving the political struggles of the giants. In *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, for example, Egill and Ásmundr encounter the giantess Arinnefja and her daughter Skinnnefja at a time when Arinnefja's brothers Gautr and Hildir are competing for the crown of Jötunheimar after the death of their father Qskruðr (see chs 12 and 14 of the saga; compare the similarly fraught political situations in ch. 18 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, in which Qrvar-Oddr helps the rather courtly giant Hildir, clearly to be distinguished from the monstrous giants Qrvar-Oddr encounters in chs 5-6 of the saga, to win the crown of Risaland from his stronger brothers Úlfr and Ylfingr and is rewarded by the giant, and chs 5-10 of *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*, in which Þorsteinn bæjarmagn, a hero modelled on Þórr, helps King Guðmundr

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<sup>222</sup> It is difficult to say to what extent an association between giants and paradisaical pastoral landscapes is a native Icelandic phenomenon, for the influence of Classical tradition may be discerned here. Certainly, Egill's encounter with the giant shepherd in chs 9-10 of *Egils saga einhenda* is modelled on Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus in Book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey*, and it may be that the depiction of Arinnefja and Skinnnefja was also influenced by this. It is perhaps most likely, however, that the giant shepherds in *Egils saga einhenda* represent the fruitful interaction of both native and Classical traditions relating to giants. Sandbach, 'Grettir in Þórisdal', p. 99.

of Glæsisvellir, a tributary king of King Geirrøðr of Jötunheimar, to take the throne of Jötunheimar).<sup>223</sup> According to Arinnejfa in ch. 14, Gautr and Hildir agreed that the brother to take the crown would be the one who kidnapped the nobler and more talented princess, leading to their kidnap of Brynhildr and Bekkhildr, daughters of Hertryggr, the king of Russia, who Egill and Ásmundr are now in search of (note the influence of the traditional mythological narrative of bride-theft by a giant here); luckily, however, Arinnejfa helps Egill and Ásmundr to kill her brothers and rescue the princesses with the assistance of her husband, the lawman Skröggr, after which she and her husband are given charge of Jötunheimar (chs 15-16; particularly interesting here is that Qskruðr's daughter Arinnejfa inherits the crown of Jötunheimar rather than his sons, which suggests an implicit critique of male privilege in succession). In this instance, political turmoil in Jötunheimar has prompted political turmoil in the human world, the theft of King Hertryggr's daughters denying him the possibility of marrying off Brynhildr and Bekkhildr to men capable of succeeding him in the absence of sons, and we can see in this the expression of anxieties relating not only to the external forces (other kingdoms, for example) that might disrupt political stability at home, but also fears of succession in the absence of a male heir. It is significant in this respect that Hertryggr promises marriage to his daughters to the men who find them (ch. 2), perhaps suggesting that succession concerns are uppermost in his mind after the disappearance of his daughters, and Egill, who is married to Bekkhildr (ch. 17), takes the throne after Hertryggr has died (ch. 18), bringing political stability to Russia in an age of now friendly relations with Jötunheimar, a

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<sup>223</sup> In *Helga þáttur Þórissonar*, in which there are specific parallels with Marie de France's *Le Lai de Lanval* (translated into Norwegian as *Januals ljóð*), as Rosemary Power has identified, King Guðmundr of Glæsisvellir appears to have been modelled on the figure of the fairy king of continental romance. The fairy king is ruler of the otherworld and a source of disruption in the courtly human world (as we see, for example, in the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*), and we may therefore posit interaction between continental romance and Old Norse-Icelandic mythological traditions concerning the dispossessed status of the giants in the crystallization of the depiction of Jötunheimar and other realms belonging to the giants as being politically turbulent or dangerous. *Helga þáttur Þórissonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, iv, pp. 345-53; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text. Rosemary Power, 'Le Lai de Lanval and Helga þáttur Þórissonar', *Opuscula*, 8 (1985), 158-61. *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

kingdom beyond its borders (certainly, Arinnefja is very pleased with Queen Ingibjörg and Ásmundr's gifts of a butter-keg and bacon in ch. 17).

## Conclusion

Myths detailing the antagonism of the giants coexisted with those providing examples of necessary relations between the gods and the giants, and the influences of the manifold configurations of giants present in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts can be observed in the depiction of giants in saga literature. Although scholars such as Motz have attempted to uncover the distinct classes of giants supposedly preserved in the extant Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the examples considered in this chapter, which does not claim to be exhaustive, demonstrate that giants are to be regarded as composite figures embodying various combinations of the attributes associated with giants in mythological tradition.<sup>224</sup> Moreover, very little attempt is made in the sagas to distinguish giants from their descendants, who inherit the same attributes from their giant forebears and are equally emblematic of anti-social tendencies and rampant individualism.

In *Qrvar-Odds saga*, the legendary world is inhabited by monstrous giants, who attack Qrvar-Oddr. The antagonism and hostility of giants to human heroes is represented by an ugly and monstrous appearance, but the status of that appearance is conceptually blurred, combining human, giant, and animal. In this instance, the monstrous body is emblematic of an alternative world organized according to principles that are the same (the social similarity between humans and giants suggested by the resemblance of the giants' cave to a human hall in ch. 6, for example), but different (giants are undoubtedly non-human, even if they demonstrate a semblance of humanity). Conceptual boundaries are blurred even more so by

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<sup>224</sup> Motz, 'The Families of Giants'.

the half-human, half-giant Qgmundr, who is not dissimilar to Qrvar-Oddr, and in this instance, giants become the embodiment of conceptual and ideological uncertainty.

Mythological traditions concerning the theft of goddesses by giants directly influenced the incorporation of bride-theft narratives in *Gautreks saga*, and despite the complementary influence of bridal-quest romance from the continent, the ideological value of native mythological patterns is at the forefront of these narratives. What is initially presented as the abduction of Álfhildr by the giant Starkaðr Áludrengr is revealed by Þórr to be a consensual relationship between Starkaðr and Álfhildr, Þórr's murder of Starkaðr being motivated not by his desire to defend the human world from giants and their descendants in the same way that he defends Ásgarðr and the Æsir from the incursions of Jötunheimar in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, but to compensate him for his humiliation in being rejected as lover or suitor by Álfhildr. Starkaðr's son Stórvirkr is similarly punished for a relationship considered by the brothers of his lover to be undesirable. In both of these 'bride-theft' narratives, the ideological imperative of protecting women from marrying suitors unsanctioned by their male kin is embodied only to be deconstructed in an attempt to give narrative expression to the perspective of the undesirable suitor, configured in these examples as a giant and the son of a giant respectively, and this ideological game-playing engages in sophisticated ways with native mythological tradition.

The aggressive temperament and anti-social tendencies of Egill Skalla-Grímsson and his family can be attributed not only to the desire of the author of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* to portray his protagonist as an Odinic figure, but also to his inheritance of the giant-like attributes of his father Skalla-Grímr Kveldúlfsson. Moreover, the giant ancestry of Kveldúlf and Skalla-Grímr taps into mythological traditions relating to the giants as the dispossessed race of the cosmos, such as traditions concerning the creation of the world from the corpse of the primordial giant Ymir, offering as a parallel situation the very difficult

relationship between Kveldúlfr and his family and King Haraldr inn hárfagri, whose ambition to bring the whole of Norway under his sovereignty leads ultimately to Kveldúlfr's decision to leave Norway, dispossessed of his former rights as chieftain, and settle in Iceland.

Elsewhere, traditions relating to the wisdom of the giants have resulted in them being cast in the role of the foster-father, and in *Bárðar saga*, this is conceptualized in a distinctively Icelandic way, with Bárðr and the giants representing the heathen Icelanders of the settlement period. The equation of heathens with giants is also evidenced in sagas such as *Kormáks saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, and suggests the forging of a connection between the giants as the primordial race subdued by the gods and the heathens as an older race subdued by Christianity.

Descent from the giants is employed as an ideological construct in *Orkneyinga saga* to initiate the pattern of fraternal strife which motivates the action of the saga, imagined as deriving ultimately from the ancient rivalry of their giant ancestors. Within this construct, the themes of giant descent, fraternal strife, and the threat of dispossession are triangulated, providing an ideological model informed by native mythological traditions capable of integrating the rulers and communities of the Viking diaspora into the wider Scandinavian world. A similar theme of dispossession is also at the heart of the portrayal of the valley ruled by the giant Þórir in *Grettis saga*, in which Grettir's outlawry is equated with the isolation of the giants and their location in peripheral lands away from the centre, while depictions of the political turmoil engulfing the various realms of the giants in the *fornaldarsögur*, as we see, for example, in *Egils saga einhenda* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, suggest the usefulness of giants in exploring political anxieties, including fears relating to hostile neighbouring kingdoms and royal succession.

Despite the variation between the manifold portrayals of giants and those descended from giants in saga literature, each of these portrayals is linked by common themes, including

dispossession, social isolation, and alternative worlds. Each of these themes suggest that the cognitive significance of giants in medieval Iceland was tied to their status as the hostile and anti-social antagonist, their equation with heathens and heathen religious practices, and the opportunity they afforded for peripheral and parallel worlds to be incorporated, represented, and kept at bay.

## Chapter 5

### Disruptive Magic: Sorcery and the Supernatural in the Sagas

Although depictions of magic and practitioners of magic in the *Íslendingasögur* are more naturalistic than those in the *fornaldarsögur*, in both genres magic is presented as a socially and politically disruptive force, though not always in negative terms. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has observed in her analysis of magic in the *Íslendingasögur*, magic itself is generally neither positive nor negative; rather, it is ‘the social evaluation of its outcome’ in each individual situation that determines its ethical character.<sup>225</sup> The same can be said of magic in the *fornaldarsögur*, which, while being more fantastical than magic in the *Íslendingasögur*, is as capable of destroying realms and defeating heroes as it is of restoring normality and ensuring heroic success.<sup>226</sup>

In this chapter, the presentation of magic in a selection of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* will be examined in relation to the mythological patterns, characters, and motifs evident in its conception. Although the authors of the *Íslendingasögur* are relatively conservative in their appropriation of mythological traditions when presenting magic and its practitioners, the same structural pattern according to which magic is both foreign and feminine in certain of our extant mythological texts can nevertheless be detected in the *Íslendingasögur*, suggesting a shared cognitive paradigm identifying magic as a marker of ethnic and gendered otherness. In some of the *Íslendingasögur*, however, more extensive interactions between mythological traditions and the representation of magic and sorcerers are to be found, particularly where depictions of *vǫlur* are concerned. The *vǫlva* who features

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<sup>225</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Women’s Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 81 (2009), 409-36 (p. 412).

