Abstract: The article reassesses Margaret Clunies Ross's highly influential argument for a pseudo-procreative ideology inherent in Old Norse creation myths, which valorised male spiritual and cultural creative endeavours as superior to the ordinary processes of physiological female reproduction. The article suggests that such a paradigm both fails to appreciate the major cultural significance of physiological childbirth and imposes on Old Norse beliefs a modern, scientific evaluation of what is 'pseudo' and what is real, which distorts their perspectives on procreation and birth. An alternative understanding of pseudo-procreation is then proposed, focusing on procreative events that are considered false or unnatural within their own narrative contexts. Two examples are explored in detail: the adoption episodes in *Ála flekks saga* and *Finnboga saga* in which elderly women pretend to give birth to abandoned children whom their husbands have rescued; and the bosom serpent episodes in *Morkinskinna* and *Guðmundar saga D*, in which women are found to have ingested and incubated an *ormr* (serpent), which must then be drawn out of them, usually through the mouth.

Keywords: Old Norse, Pseudo-Procreation, Bosom Serpents, Infant Exposure, Childbirth, *Ála flekks saga*, *Finnboga saga*, *Morkinskinna*, *Guðmundar saga D*

REASSESSING PSEUDO-PROCREATION IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

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Creation as Male Pseudo-Procreation

In her highly influential 1994 work *Prolonged Echoes. Volume I: The Myths* Margaret Clunies Ross argued for a pseudo-procreative ideology within Old Norse myth which ‘asserts the superiority of male creativity on a spiritual or cultural level above mere physiological reproduction’ (186). The ideology was exemplified by the creation of the world by the sons of Borr from Ymir’s male body,[1] the creation of dwarves and of humankind from earthly matter imbued by the male gods with consciousness and life, several of Loki’s gender-fluid exploits including his impregnation by eating the heart of an evil woman in *Hyndluljóð* 41, and Heimdallr’s establishment of the hierarchies of human society in *Rígsþula* (Clunies Ross 1994, 152–86). The Old Norse world order thus rested on a foundation of male appropriation of what Clunies Ross considered to be naturally female procreative powers, but an appropriation that was made to seem positive and necessary by enabling superior and more meaningful creative endeavours on the part of its male perpetrators.

Clunies Ross’s identification of the male pseudo-procreative ideology underlying Old Norse myth was one of *Prolonged Echoes* most praised aspects. As one reviewer wrote, ‘this differentiation between two dominant metaphors constitutes one of Clunies Ross’s greatest contributions to our understanding of Old Norse myth’, setting male spiritual and cultural creativity on the one hand against female physiological creativity on the other (Tangherlini

[1] Though there are good etymological grounds for believing Ymir was originally a hermaphroditic being (see Nordvig 2020, 993) he appears in both eddic poetry and *Gylfaginning* as male and is interpreted as such in Clunies Ross’s analysis. Indeed, she explicitly notes that ‘there is no indication in the texts that he possessed any female organs of generation’ (1994, 152).

1996, 512). Barring a few isolated criticisms (e.g. McKinnell 2005, 23), her conclusions have, to a greater extent, been absorbed into our collective scholarly understanding of Old Norse myth with minimal debate. Pseudo-procreation has been established as a predominantly mythic and sometimes poetic process and frequently both since the mythic origins of poetry are themselves considered strongly pseudo-procreative: as Clunies Ross herself says, 'in generating poetry, the gods mimic female processes of pregnancy and giving birth: their spitting into a cauldron generates the wise being Kvasir while Óðinn's swallowing and regurgitating of the mead when he is transformed into an eagle makes it fruitful for the life of the mind' (2005, 93). Above all, though, pseudo-procreation has been seen as a *male* process, practised by the male Æsir and then imitated by predominantly male poets.