<sup>226</sup> On magic in Iceland and Scandinavia, see Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

in ch. 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, for example, is a figure identifiable not only with the *vǫlur* presented elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur* (see, for example, the Finnish *vǫlva* in ch. 10 of *Vatnsdæla saga*) and the *fornaldarsögur* (see, for example, the *vǫlva* in ch. 2 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*), but also with the *vǫlur* of the eddic poems *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, suggesting the parallel development of a standard *vǫlva*-figure in both poetry and prose, presumably with roots in the nature of real-world *vǫlur* and oral tradition.<sup>227</sup> Episodes of the *Íslendingasögur* in which magic is directly responsible for governing the fate of an individual or community also appears to have prompted more explicit adaptation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs than we find generally in the *Íslendingasögur*. As we shall see, the author of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, in particular, appears to have been especially interested in mythological traditions concerning the role of supernatural and magical intervention in the unfolding of fate, and nowhere is this made more apparent than in ch. 157 of the saga, in which twelve women resembling *valkyrjur* and *nornir* determine the fate of warriors in the Battle of Clontarf (1014) by magically weaving fabric from human entrails.

In the *fornaldarsögur*, magic is openly attributed to the full range of mythological beings, including gods, giants, elves, and dwarfs, and its mythological dimensions are therefore prominent. Indeed, it seems that crediting each kind of mythological being with magical abilities was a strategy of incorporating the various mythological races in the heroic and legendary world of the *fornaldarsögur*, enabling representatives of these races to be cast as the powerfully disruptive and magically potent forces living just beyond the borders of the kingdom. In ch. 23 of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, for example, the dwarf Mondull Pattason arrives at the court of Þorgný jarl a stranger and soon uses his magic to destabilize the kingdom, while in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, King Hrólf's half-sister Skuld, whose mother is an elf (ch. 15), evidently inherits the magical abilities she employs to destroy her paternal sibling in battle

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<sup>227</sup> *Eiríks saga rauða*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), pp. 193-237 and *Vatnsdæla saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 1-131; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

(chs 47-52) from her maternal elfish ancestry (ch. 47).<sup>228</sup> Dwarfs, in particular, are presented as primarily practitioners of magic in the *fornaldarsögur*, and it is clear that the social disruption they cause can be positive or negative depending on how they are treated by other characters. Although Mǫndull Pattason initially destabilizes the kingdom of Þorgný jarl with his magic in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, for instance, he is eventually persuaded by force to magically restore the kingdom and its inhabitants (ch. 25), and his sorcerous abilities play an essential role in securing Göngu-Hrólfr's victory in battle against King Eiríkr (chs 31-33). Elsewhere, magical dwarfs forge extraordinary weapons for maturing heroes (see, for example, the dwarf who heals the handless arm of Egill einhendi (One-hand) by fixing a sword to it in ch. 11 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*), a role clearly indebted to mythological traditions presenting dwarfs as superlative craftsmen; in providing weapons essential to the hero's success, these dwarfs come to resemble the Proppian donor in the same way that Óðinn does (see Chapter 2) and alter the course of the hero's life to the hero's benefit.<sup>229</sup>

In the second section of this chapter, the figure of the magical dwarf will be examined as a case study demonstrating the way in which mythological beings become reified in the *fornaldarsögur* as the external forces determining the course of human events for either good or evil. This case study will be followed by discussion of the way in which the magical operation of the pagan gods in *Sǫrla þáttur eða Heðins saga ok Högna* is employed as a representation of the disruptive nature of paganism and social anxieties relating to the uncertain success of exogamy are expressed in the figure of the sorceress stepmother in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*.<sup>230</sup> It will emerge in the course of this chapter that the depiction of magic and its practitioners in the *fornaldarsögur* is not

<sup>228</sup> *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, III, pp. 161-280; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

<sup>229</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 39.

<sup>230</sup> *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, IV, pp. 177-243; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

indiscriminate; rather, it is employed to express and explore similar social and political anxieties to those expressed by depictions of magic and sorcerers in the *Íslendingasögur*, including fears about social disruption, political instability, and the inescapable nature of fate. These anxieties are formulated in both magical and mythological terms, demonstrating not only the longevity of mythological themes, but also the role of magic as a nexus between mythology and social reality.

### *Magic, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Sagas*

In many of the *Íslendingasögur*, the practice of magic is attributed to foreigners, particularly to the Finnar, a term applied to the Finns and Sámi living in the extreme north.<sup>231</sup> In *Vatnsdæla saga*, for example, both the *völva* invited to Ingjaldr's farm and the sorcerers employed by Ingimundr to locate and magically transport back to Norway his Freyr amulet are identified as Finnar (chs 10 and 12). It should be noted, however, that the frequent attribution of magic to the Finnar is not exclusive to the *Íslendingasögur*, but also appears in the *fornaldarsögur*, where it is commonly the nationality of wicked sorcerers. In *Qrvar-Odds saga*, for example, Qrvar-Oddr's primary antagonist Qgmundr is said to have been taught magic in Finnmörk (ch. 19), while in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, two Finnish kings called Fiðr and Flóki, who are called 'galdramenn' (sorcerers; ch. 15), serve in the army of King Hárekr in the attack on Grímr (ch. 15).<sup>232</sup> Despite the prevalence of sorcerers identified as Finnar, foreigners from other nations are also credited with magical abilities. In *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*, for instance, the Skrælingar are credited with various magical powers, including illusions of a great warrior host (*Eiríks saga*, ch. 11) and the conjuring of Guðríðr's *Doppelgänger* (*Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 6), while in *Laxdæla saga*, Kotkell and his

<sup>231</sup> On the depiction of the Finnar in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Jeremy DeAngelo, 'The North and the Depiction of the *Finnar* in the Icelandic Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82 (2010), 257-86.

<sup>232</sup> *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, iv, pp. 245-85.

family, who are ‘seiðmenn’ (sorcerers) and ‘mjök fjölkunnig’ (very skilled in magic), have recently moved to Iceland from the Hebrides (ch. 35).<sup>233</sup> From this brief survey of the nationalities to which magical abilities are ascribed, it is clear that the specific national identities of sorcerers are less important than the general association of magic with foreignness and ethnic difference.

In some respects, the association of magic and ethnic difference in the *Íslendingasögur* can be understood as deriving from xenophobia, particularly in the sense of the social disruption feared as a result of the introduction of settling foreigners into Icelandic society. The connection between magic, ethnicity, and social disruption is especially foregrounded in the figures of Kotkell and his family in *Laxdæla saga*. As has been said, it is explicitly stated in the saga that these characters have recently moved to Iceland from the Hebrides, and this family are therefore categorized as foreign right from the outset (ch. 35). The family of Hebrideans are ‘seiðmenn’ and ‘mjök fjölkunnig’, and even more significant in this respect is that Þórðr’s mother Ingunn complains of both their magical practices and theft of her livestock in asking for her son’s help. The collocation of theft and sorcery signifies that the magical skills of Kotkell and his family are configured negatively and in socially disruptive terms in the same way as theft. The socially disruptive nature of the magic practised by Kotkell and his family is made explicit in their orchestration of the deaths of multiple inhabitants of the district. The first deaths are the drownings of Þórðr and his crew as they sail home following Þórðr’s accusations of theft and sorcery (ch. 35). Angered by these accusations, the family raises a *seiðhjallr* (*seiðr*-platform) and stir up a savage storm at sea with their magic; Þórðr’s ship sinks, and everyone on board is drowned.<sup>234</sup> Arguably, however, it is the final death orchestrated by the family of sorcerers that demonstrates the

<sup>233</sup> *Grænlandinga saga*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 239-69 and *Laxdæla saga*, in *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit, 5 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), pp. 1-248; all subsequent references are to these editions, incorporated in the text.

<sup>234</sup> The performance of magic on a raised platform appears on other occasions in the sagas (see, for example, ch. 28 of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*), perhaps suggesting that this is a detail based on real-world magical practice.

most dangerous risk magic can pose to social stability. Þorleikr Høskuldsson is angry with his kinsman Hrútr Herjólfsson for killing a man named Eldgrímr, who has stolen Þorleikr's horses (ch. 37). Þorleikr hires Kotkell and his family to punish Hrútr for his actions, and they travel to Hrútr's farm one night and perform *seiðr*, which involves beautiful chanting. Hrútr realizes what is happening and instructs all members of his household not to leave the building and to stay awake for as long as possible to avoid harm. Eventually, however, everyone falls asleep, and the magic of Kotkell and his family has disastrous consequences:

Kári hét sonr Hrúts, er þá var tólf vetra gamall, ok var hann efniligastr sona Hrúts. Hann unni honum mikit. Kári sofnaði nær ekki, því at til hans var leikr gorr; honum gerðisk ekki mjök vært. Kári spratt upp ok sá út; hann gekk á seiðinn ok fell þegar dauðr niðr.

(Kári was the name of Hrútr's son, who was twelve winters old at that time, and he was the most promising of Hrútr's sons. He was a great favourite to him. Kári did not sleep deeply because the incantation was directed at him; he did not feel much at ease. Kári sprang up and looked outside; he went into the *seiðr* and immediately fell down dead.)

The murder of Kári by Kotkell and his family is, of course, a very personal tragedy for Hrútr and his household, but it is also a blow for the district as a whole. The superlative 'efniligastr' (most promising) suggests that Kári would have been an asset for the district if he had grown to manhood and can be seen as a comment on his potential social worth. His untimely death removes Kári from the pool of talented successors available to take over the running of the district and its farms after the end of the current generation. Both the foreignness and magical abilities of Kotkell and his family can be understood, therefore, as an expression of anxieties concerning the potential social disruption that can be caused by outsiders settling in Iceland.

John Lindow has explored the issue of magic and ethnicity in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition and astutely observes that the ascription of attributes such as the practice of magic to

the ethnic other tells us something about an ascribing culture's view of itself.<sup>235</sup> In his words, 'what is ascribed to the other may be the obverse of what one would ascribe to oneself.'<sup>236</sup> Applying this theory to the example of Kotkell and his family in *Laxdæla saga*, Hebrideans are socially disruptive sorcerers and Icelanders are not. Lindow's examination of the way in which the practice of magic is associated with ethnic otherness in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition helps in the analysis of the mythological overtones of magic in the *Íslendingasögur*, which do not necessarily make explicit use of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the description of sorcery. Especially notable in this respect are the origins ascribed to magic in a number of our extant mythological texts, in which magic is presented as an art that came from outside. In *Völuspá*, for example, the practice of magic is not mentioned in the *völva*'s history of the world until the arrival of the mysterious Gullveig (v. 21), whom scholars have tended to view as a figure associated with the Vanir following the work of Karl Müllenhof and Sigurður Nordal.<sup>237</sup> According to the *völva*, the attempted killing of Gullveig by the Æsir is the first war in the world between the Æsir and the Vanir. First, Gullveig is attacked with spears, and afterward, she is burned three times only to be reborn three times. This account is then followed by the introduction of the equally enigmatic Heiðr:

Heiði hana héto,    hvars til húsa kom,  
 völo velspá,    vitti hon ganda;  
 seið hon, hvars hon kunni,    seið hon hug leikinn,  
 æ var hon angan    illrar brúðar. (v. 22)

(They called her Heiðr, wherever she came to houses, a *völva* prophesying good, she cast spells on spirits; she practised *seiðr* wherever she could, she played with minds with *seiðr*, she was always the favourite of evil brides.)

<sup>235</sup> John Lindow, 'Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millennium of World View', *Scandinavian Studies*, 67 (1995), 8-31.

<sup>236</sup> Lindow, 'Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others', p. 22.

<sup>237</sup> Karl Müllenhof, *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, 5 vols (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1887-1900), v, pp. 1-157 and *Völuspá*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, trans. B. S. Benedikz and John McKinnell, Durham and St Andrew's Medieval Texts, 1 (Durham: Durham and St Andrew's Medieval Texts, 1978), pp. 42-46.

The pronoun ‘hana’ seems to refer back to Gullveig here, suggesting that she is identical with Heiðr and possibly that her ordeal among the Æsir has initiated her in the knowledge of magic.<sup>238</sup> In this instance, the mythological origins of magic are explicitly foreign, being introduced into Æsir society by a figure associated with the Vanir in a manner that is socially disruptive, having some kind of causal relationship with the first war in the world: the Æsir may use magic after its introduction, but it remains the art of the outsider. It may be objected that the presentation of Óðinn as a teacher of magic in Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga* demonstrates that the conception of magic as something foreign (in the sense of non-Æsir) in mythological tradition was by no means universal, but it should be noted that discussion of Óðinn’s magic (chs 6 and 7) is preceded by the arrival of Óðinn and the Æsir from Asia (ch. 2). In Snorri’s account in *Ynglinga saga*, even the Æsir themselves are presented as foreign, regardless of their position as progenitors of the major Scandinavian dynasties. The arts they bring with them, including the practice of magic, are therefore similarly foreign.

Particularly relevant in this respect are the traditions relating to a particular kind of magic called *seiðr*, practice of which by men often leads to accusations of unmanliness and sexual perversion.<sup>239</sup> In *Ynglinga saga*, for example, *seiðr* is said to be considered an unmanly form of magic and taught to priestesses for this very reason (ch. 7), and it is significant in this respect that the sorceress Heiðr is said to be the favourite of brides in *Völuspá*. Magic is not only the ethnic other, but also the gendered other, being thought appropriate for female practitioners rather than male. Jóhanna Katrín has suggested that the practice of magic by women in the *Íslendingasögur* is a means of giving them agency in an otherwise male-dominated, patriarchal society, but it also strongly associates women with socially disruptive practices, even if this disruption has a positive outcome in such cases as

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<sup>238</sup> John McKinnell, however, has suggested the alternative possibility that the prophetess speaking in *Völuspá* is to be identified as Heiðr and that the prophetess is referring to herself in the third person in v. 22. John McKinnell, ‘On Heiðr’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 25 (1998-2001), 394-417 (p. 413).

<sup>239</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, p. 19.

the magic employed by the prophetess Þorbjörg lítil-völva (Little-prophetess) in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4).<sup>240</sup> The attribution of magical skills to female practitioners suggests that magic is a sign of gendered otherness and the potentially disruptive behaviour of women in a patriarchal society. That the origins of magic in *Völuspá* are associated with both foreignness and the feminine in the figure of Gullveig-Heiðr as the practice of magic is in the sagas implies the existence of a shared traditional cognitive paradigm categorizing magic as the ethnic and gendered other.

The role of the *völva* in a number of sagas demonstrates the capacity of the disruptive magic practised by women to have both positive and negative outcomes. The most well-known prophetess in the sagas is the aforementioned Þorbjörg lítil-völva in *Eiríks saga rauða*, who is invited to the farm of Þorkell in Greenland to provide the household with information as to when the famine affecting the country will come to an end. The author explicitly states that preparations are made to entertain her well ‘sem siðr var til, þá er við þess háttar konum skyldi taka’ (as was the custom when dealing with this kind of woman; ch. 4). A high seat is set up for her with a cushion stuffed with chicken feathers, the prophetess wears strikingly ceremonial dress, everyone in the house is to greet her respectfully, and a special meal of kid’s milk and animal hearts is made for her, suggesting that there is a clear suspension of normal behaviour. Moreover, the reluctant involvement of the Christian Guðríðr in singing the *varðlokur* (guardian-songs) to help Þorbjörg in her magic implies that the operations of the prophetess are so socially subversive that even religious affiliations can be temporarily suspended. Even though Þorbjörg’s magic is successful and allows her to reveal that the hardship suffered by the Greenlanders will end soon and the good fortune of Guðríðr, it nevertheless disrupts the day-to-day workings of Þorkell’s household and can be seen as the intervention of an outside world, the prophetic gifts of Þorbjörg providing a

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<sup>240</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Women’s Weapons’.

connection between the human and supernatural domains and facilitating an irruption into everyday life of magic (the same suspension of normal behaviour is evident also in the special preparations that must be made for the *vǫlva* Heiðr – note the name shared with Heiðr in *Vǫluspa* – in ch. 2 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*). The arrival of Gullveig-Heiðr is similarly presented in *Vǫluspá* as the irruption of magic into the ordered world of the Æsir, and it is tempting to root the depiction of Þorbjörg lítil-vǫlva and her practices in *Eiríks saga* and of other *vǫlur* in the sagas in the traditional mythological conception of magic as the art of the other.

An additional point of contact between the mythological *vǫlur* in *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar* and those we see in the sagas is in the hostility many of these prophetesses endure during the delivery of their prophecies. Arguably, Óðinn's hostility toward the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar* is as much a response to the hostility of the *vǫlva* toward him as it is to his eagerness to discover information about the fate of Baldr, while the prophetess herself is hostile in *Vǫluspá*. In the latter poem, the *vǫlva* taunts Óðinn not only with the sheer quantity of knowledge she possesses, but also with his apparent lack of knowledge, using the refrain '[v]ituð ér enn – eða hvat?' (know you yet, or what?) of *Vǫluspá* (vv. 27, 28, 33, 34, 38, 40, 50, 60, and 61). By contrast, the prophetess in *Baldrs draumar* is apparently reluctant to provide Óðinn with any information at all, forcing the god to repeatedly demand that she continues to speak with the refrain 'Þegjattu, vǫlva' (Do not be silent, *vǫlva*; vv. 8, 10, and 12). The same hostility toward prophetesses is displayed by some characters in the sagas, often by those about whom important prophecies are made. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, for example, Ingimundr and his foster-brother are said not to trust the predictions of the Finnish *vǫlva* invited to Ingjaldr's, and neither of them go up to receive a prophecy (ch. 10). The *vǫlva* predicts Ingimundr's fate anyway, but he is unconvinced that his fortune lies in Iceland and assures her that she would be rewarded with violence if it were not for the risk of offending

his foster-father.<sup>241</sup> In *Qrvar-Odds saga* (ch. 2), Qrvar-Oddr is so hostile to the *vǫlva* Heiðr, who is invited to speak at his foster-father Ingjaldr's, that he physically strikes her, clearly not having the same qualms about this as Ingimundr in *Vatnsdæla saga*, and goes out of his way to act against the prophecy in a manner that only serves to fulfil it. Even in *Eiríks saga rauða*, in which the depiction of Þorbjörg lítil-vǫlva and her magic is framed in largely positive terms, there is apparently some hostility toward her on the part of Þorbjörn, who refuses to stay at home on the farm while such 'hindrvitni' (superstitious practices; ch. 4) are going on. Hostility toward prophetesses and their prophecies is no doubt due to hostility toward inexorable fate in general, and by extension, to those who act as its agents, such as *vǫlur*. Fate in Old Norse myth is subject to the sometimes magical intervention of supernatural female figures, including *valkyrjur*, *dísir* (female spirits), and *nornir*, and the hostility toward these individuals elsewhere (in v. 28 of *Hamðismál*, for example, Sǫrli is hostile to the way in which the *dísir* have influenced the disastrous course of events in the poem) extends also to *vǫlur* in both mythological texts and the sagas. In *Qrvar-Odds saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, however, hostility is not really directed toward the *vǫlur* themselves, but to the suggestion that the characters about whom prophecies are made are not in control of their own lives, the details of these prophecies predicting disruption from the course of events intended by the characters (death in *Qrvar-Odds saga* and moving to another country in *Vatnsdæla saga*).

Magical intervention in the course of fate receives similarly mythological treatment in ch. 157 of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, in which the operation of fate in battle draws on precisely the association between fate and female supernatural figures we see also at work in representations of the *vǫlva*. On the morning of Good Friday, a man named Darraðr out walking in Caithness sees twelve women riding to a room and going inside. Darraðr goes up

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<sup>241</sup> Although the *vǫlva*'s prediction proves correct, her prophecy is connected with social disruption in a similar way to the prophecy of Þorbjörg lítil-vǫlva in *Eiríks saga rauða*, resulting in the uprooting of Ingimundr from one country and his settlement in another.

to the room, looks in through the window, and witnesses a grisly sight. The women have set up a loom constructed of various dismembered body parts and are weaving fabric from human entrails: men's heads are used for the weights, their intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater. At this point in the account, the poem *Darraðarljóð* is incorporated in the saga as the verses recited over the weaving by the twelve women, after which they tear the cloth they have made to pieces and depart, each woman keeping hold of a piece of the fabric. These women are clearly an amalgamation of the various female supernatural figures with an interest in fate and battle in Norse mythology, namely *valkyrjur*, *dísir*, and *nornir*. According to ch. 36 of Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, for example, *valkyrjur* allot death or victory to men in battle, while in ch. 15, the *nornir* are said to shape the lives of men; indeed, one of the *nornir*, Skuld, is said to ride with the valkyries to choose the slain and govern the killings (ch. 36). From this, it is clear that the twelve women in *Brennu-Njáls saga* are to be interpreted in mythological terms (compare also the eighteen women riders, identified as *dísir*, who are interpreted as signifying a change of religion in ch. 335 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* in *Flateyjarbók*).