Indeed, the characterisation of pseudo-procreation as both mythic and male has been not just observational but integral to its functioning as a concept. Pseudo-procreation is a male phenomenon because reproduction is considered by Clunies Ross to be 'biologically the domain of females' (1994, 146). Pseudo-procreation is a mythic phenomenon because, as Andrew Lattas (1989, 466) has expressed it:

> Men cannot appropriate the dispersed plenitude of female procreation as this manifests itself in everyday life, in childbirth. This has too much of dispersed multiplicity to be appropriated in one act, its decentredness resisting a ready incorporation. Only in mythic time is there the unitary structure through which men can appropriate definitively the supreme emblematic products of female procreation in one clear-cut gesture. Only by hypostatising and condensing female procreation into an original act of supreme procreation can men steal the plenitude of that act.

Lattas's comments are not perfectly applicable to the Old Norse context since male appropriation of procreative powers is not imagined as a direct theft, as in the cultural myths of the Kaliai of Papua New Guinea to which he was referring in his analysis, but as a more subtle usurpation: a fantasy of male procreative self-sufficiency. However, his fundamental point, that only in the mythic dimension can such an appropriation take place remains persuasive, appearing to be borne out by the Old Norse material. Clunies Ross confines her argument exclusively to the mythic and legendary sphere (with the exception of later poets who are themselves appealing to this earlier material) and other scholars have followed her example. Elizabeth Rowe has discussed the erasure of mothers in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, a legendary saga which 'describes men who produce children apparently by parthenogenesis' (2004, 146). William Layher has read Starkaðr's rebirth via the respective blessings and curses of Óðinn and Þórr in *Gautreks saga*, another legendary saga, in the light of Clunies Ross's paradigm of male pseudo-procreation (2009, 21n49). Meanwhile, the semi-realistic *Íslendingasögur*, which do not seem compatible with the transparently non-realistic character, to a modern mind, of many pseudo-procreative events, contain for the most part fairly matter of fact descriptions of birth, such as that found in *Vatnsdœla saga*, discussed briefly below.

However, it should be noted that pseudo-procreation and male appropriation of female reproductive and sexual power are not synonymous, though they have sometime been presented as such. A major issue with our current understanding of pseudo-procreation is its presentation as a gendered phenomenon, rooted largely in myth, when, I will suggest, it ought to be reconceived as a diverse phenomenon that is neither purely mythic nor purely male. This article therefore has two aims: first to contest Clunies Ross's articulation of male pseudo-procreation as the dominant ideology of Old Norse creation myth by interrogating the assumptions inherent in the term pseudo-procreation as it was originally conceived by anthropologists and imported by Clunies Ross into her analysis. Having problematised the

current use of the term, the second aim is to demonstrate how the term might be differently applied to certain Old Norse texts in such a way as to avoid some of the present issues with its use. In doing so, the article ranges widely across Old Norse literature, embracing texts of varying dates and genres. It is not my intention to suggest that these texts represent a uniform understanding of pseudo-procreation, but it is at present beyond the scope of this article to ascertain exactly how depictions of pseudo-procreation might be inflected by a text's period and genre. My objective in this paper is merely to suggest that our current understanding of pseudo-procreation entails some troubling assumptions about Old Norse childbirth and to propose a redefinition of the term, illustrated by two examples from Old Norse literature as a means of demonstrating the term's continued analytical value in its reconceived form.

The Problems with Pseudo-Procreation

Clunies Ross's paradigm of male pseudo-procreation is firmly rooted in structural functionalism, relying on a number of clear-cut binaries: nature and culture, woman and man, body and mind. Femininity is associated with the natural world, with the body and its processes, with raw or wild matter and particularly with the giants. By contrast, masculinity is everything civilised, it is culture and society, the mind and its processes, and transformed substance, and it is associated by Clunies Ross with the Æsir in particular.

There is no doubt that there are interesting, gendered aspects to Old Norse cosmogony and the procreative endeavours it entailed. As a recent example, Adèle Kreager and Judy Quinn (both forthcoming) have drawn comparisons between Jǫrð, the female manifestation of the earth, and Ymir, who must become the earth by a process of brutal transformation, revealing mythic patterns of male self-sacrifice and female somatic intactness.