The closest parallel to the motif of a shirt made from human entrails in this episode of *Brennu-Njáls saga* elsewhere in saga literature is arguably the motif of magically protective clothing found commonly in the *fornaldarsögur*, including in ch. 12 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ch. 18 of *Sqrla saga sterka*, and ch. 3 of *Þátr af Ragnars sonum*.<sup>242</sup> The example from *Qrvar-Odds saga* is particularly significant in this respect, incorporating as it does a verse in which weaving is specifically presented as a magical act (chs 11 and 12). Qrvar-Oddr is provided with a magical shirt by the Irish princess Qlvqr, and while wearing the shirt, he will never be cold at sea or on land, never become tired when swimming, never be harmed by fire, and never be hungry, and swords will not wound him unless he runs away from battle. After

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<sup>242</sup> *Þátr af Ragnars sonum*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, I, pp. 287-303.

Qrvar-Oddr has tried on the shirt and been assured that it possesses the qualities promised by Qlvör during their first meeting, he asks Qlvör about the circumstances of its tailoring, and she replies with the following verse:

Serk of frák ór silki  
ok í sex stöðum gervan:  
ermr á Íralandi,  
önnur norðr með Finnum,  
slógu Saxa meyjar,  
en suðreyskar spunnu,  
váfu valskar brúðir,  
varp Óþjóðans móðir.

(I have heard of a shirt of silk made in six places: one arm in Ireland, the other in the north by Finns, Saxon girls began it, and Hebrideans spun it, French brides wove it, on the warp of Óþjóðan's mother.)

As we have seen, the Finns and Hebrideans are presented as gifted sorcerers in the *Íslendingasögur*, and the same nationalities are given here to some of the weavers involved in the making of Qrvar-Oddr's magic shirt. Weaving is configured as a magical act, with the ethnic foreignness of the weavers of the magical shirt in the example from *Qrvar-Odds saga* corresponding with the association between magic and ethnic otherness that we have encountered elsewhere in saga literature, and we can therefore interpret the weaving of the twelve women in *Brennu-Njáls saga* as a magical act. On the one hand, the motif of the magically protective shirt can be seen as an element of wish-fulfilment on the part of a masculine warrior culture: a magically protective shirt would be highly desirable in a society in which the risk of death or serious injury in feuds and battles was an everyday obstacle. On the other hand, however, the magically protective shirt also embodies physically the agency of fate in battle, the magic of the shirt predetermining the warrior's survival. The fabric woven from human entrails and its subsequent tearing in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which predetermines the fate of warriors in the Battle of Clontarf, can be considered to be an

inversion of the motif of magically protective clothing, guaranteeing death in battle as opposed to survival; whereas the weaving of the magic shirt in *Qrvar-Odds saga* provides a protective outer covering for the flesh, the weaving of fabric from flesh in *Brennu-Njáls saga* makes the flesh itself the outer covering, increasing the vulnerability of combatants in battle and in all likelihood to be interpreted as an act of sympathetic magic. The employment of women who appear to be an amalgamation of the many supernatural female figures with an interest in fate and battle in Old Norse myth lends additional mythological resonance to the impending battle and expresses the same gender principle according to which magic is female that we have seen elsewhere in both saga literature and Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts.

In the examples considered here, it can be seen that sorcerers are frequently portrayed as the other in terms of gender and ethnicity, providing evidence of a cognitive paradigm casting magic as the socially disruptive art of the outsider, a status it also occupies in *Völuspá*, in which magic is introduced into Æsir society by a woman from another tribe. The attribution of magical skills to foreigners and women can be seen as an expression of fears relating to the potential social disruption to society posed by both foreigners and women, and in the case of *völur* and the twelve women in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the employment of mythological traditions relating to *völur*, *valkyrjur*, *dísir*, and *nornir* can be seen as a psychosocial strategy for conceiving of and accepting the inscrutable operations of inescapable fate.

#### *Magical Disruption in the 'fornaldarsögur'*

The prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* addresses issues of truth and fictionality in the narrative that follows it. Perhaps understandably, magic is discussed prominently in the prologue as

one of the elements of the saga most likely to be unbelievable to the audience, suggesting that magic and sorcerers were one among many primarily fictitious elements in the sagas to the author of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*:

Er þat ok margra heimskra manna náttúra, at þeir trúu því einu, er þeir sjá sínum augum eða heyra sínum eyrum, er þeim þykkir fjarlægt sinni nátturu, svá sem orðit hefir um vitra manna ráðagerðir eða mikit afl eða frábæran léttleika fyrimanna, svá ok eigi síðr um konstir eða huklaraskap ok mikla fjölkynngi, þá þeir seiddu at sumum mönnum ævinliga ógæfu eða aldrtila, en sumum veraldar virðing, fjár ok metnaðar. Þeir æstu stundum höfuðskepnur, en stundum kyrrðu, svá sem var Óðinn eða aðrir þeir, er af honum námu galdrlistir eða lækningar.

(Furthermore, it is the nature of many foolish men that they believe only that which they see with their own eyes or hear with their own ears that seems to them distant from their own character, such as have reports concerning the counsels of wise men or the great strength or exceptional agility of predecessors no less than reports of their magical skills or witchcraft or powerful sorcery, when they conjured for some men everlasting misfortune or death, but for some worldly honour, wealth, and esteem. Sometimes, they stirred up the elements, and sometimes, they calmed them, just as Óðinn did or those others who learned the magic arts or healing from him.)

This passage tells reveals many of the generic commonalities in the depiction of magic in the *fornaldarsögur*. Firstly, the author admits that certain members of his audience will not believe the events of the saga because they have not witnessed them for themselves and because they constitute something distant from their own experiences. Magic itself is neither positive nor negative; rather, the author focuses on the outcomes of magic as a means of ethical evaluation, providing direct evidence that the attitude toward magic in the *fornaldarsögur* is identical with the attitude toward it in the *Íslendingasögur* identified by Jóhanna Katrín.<sup>243</sup> Most important for our purposes is the identification of Óðinn as both practitioner and teacher of magic, which demonstrates that magic was still considered to be mythological in origin to the author of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. Indeed, the association between

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<sup>243</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons', p. 412.

magic and Óðinn in medieval Scandinavia had great longevity, as Stephen Mitchell has shown in his examination of witchcraft trials in fifteenth-century Sweden.<sup>244</sup>

As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, Óðinn is credited with various magical abilities in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, abilities primarily relating to dynastic fertility and battle. Óðinn is not, however, the only mythological figure presented as a practitioner of magic in the *fornaldarsögur*; in fact, the ability to use magic is ascribed to the full range of mythological beings. In ch. 47 of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, for example, King Hrólfr's half-sister Skuld is described as being a 'galdrakind' (sorceress), and her identification as a practitioner of magic is followed immediately by a reminder that Skuld is of elfish descent on her mother's side, suggesting that her magical abilities are inherited from the elves. Giants and trolls, too, possess magical abilities in the *fornaldarsögur*. Among their many magical powers are shapeshifting (see, for example, ch. 5 of *Ketils saga hængs*), the ability to control the weather (see, for example, ch. 12 of *Hálfðanar saga Brǫnufóstra*, ch. 16 of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, and ch. 6 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*), and healing magic (see, for example, ch. 14 of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*), and they are also particularly adept at using magic to steer ships off course or make men lose their way and bring to their lands fresh human meat (see, for example, ch. 4 of *Hálfðanar saga Brǫnufóstra*, ch. 19 of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and ch. 3 of *Sǫrla saga sterka*; the ability to steer ships off course is also attributed to the Finnar in ch. 3 of *Ketils saga hængs* and ch. 6 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*).<sup>245</sup>

Dwarfs, in particular, are primarily presented as practitioners of magic in the *fornaldarsögur*, and one of the most intriguing magical dwarfs in these sagas is Mǫndull Pattason in *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*, whose magical abilities are representative of those ascribed to dwarfs elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*. Entering the story after Gǫngu-Hrólfr has left for Russia, Mǫndull arrives at the court of Þorgný jarl a stranger and quickly wins his favour (ch.

<sup>244</sup> Stephen Mitchell, 'Odin, Magic, and a Swedish Trial from 1484', *Scandinavian Studies*, 81 (2009), 263-86.

<sup>245</sup> *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, iv, pp. 51-176.

23). Initially, the only indication that Mōndull belongs to a race other than human is his shortness and stoutness, for the term *dvergr* (dwarf) is not used of him until after Gōngu-Hrólfur's return to Denmark and his frustration of Mōndull's nefarious designs (ch. 25). According to the saga author, Mōndull 'var lágr á vöxt ok mjök riðvaxinn' (was short of stature and very squarely built; ch. 23), and the same attribution of shortness and stoutness is made a little later when Gōngu-Hrólfur observes a man 'lágvaxinn ok miðdigr' (short and stout; ch. 25) entering the hall in the home of Björn, Þorgný's counsellor. Gōngu-Hrólfur seizes Mōndull by the throat and strangles him until he bargains for his life and admits his true identity:

“Ger svá vel, Hrólfur, at þú drep mik eigi. Skal ek þik þá heilan gera, því at ek á þau smyrsl, er engi eru slík á Norðrlöndum. Hefi ek svá mikil konstr til læknisdóms, at ek má allt heilt vinna, þat lífs er ván, innan þriggja náttu. Ek vil þér ok kunngera, at ek er dvergr í jörðu byggjandi, ok dvergsnáttúru hefi ek á kynstrum til lækidóms ok hagleik...” (ch. 25)

(“Do so well, Hrólfur, that you do not kill me. I shall then grant healing to you, because I have that ointment which none is the likeness of in Scandinavia. I have such great magical skills of healing that I can make completely whole the man who has hope of survival within three nights. Moreover, I will reveal to you that I am a dwarf, a dweller in the earth, and I have the nature of a dwarf in respect of the magical skills of healing and craftsmanship...”)

The association between dwarfs and craftsmanship is attested in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* in his account of the forging of golden hair for Sif, the wife of Þórr (ch. 35), and in his telling of the origins of the mead of poetry, in which the brewing of the poetic mead by the dwarfs Fjalarr and Galarr from the blood of Kvasir and honey can be considered as an extension of their creative metal-working abilities (ch. 657).<sup>246</sup> Although the association between dwarfs and healing is not foregrounded in our extant mythological texts, the collocation of dwarfish craftsmanship and healing is arguably present in the story of the golden hair made for Sif. As

<sup>246</sup> As Margaret Clunies Ross has demonstrated, poets and the art of poetry were conceptualized in terms similar to those of craftsmen and their craft in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), pp. 84-91.

the story goes, the mischievous god Loki cut off Sif's hair 'til lævísi' (for craftiness; ch. 35), and when Þórr threatened to break his bones, Loki promised to have a head of hair made for her out of gold. He visited some dwarfs, the sons of Ívaldi, and they made a replacement for Sif's hair out of gold, as well as some other treasures which Loki gifted to the most important gods. Once Loki returned to Ásgarðr with these treasures, the gods gathered to judge whether the gifts constituted an appropriate atonement, and Loki announced the special features of his dwarf-made artefacts. From this announcement, it appears that Sif's golden locks were much more than a hairpiece. According to Loki, 'haddrinn var holdgróinn þegar er hann kom á hofuð Sif' (the hair was rooted in the flesh as soon as it came to Sif's head). Presumably, once the golden hair was rooted to the follicles, it grew in the same way as natural hair, restoring function as well as organ. In this story, the exceptional abilities of dwarfs are both creative and restorative. Their creative abilities are manifested in their craftsmanship (the forging of the hair) and their restorative abilities in their healing skills (the restoration of organic functionality), and the combination of the two in this example can perhaps be configured in magical terms. The specific attribution of skills of craftsmanship and healing to dwarfs in the passage above from *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* no doubt derives from their primary role as the smiths of Old Norse myth and from the additional connection between smith-work and healing found in the story of Sif's golden hair, which may be rooted in the equation of the smith's ability to re-forgo whole weapons from shards and the healing of wounds.

The same collocation of dwarfish craftsmanship and healing appears in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. Egill loses one of his hands in a fight with a giant, and the pain he suffers from the wound is unbearable. Eventually, Egill can stand the pain no longer and walks into the forest, where he sees a 'dvergsbarn' (dwarf's child; ch. 11) sent to fetch water come out of a rock and places a gold ring in his pail. The dwarf child runs back into the rock with the ring, and his father comes out to find out who has been so generous to

his child. After hearing of Egill's suffering, the dwarf invites him into the rock and employs both healing magic and craftsmanship to restore functionality to Egill's hand:

Tók dvergrinn þá at binda um stúfinn, ok tók ór verk allan, ok var gróinn um morguninn. Tók dvergrinn þá at smíða honum eitt sverð, en upp frá hjöltunum gerði hann fal svá langan, at upp tók yfir olbogann, ok mátti þar spenna at, ok var Agli svá hægt at höggva með því sverði sem heil væri höndin. (ch. 11)

(Then the dwarf took the stump to bind, and took up all the work, and he was healed by morning. Afterward, the dwarf makes for him a sword, and from the hilt he made a socket so long that it reached up over the elbow and was able to attach to it, and it was as easy for Egill to strike with the sword as it had been with his hand.)

Although the attaching sword appears to be an ingenious mechanical device rather than an object which attaches magically to the arm in the same way that Sif's hair attaches to the follicles, the dwarf's ability to heal Egill's wound overnight is likely to signify the employment of healing magic, particularly since Egill's suffering is unbearable for days without relief until his meeting with the dwarf. Especially important in this respect is the fact that Egill must enter into the rock in which the dwarf and his child live, which symbolizes a transition from the human world to the other world, perhaps specifically the mythological world. The suggestion is that such fantastic skills as overnight magical healing are unavailable in the human world and found only in the mythological domain, in particular, the underground world of the dwarfs. Magic is both distinctly unhuman and fundamentally mythological in *Egils saga einhenda*, and the necessity of entering the mythological domain to benefit from the magical abilities of the dwarf can be seen as a temporary disruption of reality.

Arguably, the attribution of restorative healing magic to Mōndull in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is complicated by his initial role in destabilizing Þorgný's kingdom and framing

Þorgný's counsellor Björn for theft in an attempt to acquire his wife Ingibjörg (ch. 23).<sup>247</sup> Moreover, Mǫndull's affliction of Ingibjörg with a terrible illness after she has resisted his seduction is in direct contrast with the healing abilities ascribed to him, suggesting that if a dwarf is capable of healing magic, he must also be capable of the obverse. The idea that a dwarf might employ his magic to acquire a woman may well have its precedent in mythological stories of goddess theft by dwarfs. Although goddesses are usually at risk of theft from giants in the majority of our extant mythological texts (see Chapter 4), the eddic poem *Alvíssmál* centres on the attempted theft of Þórr's daughter by a dwarf named Alvíss. Þórr proposes a wisdom contest and suggests that Alvíss will receive his daughter as his bride if he can answer all his questions, but the contest is really a ruse to keep the dwarf talking for so long that he is still outside when the sun rises and consequently turns to stone. It is possible that there were more such stories of dwarfish designs on the Ásynjur than have survived and that the story-type was sufficiently well-known to establish the dwarf as a socially disruptive figure, perhaps specifically as a mythological species as likely as the giants to subvert the proper dispensation of brides. As a result, Mǫndull is introduced from the outset as a socially disruptive figure, entertaining Þorgný so much that he neglects matters of state, and the magic he initially employs is similarly disruptive.<sup>248</sup>

The belief that dwarfs are capable of destructive as well as creative and restorative magic is also present in *Áns saga bogsveigis*, in which the protagonist Án has five arrows made for him by a dwarf (ch. 1).<sup>249</sup> In a situation reminiscent of Egill's meeting with the

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<sup>247</sup> Jacob Wittmer Hartmann has said of Mǫndull that 'he absolutely lacks any individuality, exerting his powers quite as readily in Gǫngu-Hrólf's interests as in his own, and this for almost no apparent reason.' I would disagree with Hartmann here, for the switch to Gǫngu-Hrólf's interests can in all likelihood be attributed to the idea that dwarfs serve whoever it is most expedient for them to serve or whoever has made a bargain with them, as we see, for example, in ch. 35 of *Skáldskaparmál*. Jacob Wittmer Hartmann, *The 'Gǫngu-Hrólfssaga': A Study in Old Norse Philology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), p. 9.

<sup>248</sup> Mǫndull's distraction of Þorgný with stories is very similar to Óðinn's distraction of King Óláfr Tryggvason with stories in an attempt to make him oversleep and miss Mass in various sagas about the king (see Chapter 1). Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation, and the Devil'.

<sup>249</sup> *Áns saga bogsveigis*, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, II, pp. 365-403; all subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

dwarf in *Egils saga einhenda*, Án enters a forest clearing and finds a man standing by a stream near a large rock. According to the saga, Án has heard of dwarfs and that they are ‘hagari’ (more skilful; ch. 1) than other men. Án comes between the stone and the dwarf and ‘vígir hann utan steins’ (charms him out of the stone; ch. 1) and stipulates that the dwarf will never make it back inside unless he makes five arrows for Án according to his specifications:

Þat skyldi þeim fylgja, at hann skyldi um sinn hæfa með hverri, þat er hann skyti til eftir sínum vilja. Innan þriggja náttu skyldi þetta gert vera, ok beið Án þar meðan. Svá gerði dvergrinn sem fyrir var skilit ok með engum álögum, en dvergrinn hét Litr. (ch. 1)

(It must follow like this, that he should make them all according to his instructions, that he should hit everything according to his will. These should be ready within three nights, and Án waited there in the meantime. So the dwarf made the arrows as was stipulated before and with no curses, and the dwarf was called Litr.)

The ability to forge arrows with the property of hitting whatever target the Bowman wishes is surely a sign that an element of magic is involved in their creation, but the statement that the dwarf placed no curses on the weapons suggests that dwarfs are equally capable of destructive magic. The idea that dwarfs are capable of deception in the way they use their magic may derive from the same conception of dwarfs as socially disruptive bride-thieves that influenced the role of Möndull in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, but it may equally derive from the apparent necessity of bargaining with dwarfs to benefit from their skills, as in Loki’s head-wager with the sons of Ívaldi in the story of Sif’s golden hair in ch. 35 of *Skáldskaparmál*.

In some of the *fornaldarsögur*, the mythological association between dwarfs, craftsmanship, and magic can be seen as the inspiration of episodes in which dwarfs occupy a role corresponding to the figure of the donor identified in folktales by Vladimir Propp in the same way that Óðinn does as the foster-father of heroes (see Chapter 2).<sup>250</sup> In *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, for example, Þorsteinn rescues the son of a dwarf from being carried off by an

<sup>250</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 39.

eagle the dwarf believes has been sent by Óðinn. The dwarf thanks Þorsteinn by gifting him with various magical items which will prove useful to him later in the saga: a shirt that will prevent tiredness when swimming and make him invulnerable to wounds, a silver ring with the power to ensure he is never short of money, a black flint capable of conferring invisibility on the holder, and a multi-coloured piece of marble with the power to cause a hailstorm, thaw snow, produce fire, hit any target, and return to the owner when called (compare also the role of the dwarf Sindri in chs 22-23 and 25 of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*).<sup>251</sup> The same mythological association between dwarfs, craftsmanship, and magic may also lie behind the battle magic worked by Mǫndull in ch. 33 of *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*: if dwarfs forge the accoutrements of war, it is logical to attribute to them magical skills in battle. The battle magic employed by Mǫndull is very similar to the battle magic attributed in ch. 6 of *Ynglinga saga* to the god Óðinn, the major difference being that Óðinn appears to practise battle magic to achieve his own ends, whereas Mǫndull employs the same kind of magic on behalf of Gǫngu-Hrólfr, presumably in atonement for his attempts to steal the wife of Björn.