However, there are two major problems with this kind of binary thinking. First, the dichotomy between male and female procreative acts rests on the assumption that 'mere

physiological reproduction', which for Clunies Ross is coded exclusively female, is not culturally or spiritually meaningful (Clunies Ross 1994, 186), an accusation which decades of anthropological scholarship on birth and kinship would strenuously refute (Hennessey 2019; Sahlins 2013; Godelier 2011; Davis-Floyd 2003; Jordan 1993; Kay 1982).[2] Birth is not and never has been a purely biological process. It is a locus for all kinds of meaning, most especially the spiritual and the cultural. The idea that birth can exist outside of culture as a kind of precultural, presocial and purely physiological event is manifestly false. On the contrary, birth is deeply embedded in existing socio-cultural structures and assists in the production and maintenance of a society's values and ideas, as has been affirmed by the work of numerous scholars who have addressed the subject of childbirth in the medieval and early modern periods (Gislon Dopfel, Foscati and Burnett 2019; Wilson 2013; Musacchio 1999; Cressy 1997; Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990).

Old Norse literature likewise attests to the cultural and spiritual significance of ordinary, physiological childbirth. When in *Vatnsdœla saga* (1939, ch. 15, 41) Vigdís lies down and gives birth to her daughter Þórdís by the Vatnsdalsá, the Vatnsdalr river, it is not an act of mere female reproduction but a symbolically charged moment of settlement which marks her husband Ingimundr's arrival in the valley where he is fated to settle. Indeed, Þórdís birth is directly followed by the discovery of the lost amulet which was prophesied to mark the spot where Ingimundr would set up his high-seat pillars. That this juxtaposition is not mere coincidence is supported by the amulet's 'fertility associations' which can be inferred from its dedication to Freyr, revealing a thematic link between the amulet's discovery and the birth which preceded it (Waugh 2011, 333). The amulet's recovery from within the earth could even be seen as a parallel for birth while the erection of the high-seat pillar by inserting the pole into

[2] For a more comprehensive though somewhat dated overview of anthropological scholarship on birth see Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997.

the hole dug in the ground could be argued to mimic the sexual act.[3] The birth of an individual family member is thus emblematic of the entire family's new beginning in Iceland, emphasised by the inscription of the birth into the surrounding landscape as Ingimundr names the spot Þórdísarholt in commemoration. The family's claim to the valley is being written into the very land itself through the medium of childbirth.

In *Óláfs saga helga* (1945, ch. 138, 244–45) we are afforded a glimpse of the dangerous childbirth ordeal of Ragnhildr, wife of Þorbergr Árnason. Though presented as a narrative flashback, the scene is far from tangential to the drama at hand, that is the Icelander Steinn Skaptason's escape from King Óláfr of Norway. The birth scene functions not only as an explanation for why Ragnhildr should help Steinn, out of gratitude for the assistance he rendered at the difficult birth of her daughter Þóra, but also as social and political commentary on Steinn's current situation. His outlawry for the crime of killing King Óláfr's steward is implicitly likened to the liminal predicament of the struggling mother and unborn child, while Steinn's own authoritative characterisation during the birthing episode, in which even the priest Bárðr, the representative of spiritual authority, openly defers to him, becomes a means of subverting royal authority in the wider escape narrative. Óláfr's impotence when it comes to enforcing Steinn's punishment contrasts with Steinn's empowered ability to deal life to his allies and death to his enemies.

These are intended only as sketches, much more detailed analyses could, of course, be made but hopefully they are sufficient to illustrate that such scenes are far from devoid of cultural or spiritual meaning. Instead, these scenes of childbirth, like their counterparts in Old Norse legendary literature, form 'important narrative nexuses where systems of gender, power and kinship all meet and coincide' (Olley 2018, 59). Looked at from this perspective, the

[3] I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for this insight.