Dwarfs appear again in relation to magic in *Sǫrla þáttur eða Heðins saga ok Hǫgna*, but here the association is indirect and dependent on their dealings with the goddess Freyja, whose magical abilities, along with those of Loki, are portrayed as representing the deceptive and disruptive nature of the intervention of the pagan gods, and by extension, of paganism itself. At the beginning of *Sǫrla þáttur*, Freyja comes across four dwarfs in the act of forging a golden necklace and admires the necklace as much as the dwarfs admire her: ‘Freyju leizt vel á menit. Dvergunum leizt ok vel á Freyju’ (Freyja admired the necklace very much. The dwarfs also admired Freyja very much; ch. 1). Freyja first attempts to buy the necklace from

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<sup>251</sup> Other mythological beings also occupy a very similar role elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur*, including the *álfkona* (elf-woman) who rewards Gǫngu-Hrólfr for lifting a curse preventing her daughter from giving birth with a magic ring that has the power to ensure that he never loses his way in ch. 15 of *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* and the trolls and giantesses who act as foster-mothers in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Hálfðanar saga Brǫnufóstra*, and *Sǫrla saga sterka*. This would suggest that various mythological beings came to be levelled in many of the *fornaldarsögur* and were assimilated to a stock figure resembling the Proppian donor.

the dwarfs, but the dwarfs will only give her the necklace if she sleeps with each of them for one night. The dwarfs themselves do not practise magic, unless the intense desire of Freyja for the necklace they are making is to be attributed to magic employed by them in its creation, but they can be aligned with the spells worked by Freyja on behalf of Óðinn through the recurring theme of desire, which is introduced in the story of Freyja's desire for the necklace and the dwarfs' desire for Freyja with the verb *líta*, one of whose meanings is 'to look upon with love'. Helen Damico has noted the thematic unity of Freyja's desire for the dwarf-made necklace, Sqrli's desire for the dragon-ship, and Heðinn's desire for fame in *Sqrli þátr*, and the magic practised by the gods in this story should be understood, therefore, within the context of desire.<sup>252</sup>

It is significant that the magic employed by Freyja in *Sqrli þátr* includes the administering of a drink of forgetfulness. The most famous appearance of a drink of forgetfulness in saga literature is in ch. 28 of *Volsunga saga*, in which a magical drink makes Sigurðr forget his betrothal to Brynhildr and sets in motion his disastrous involvement with the Gjúkungar, and Mōndull the dwarf uses the same kind of drink in ch. 23 of *Gōngu-Hrólfss saga* to make Ingibjōrg forget her husband. In each of these examples, a magical drink of forgetfulness is employed to achieve a forbidden object of desire, and it is likely, therefore, that this collocation of forgetfulness and desire in the motif of the magical drink was a traditional association (compare also Óðinn's statement that the '[ó]minnis hegri...steln geði guma' (heron of forgetfulness...steals the wits of men) during ale-drinking in v. 13 of *Hávamál*). Given the recurring theme of desire in *Sqrli þátr*, the use of such a drink to cause Heðinn to forget the ties preventing him from achieving his desires and to facilitate Freyja's recuperation of the dwarf-made necklace she desires makes thematic sense. Moreover, the attribution of this kind of magic to Freyja can be seen as being derived from her presentation

<sup>252</sup> Helen Damico, 'Sqrli þátr', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano *et al.*, Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, 1, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 934 (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 638.

as both desirer and desired in certain mythological texts and from the intention to conflate Freyja with the figure of the *valkyrja* in *Sorla þáttr*, which has been noted by Régis Boyer.<sup>253</sup> As has been mentioned in previous chapters, Freyja is the desired bride of the giants in the eddic poem *Brymskviða* and in Snorri's story of the giant builder in ch. 42 of *Gylfaginning*. She is also accused by Loki in *Lokasenna* of having slept with all the gods and elves gathered together at Ægir's feast (v. 30) and has a human lover in *Hyndluljóð*, while in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, she is said to weep for her absent husband Óðr (ch. 35), suggesting a complex network of associations linking Freyja with desire and longing, perhaps specifically sexual desire. Indeed, it is likely that these associations derive from her position as a member of the Vanir race, who are characterized in ch. 4 of *Ynglinga saga* by the practice of incest and are traditionally considered to be fertility gods. These mythological traditions would be enough to make the administering of a magical drink in the fulfilment of desire a sensible form of magic for a goddess already associated with desire to employ, but the function of bestowing a magical drink is even further grounded in mythology by the author's conflation of Freyja with the figure of the *valkyrja*, who 'þjóna skulu í Valhöll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ǫlgagna' (must wait on people in Valhöll, serve drink and take care of the tableware and drinking-vessels) in ch. 36 of *Gylfaginning*. Not only does Freyja adopt the typical *valkyrja* name Gøndull and drink-bestowing function in her dealings with Heðinn, but she also incites him to heroic action in the same way that the valkyries incite their heroic lovers in the three Helgi-poems. Indeed, the evidence of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, which present highly erotic relationships between *valkyrjur* and heroes, would suggest that sexual desire was also an important component of the *valkyrja* tradition.<sup>254</sup>

<sup>253</sup> Régis Boyer, *Les sagas légendaires* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), p. 220.

<sup>254</sup> Matthias Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 71 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 84-104.

As Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has noted, however, the author of *Sqrla þátrr* has inverted the Valhøll-complex in having Freyja use magic to prompt the Hjaðningavíg, a perpetual battle between Heðinn and Høgni, to imply ‘that the pagan vision of the highest reward for valiant men is one not of heaven but of hell.’<sup>255</sup> What were originally consolatory traditions promising cheer and good ale for warriors dying in battle have been reimagined in the depiction of the Hjaðningavíg as nothing more than the hellish delusions of pagan gods, their magic, and their selfish and pernicious desires. Ashman Rowe rightly observes that Christian intervention is necessary to resolve the unjust intervention of the pagan gods in *Sqrla þátrr*, ‘balancing and making good the gods’ disruption of nature and ‘natural’ society’.<sup>256</sup> Furthermore, Ashman Rowe concludes that *Sqrla þátrr* functions as a thematic introduction to the conversion of Norway by illustrating ‘the horrors of the pagan age’, one of which is the unjust magical intervention of the pagan gods, and glorifies King Óláfr Tryggvason by exemplifying the power of his luck.<sup>257</sup> In this respect, it is likely that *Sqrla þátrr* displays the influence of the *specula principum* tradition, establishing Óláfr as the model, unifying king as opposed to the greedy, desirous, and disruptive kings of the heroic past. As Ashman Rowe’s analysis of the interplay of pagan and Christian themes in this *þátrr* would suggest, good kingship is synonymous with Christian kingship and bad kingship with pagan kingship. Paganism itself is presented as being fundamentally disruptive, and this disruptiveness is attributed to the operation of the gods and their magical practices, used as they are in *Sqrla þátrr* to subvert the normal order of society to make humans forget the bonds that tie them together and resurrect the dead.<sup>258</sup> In this way, the author of *Sqrla þátrr*

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<sup>255</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘*Sqrla þátrr*: The Literary Adaptation of Myth and Legend’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 26 (2002), 38-66 (p. 62).

<sup>256</sup> Ashman Rowe, ‘*Sqrla þátrr*’, p. 43.

<sup>257</sup> Ashman Rowe, ‘*Sqrla þátrr*’, p. 63.

<sup>258</sup> The practice of magic is often associated with paganism in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* (see, for example, ch. 22 of *Kormáks saga*, chs 10 and 12 of *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 17 of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and ch. 28 of *Qrvar-Odds saga*), suggesting that this was another way in which magic was conceived of as the disruptive art of the other.

employs mythological characters and their magic to present the otherness of paganism in a similar way to the author of *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda*, who, as we saw in Chapter 1, uses motifs from the story of Þórr's encounter with Útgarðaloki to represent the strange outsider status of a recalcitrant pagan in relation to the centralizing tendencies of Christian monarchy. In *Sǫrla þáttr*, this otherness is presented in magical, as well as mythological, terms and can therefore be seen to operate within the wider cognitive paradigm according to which magic is a marker of otherness we have observed in both saga literature and Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts.

In some of the *fornaldarsögur*, magic and the mythological are invoked to express anxieties relating to social and political disruption at the dynastic or family level, most notably in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*. In both of these sagas, the figure of the sorcerous stepmother is employed to demonstrate the potential social disruption that can be caused by an exogamous union, and in each saga, the magic performed by the stepmothers is presented in mythological terms. In *Gríms saga*, for example, Grímr loðinkinna's betrothed Lofthæna is magically transformed into a hideous troll by her stepmother Grímhildr (ch. 2). Grímr must kiss and sleep with her to restore her to her normal appearance, and in the morning, Grímr finds himself lying next to a very different woman from the trollish Geirríðr with whom he went to bed (compare the similar circumstances surrounding the night King Helgi spends with the initially grotesque *álfkona* in ch. 15 of *Hrólfs saga kraka*):

En er hann vaknar, sá hann konu svá fagra liggja í sænginni hjá sér, at slíka þóttist hann varla sét hafa. Hann undraðist, hversu lík hún mátti vera sköpuð Lofthænu, festarkonu hans. Niðri fyrir stokkinum sá hann, hvar lá sá inn illiligi tröllkonuhamr, er Geirríðr Gandvíkrekka hafði haft. Raun-máttlítil var þá þessi kona.

(But when he wakes up, he saw a woman so beautiful lying in the bed beside him that he could scarcely remember having seen someone so pretty before. He was astonished at how she could be shaped like Lofthæna, his betrothed woman. Down at the foot of

the bed, he saw where the hideous skin of the troll-woman lay, which Geirríðr Gandvíkrekka had had. This woman proved to be of little strength now.)

Geirríðr's appearance turns out to be nothing more than a magic skin with shapeshifting powers not unlike the 'fiaðrhamr' (feather-skin) borrowed by Loki from Freyja in *Prymskviða* (vv. 3-5). Particularly important in the characterization of Grímhildr and her employment of shapeshifting magic is her ethnic origin and sibling relationship with the giant Hrímnir. According to the saga, Grímhildr is 'norðan af Finnmörk' (from Finnmark in the north; ch. 1), aligning her with other sorcerers of Finnish descent in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, and her ethnic otherness is later given a mythological amplification in her familial ties with the giant Hrímnir. In Old Norse myth, giants are the other race *par excellence*, distinguished from both the Æsir and the Vanir and suppressed by the gods (see Chapter 4), and the attribution of both foreign and mythological otherness to Grímhildr, along with the attribution of magical powers, is intended to emphasize her position as the bride from another place and a source of disruption. The troll husk of Lofthæna can be seen as invoking the dispossessed position of the giants in Old Norse myth to demonstrate the way in which her stepmother has removed her from society, dispossessing both her and Grímr of a profitable union, children, and the passage of property from one generation to the next (including the passage of Lofthæna's dowry to Grímr) until Grímr has reversed the spell.

In *Hjálmpés saga ok Ölvis*, the wicked Lúða is configured in mythological terms similar to those used of Grímhildr in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*. Lúða arrives in the kingdom of Mannheimar and tells Ingi, its king, that her husband King Lúcartus has been murdered by King Núdus of Serkland (ch. 3). Her description of Núdus's army is particularly important in assessing the conception of magic in the saga and its relationship with the mythological. According to Lúða, Núdus 'hefir með sér allra handa lýð, blámenn ok tröll ok berserki ok risa ok dverga ok annat fitónsandafólk' (has with him people of all kinds, black men and trolls

and *berserkir* and giants and dwarfs and other sorcerers; ch. 3). The use of the phrase ‘annat fitónsandafólk’ suggests that nouns including *blámaðr*, *troll*, *berserkr*, *risi*, and *dvergr* are synonymous with terms for ‘sorcerer’ in *Hjálmþés saga*. Both mythological beings, such as giants and dwarfs, and supernatural figures, including trolls and *berserkir*, are characterized by the practice of magic, providing evidence of a wider tendency in the *fornaldarsögur* to level the distinction between the mythological and supernatural domains and the attribution of magic to both. Since Lúða is herself a sorceress, she too is to be grouped with the whole range of supernatural and mythological beings she lists in enumerating the forces of Núdus. The name of Ingi’s kingdom, Mannheimar (Worlds of Men), underscores the duality between humans on the one hand and the various mythological and supernatural beings living elsewhere on the other, framing the magic Lúða uses against Hjalpmþér in cursing him never to have peace of mind until he has seen Hervör Hundingsdóttir (ch. 8) in socially and politically disruptive terms, the foreign bride destabilizing his ability to inherit the kingdom after his father until Lúða has been defeated.

The presence of magic has been noted as one of the defining features of the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre, as we saw in Christopher Abram’s inclusion of ‘magic swords’ in his description of these sagas, but its frequent appearance in the *fornaldarsögur* should not lead to the conclusion that magic is employed indiscriminately.<sup>259</sup> Such is exemplified by the treatment of dwarfs in the *fornaldarsögur*, whose magical abilities are derived from and circumscribed by their primary role as craftsmen in our extant mythological texts, which, as we have seen, is extended from the ability to create magical objects to include both healing and, in the case of Mǫndull in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, battle magic. There is an internal logic to the magical abilities they possess, and this logic is mythological in origin, just as it is in the other depictions of magic and practitioners of magic considered here.

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<sup>259</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 23-24.

### Conclusion

The association between the practice of magic and the ethnic other is one of the defining features of the depiction of sorcery in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. The ascription of magical abilities to foreigners has its precedent in mythological tradition, for the origins of magic are ascribed in *Völuspá* to a figure associated with the Vanir. Óðinn and the Æsir may practise magic, but the art was acquired from elsewhere; it defines not the Æsir, but the two ethnic groups with whom they are opposed. Furthermore, depictions of *völur* in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* are linked with the image of mythological *völur* through the employment of a shared complex of ideas relating to fate, the haughtiness of *völur*, and the hostile reactions of those about whom prophecies are made, and these depictions, as well as the attribution of magic to foreigners in the sagas, can be seen as reflecting the invocation of practitioners of magic to express anxieties concerning the potential social disruption of outsiders and the inscrutable operations of fate.

In the *fornaldarsögur*, the magical abilities of dwarfs are restricted to those that can be associated with their primary role as smiths and craftsmen in our extant mythological texts. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, which features the most developed characterization of a dwarf in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the magical skills of dwarfs are said to be craftsmanship and healing and are both creative and restorative. Also in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the ability of dwarfs to forge weapons for use in battle can be seen to motivate the attribution of battle magic to the dwarf Mjondull, while in *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*, the employment of a dwarf as the Proppian donor who bestows on the hero magical objects which secure later victory in his dealings with enemies can similarly be seen as deriving from this same ability, as well as from the levelling of various mythological beings, including Óðinn (see Chapter 2) in their assimilation to the role of the donor. The potential social disruption of the magic

practised by dwarfs is also foregrounded, deriving perhaps from such stories as the attempted theft of Þórr's daughter by Alvíss in *Alvíssmál*.

In *Sqrla þátr*, dwarfs are linked with the magic worked by Freyja on behalf of Óðinn by the theme of desire. The employment of a drink of forgetfulness by Freyja to make Heðinn forget the ties preventing the realization of his desires and to secure the return of the dwarf-made necklace she covets is concordant with this theme and invokes a traditional association between magical drinks, forgetfulness, and desire found also in *Völsunga saga* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. The decision to have Freyja administering this drink is intended to call to mind her role in Old Norse myth as desirer and desired and indicates a concern to present her employment of magic within the traditional mythological parameters governing her operation. Moreover, the mythological function of the *valkyrja* in Old Norse myth is conflated with the operation of Freyja and employed in a complex inversion of the Valhöll-complex to champion Christianity at the expense of paganism and the associated practice of magic, both of which are conceived of as being alien and disruptive.

In *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, magic and the mythological are combined to express fears relating to the potential social and political disruption that can arise from exogamy, which is shown to be a potentially dangerous practice through the figure of the sorcerous stepmother. The author of *Gríms saga* employs the sorcerous stepmother to address anxieties concerning dynastic succession. By magically transforming Lofthæna into a troll and orchestrating her removal from society, Grímhildr prevents Grímr's marriage to her and the conception of children, jeopardizing the continuation of Grímr's line and the proper passage of property from one generation to the next. Here, as in all the examples considered in this chapter, magic is not simply an element of fantasy; rather, it performs serious ideological work in configuring concerns relating to the social and political disruption that

can be caused by outsiders, and its presentation is inextricably linked to pervasive mythological patterns, characters, and motifs.

## Conclusion

The incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas is neither random nor profligate; rather, its integration in saga narrative gives expression to the ideological preoccupations of particular concern to medieval Icelanders. Even in the *fornaldarsögur*, whose preponderance of mythological and legendary content is often noted as their distinguishing characteristic, the Matter of the North, to use Tulinus's term, plays an essential role in negotiating the ideological concerns of post-conversion Iceland.<sup>260</sup> As I stated in the Introduction, this argument is unavoidably circular, but the weight of the available textual evidence points strongly in this direction.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the ideological role of Old Norse myth was instrumental in enabling medieval Icelanders to situate themselves in relation to the pagan past of their nation and ancestors. By interpreting the pagan gods euhemeristically, as Ælfric did in *De falsis diis*, medieval Christian Icelanders could reclaim not only the achievements and accomplishments of their pagan ancestors, but also the stories of the gods and heroes associated with them. Genealogical descent from the gods, who could now be conceived of as extraordinary humans in possession of exceptional abilities, provided medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians with noble and distinguished origins to rival those of Europe, which writers, such as Snorri, were keen to connect to the Classical origins of countries like Britain and thereby bring the history of Iceland and Scandinavia into line with the learned commonplaces of medieval European scholarship. By historicizing Old Norse myth in *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri was also able to formulate a typological model of right rulership advocating a necessary transition from war and conquest, represented by the figure of Óðinn, to peace and plenty, signified by Óðinn's succession by the Vanir gods Njǫrðr and Freyr, who are frequently

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<sup>260</sup> Torfi H. Tulinus, *The Matter of the North*.

associated with fertility in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The position of *Ynglinga saga* as the first narrative of *Heimskringla* is particularly significant, for the model of rulership formulated in its early chapters can be used as a standard against which to measure the success of the kings whose reigns are narrated in the sagas that follow, implicitly offering critique of those kings who failed to live up to the example of Óðinn, Njörðr, and Freyr and providing a glimpse of how a learned Icelander conceived of an increasingly interfering foreign crown that finally claimed Iceland as its own in 1262.

Old Norse myth proved just as useful for conceiving of and justifying the distribution of power in medieval Icelandic society, with successful settlement and landownership being attributed to the ordinance and favour of the gods. In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, the patronage of Freyr at first appears essential to Hrafnkell's settlement of the land at Aðalból and seizing of his *goðorð*, perhaps even passing to Hrafnkell from his father Hallfreðr, whose dream in ch. 1 of the saga may be understood as a warning from Freyr; of course, the even greater productivity of Hrafnkell's second farm at Hrafnkelsstaðir after he has abandoned the worship of Freyr may suggest that the patronage of Freyr is not, after all, the determinant of Hrafnkell's success, perhaps indicating a progression from dependence on the gods to Hrafnkell's reliance on his own accomplishments and reformed character, but there is also the possibility that Freyr is still behind Hrafnkell's prosperity at Hrafnkelsstaðir if the Þjóstarssynir's mock-sacrifice of Freyfaxi is understood to have been accepted as a true sacrifice by the god. The patronage of Freyr is undeniably the basis of Víga-Glúmr's ancestral stewardship of the land at Þverá in *Víga-Glúms saga*, for it is brought to an end by the god apparently as a result of the protagonist's conversion to worship of Óðinn, presumably instigated by Víga-Glúmr's maternal grandfather Vigfúss, an unquestionably Odinic figure. Undoubtedly, stories of settlement with supernatural sanction were inherited from oral tradition, but their survival in saga literature suggests that divine favour generally

was an important validation of power, even if that favour came at one time from a pagan god. A conceptual similarity is drawn between the receipt of divine patronage from the pagan gods in pagan Iceland and the receipt of divine patronage from the Christian God in Christian Iceland; if the distribution of power and landownership can be attributed to divine sanction at all times in the history of the nation, the prevailing power structures in medieval Icelandic society are unassailably validated by a continuous narrative of divine authorization.

Perhaps counterintuitively, mythological and legendary patterns, characters, and motifs associated with the stories of the old religion also proved constructive for understanding Christianity, especially its processes of conversion. Producing parodies and satires subverting mythological expectations to ridicule the superstitions of paganism was one way for authors to distance themselves from the old religion and its traditions while at the same time incorporating them in the conceived worlds of their works, an approach adopted, as we have seen, in both *Gautreks saga* and *Qgmundar þáttr dytts*. In *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda*, however, resonant motifs from the myth of Þórr's encounter with Útgarðaloki are borrowed with serious purpose to present the decentralizing power of recalcitrant pagans in mythological terms, the peripheral location of Bárðr digri's home being paralleled with the peripheral location of the giants in relation to the gods, even more unsettling given the additional significance of Útgarðaloki and his subjects as representations of unbeatable natural forces.<sup>261</sup> Moreover, Old Norse myth provided in the figure of Óðinn a means of reflecting on the role of King Óláfr Tryggvason as a missionary king. The prevalence of narratives casting Óláfr as the audience of pagan stories told by a pagan god, or in the case of Norna-Gestr, his Odinic representative, demonstrates the conceptual importance of bringing together the two religious worlds of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia for comparison and contrast; the reduction of the two religions to their representative figureheads provides a

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<sup>261</sup> Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, I, pp. 52-53 and 265-68.

means of understanding the two religious worldviews as they impact on the individual believer, as well as of reflecting on the dependence of Christianity nationally on the faithfulness and piety of the king. Ultimately, these stories present Óláfr as the perfectible successor of the chief god Óðinn and the essential instrument of the Church's power in Scandinavia. What is significant, however, is that there are variant ways of conceiving of how the Church's power relates to the myths and legends of the old religion; although some versions of the tale end with the final rejection of the tainted meat of pagan stories, as Larrington has noted, others, such as *Norna-Gests þáttur*, admit the potentially subversive possibility that these same stories might be converted to Christian ends, each of these versions contributing to a whole tradition of narratives focused on exploring how best to deal with the myths and legends of the past.<sup>262</sup>

In addition to his position as a foil for Óláfr Tryggvason, the role of Óðinn is also prominent in attempts to communicate ideological values relating to social class and advancement in the *fornaldarsögur* (see Chapter 2). In *Völsunga saga*, Óðinn is the foundation upon which is built a socially conservative ideology prioritizing birth over ability and emphasizing the importance of noble descent as validation of heroic prowess and pre-eminence. In most of the *fornaldarsögur* in which he appears, Óðinn's operation in the world is circumscribed in such a way as to accommodate primarily heroic functions, particularly his role as heroic counsellor, and this circumscription can perhaps be considered as being evidence of a concerted interest in appropriate forms of conduct and behaviour for the various classes in society; indeed, the representation of Óðinn as the patron or foster-father of kings and heroes and his crystallization into a gift-giving figure resembling the Proppian donor in the *fornaldarsögur* appear to express serious concerns relating to the growth and maturation of children and the proper application of aristocratic power. In this way, Óðinn becomes a

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<sup>262</sup> Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil'.

figure essential to the expression of ideological notions of aristocratic behaviour and supremacy and plays a central role in justifying the hierarchical stratification of society and its survival from one generation to another.

Alongside Óðinn's utility in the construction of social and political ideologies, his role in the myth of the mead of poetry imbued him also with great cultural significance (see Chapter 3). Skaldic verse is peppered with formulaic references and kennings drawing on Óðinn's reclamation of the mead of poetry, and poets present themselves in their verses as both the protégés of Óðinn and his surrogates in the human world. Of all the poets whose lives became the subject of the *skáldasögur*, Egill Skalla-Grímsson emerges as the quintessentially Odinic poet; not only do the verses and poems attributed to him and incorporated in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* contain frequent references to and exploration of the Odinic nature of the poet, but his depiction in the saga also relies heavily on traditionally Odinic roles, traits, and motifs, even to the extent that the myth of the mead of poetry is rendered in its key aspects in the domestic sphere of the everyday world. Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld is similarly presented as an Odinic figure in *Hallfreðar saga*, but in this case the Odinic character of his agency is concerned as much with the relationship between Christianity and paganism as it is with the relationship between the poet and his art; the highly dramatized context of the so-called conversion verses and Óláfr Tryggvason's position as paternal replacement bring the relationship between the two religions to the forefront of the saga and demonstrate how versatile the Odinic nature of the poet could be in examining the role of native culture in the business of conversion.

Despite the overwhelmingly Odinic portrayal of Egill and Hallfreðr, previous scholarship has generally overstated the Odinic nature of the poets who feature in the *skáldasögur*. The Odinic status of Björn Hítöelakappi and Gunnlaugr ormsunga, for example, is negligible, for the verses attributed to these poets and incorporated in their

respective sagas make very little use of Odinic references and kennings, and in the case of *Gunnlaugs saga*, there are no references at all to Óðinn in his capacity as god of poetry or to poetic composition as a specifically Odinic act; consequently, there is significantly less Odinic characterization of these poets in the prose sections of their sagas than there is of Egill and Hallfreðr in theirs. The myth of the mead of poetry may have been a commonplace of skaldic verse, but this does not mean that every Icelandic poet was exercised by their Odinic role to the same extent, and the analysis in Chapter 3 of this study has shown that we should distinguish between poets like Egill, to whom Óðinn and the myth of the mead of poetry were poetic preoccupations, and poets like Björn Hítðælakappi, whose employment of Odinic references and kennings was predominantly formulaic; even at the time when the *skáldasögur* were being written, poets were not exclusively presented as Odinic figures, with Kormákr Qgmundarson of *Kormáks saga* being aligned more closely with Þórr than with the culturally ubiquitous god of poetry, and we should therefore not be so eager to impose blanket categorizations on stock figures of saga literature without first interrogating those figures on the basis of their individual manifestations.

As much as Old Norse myth may have served important ideological ends in helping medieval Icelandic society to conceive of itself in relation to its past and present, it also played an equally important role in providing cognitive models to explore alternative and decentralizing ideologies, evidenced most notably in the functions that giants perform in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* (see Chapter 4). Particularly significant in this respect is the use of giants and trolls as representatives of pagan Icelanders in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, an association we see also in the parallels drawn between the home of Bárðr digri and the court of Útgarðaloki in *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda* (see Chapter 1) and in the figure of the *blótrisi* in *Kormáks saga* (see Chapter 3); the status of the giants as a race dispossessed by the gods in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts provided a conceptual model for

understanding the similarly dispossessed status of paganism in a Christian country, and it is not altogether certain that we are to see Bárðr's role in the death of his son Gestr, whose eyes he destroys in a dream in ch. 21 of the saga, in an entirely unsympathetic light. By the same token, the various settlements of the Viking diaspora had to be accommodated in the medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian worldview, and mythological patterns relating to the giants again provided the conceptual model for doing so, the giant ancestry ascribed to the earls of Orkney in *Orkneyinga saga* assigning to the earls a geopolitical position cognate with that of the giants elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Genealogical descent from the giants is not, however, a necessarily implicit statement of biological inferiority; even as celebrated a figure as Egill Skalla-Grímsson had giant ancestry according to his saga, and it seems that descent from the giants was sometimes associated with the kind of rugged individualism, frequently antisocial, that many of the most popular saga heroes, such as Grettir Ásmundarson, who finds temporary solace from his outlawry in a paradisaal land tended by a giant, are seen to exemplify. Interestingly, the vast majority of these explorations of alternative and decentralizing ideologies, whether geopolitical or antisocial, do not conclude with the rejection of their viability; rather, the prospect of their feasibility is subversively admitted, providing a means of critiquing the social and political norms of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia and calling for their adaptation.

Especially noteworthy in the course of this study has been the fact that there is generally no difference between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* in the kinds of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs they contain; Odinic content appears in both types of saga, as well as in the *konungasögur*, while giants and trolls perform important ideological roles across the two genres. The only exception to this rule is in the representation of magic and magical practices, for while magic is conceived of in mythological terms in the *fornaldarsögur*, with sorcerers being classified alongside other mythological beings, such as

giants, trolls, and dwarfs, in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* and the magical abilities of dwarfs in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* fitting sensibly with the traditional characteristics of dwarfs in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, the overtly mythological dimensions of magic are largely absent from the *Íslendingasögur* (see Chapter 5). There are, however, notable conceptual similarities between the presentation of mythological practitioners of magic in Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts and the depiction of sorcerers, sorceresses, and *völur* in the *Íslendingasögur*, particularly the idea that the practice of magic is a sign of ethnic otherness. There is a clear generic divergence here between authors of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* in their treatment of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs relating to magic, and we might suppose that this divergence is the result of the status of magic as an art practised by real-world practitioners; if sorcerers and *völur* were a real-world phenomenon, unlike, for example, the giant ancestors of the earls of Orkney, the authors of the *Íslendingasögur* could base their portrayals of these figures on real-world models more in-keeping with the predominantly naturalistic mode of these sagas than mythological models, particularly if the figures they portrayed were based on historical personages. True, the *Íslendingasögur* are more inclusive of non-realistic elements than earlier scholars were prepared to allow, as Clunies Ross has observed, but this does not mean that the authors of these sagas were not concerned with propriety, with presenting a relationship between the realistic and fantastic that was appropriate for the tale being told.<sup>263</sup>

If the primary finding of this study were to be succinctly formulated, it would be expressed as follows: Old Norse myth was of vital cognitive importance in constructing and negotiating social, cultural, and political ideologies from the twelfth century onwards. The material considered in the five chapters of this thesis has demonstrated time and again that

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<sup>263</sup> Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 90.

mythological patterns, characters, and motifs were not simply used for the sake of it or merely for antiquarian purposes. The referential incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas evidently accomplished important ideological work, and it is clear that in many cases their employment was playfully undertaken; indeed, the nature of allusion and obfuscation can be considered as being fundamentally ludic, testing as they do the shared cultural capital of their intended audiences and inviting them to reinterpret common knowledge in the light of its not always normative deployment. The parodic representation of an Óðinn-cult at the beginning of *Gautreks saga* (see Chapter 1), for example, works only if the audience is familiar with the traditionally aristocratic proclivities of the chief god; members of the audience must be in possession of enough information about Óðinn to have already in their minds a series of expectations about the god, his character, and his agency, which can then be subverted by a writer wishing both to satirize the superstitious behaviour of pagans and to contrast the niggardliness of peasants with the generosity of nobility. The author of *Gautreks saga*, like many other medieval Icelandic writers, is engaging with mythological expectations as much for the sheer fun of the thing as for its cognitive utility, as a form of ideological game-play fundamental in the construction of the kinds of cognitive worlds addressed by Goodman and Bruner.<sup>264</sup> Nowhere do we see this voiced more openly in Old Norse-Icelandic literature than in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, in ch. 3 of which King Haraldr Sigurðarson, noted in ch. 1 of the *þáttur* as being a good poet and a king who surrounds himself with other poets, playfully asks his chief poet Þjóðólfr, an Icelander from Svarfaðardalr, to compose a verse about a tanner and a blacksmith they see arguing while out walking.<sup>265</sup> Þjóðólfr complains that such a task is unsuitable for Haraldr's chief poet, but the king suggests it may be more difficult than he thinks and tells him to present one of the men as Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the other as Fáfnir while still identifying each man's

<sup>264</sup> Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* and Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

<sup>265</sup> *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 261-95.

trade; after composing and reciting a well-made verse, the king tells Þjóðólfr to do the same again, this time casting one of the men as Þórr and the other as the giant Geirrøðr, which he does skilfully. On one level, the king is testing his poet's technical dexterity in composing skaldic poetry, but he is also challenging Þjóðólfr's interpretative capabilities in asking him to present an everyday occurrence in an everyday world through the lens of heroic action in the legendary world and cosmic struggle in the mythological. The result, of course, is farcical, but the cognitive challenge is real, requiring the poet as it does to negotiate three conceived worlds at once and show that they are the same, but different. The referential incorporation of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs in the sagas can thus be seen to function in a very similar way to the sometimes obscure and often playful mythological references and kennings in skaldic poetry; by purposefully withholding mythological detail, employing mythological patterns, characters, and motifs removed from their usual contexts, and allusively referring to myths, perhaps even specific versions of myths, external to their own works, saga authors play with the possible relationships between the many conceived worlds of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, sometimes subverting expectation and always forcing their audiences to do the interpretative work. The hermeneutic burden lies not with the purveyors of mythological patterns, characters, and motifs, but with their recipients, and the potential for ingenuity and innovation afforded by this approach to the mythological traditions of the past demonstrates the fluidity of mythological motifs and allusions in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia and the dependence of mythological meaning on the circumstances of its incorporation.

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