‘pseudo-procreative’ birth narratives of the Norse creation myths are not substantially different in their production of cultural, political, and spiritual meaning from any biologically normative act of childbirth. Rather than saying that such ‘pseudo-procreative’ acts demonstrate male superiority in spiritual and cultural creativity it would be more accurate to suggest that by such acts male actors may partake in the spiritual and cultural creativity inherent in the act of procreation, both physiological and otherwise.

The second and perhaps even more fundamental criticism of pseudo-procreation is that it adheres to a modern scientific understanding of what constitutes real as opposed to pseudo birth and is therefore highly anachronistic to the myths under discussion. The term is rooted in a fundamentally modern, Western understanding of how procreation works which considers biological and genetic conception as presocial, scientific ‘facts’, upon which social constructs may then be layered, a perspective which has seeped into literary and anthropological analysis. Pseudo-procreation arises as a term by which to describe the procreative beliefs of those who have, to use Tim Ingold’s phrase ‘“got it wrong”, since their ideas flatly contradict the logic by which they are apprehended by Western anthropological science as constituting a contrasting, “non-Western” worldview’ (1991, 365). Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin has argued that pseudo-procreation is itself a fallacy. The *a priori* distinction between procreation and pseudo-procreation is, she suggests, ‘the result of adopting scientific criteria as a standard for defining what real and what pseudo-procreation *are* (along with the generation of life and kinship) rather than what they *mean*’ (Hauser-Schäublin 1989, 179 [emphasis in original]). She identifies the distinction as ‘part of the legacy of European philosophy which operated for centuries with the model of a dichotomy between nature and culture’, a dichotomy upon which Clunies Ross’s analysis heavily relies (Hauser-Schäublin 1989, 180). But, as has just been demonstrated, the *meaning* inherent in pseudo-procreation and in ‘normal’ procreation is highly similar in Old Norse literature, it is the process which is different.

This is not to say that every birth narrative, so-called 'pseudo' and real, has the same meaning but that they all have meaning of the same kind: social, cultural, and political and that this meaning is, in all cases, real, regardless of the plausibility of the circumstances under which it was produced. To a modern audience the scientific implausibility in the Old Norse mythic creation accounts is certainly apparent, but is it really more pronounced in these narratives than in other accounts of childbirth found elsewhere in Old Norse literature? Biological plausibility is stretched in many birth narratives: Bera's delivery of three animalistic children in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (1954, ch. 27, I 51), the nineteen-day labour of an elf-woman in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (1954, ch. 15, III 200), the triplets of different hair and skin colours in *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* (1927, ch. 6, 132), or the vanishing babies of some Icelandic miracle stories (Cormack 2008, 335). Yet these have not, that I'm aware, ever been labelled pseudo-procreative.

What then is the justification for categorising the creation of the world from Ymir's flesh or the creation of humankind as pseudo-procreation? It cannot be the focus on systemic rather than personal procreative endeavours (creating the world, beginning entire races of beings) because Loki gives birth multiple times, as a mare and as a man, to physical offspring (Sleipnir and the race of ogresses) and these narratives are labelled pseudo-procreative by Clunies Ross, as is Rerir's fertilisation by an apple in *Völsunga saga*, resulting in the birth of Völsungr himself (1994, 183–84). Nor, as we have seen, does it appear to be solely a consequence of the events' fantastical nature, since there are many fantastical births in the sagas which do not attract this label.

We return then to the profoundly gendered nature of Clunies Ross's paradigm. She opens her chapter with the following pronouncement: 'at various periods of European history, the processes of reproduction *which are biologically the domain of females* are assumed, either literally or metaphorically by males' (1994, 146 [emphasis mine]). The thesis of male pseudo-

procreation rests on the uncritical assumption that reproduction (not just birth but all reproduction) is a female business. She goes on: ‘the organising metaphors of many human cultures restrict, downplay or even deny the importance of the female’s role in procreation while allowing males to appropriate what are *in effect female capacities*’ (1994, 146 [emphasis mine]). She rests this assumption on the physiological undeniability of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation when compared to conception and fertilisation, even as she admits that ‘most societies have accepted the existence of physiological paternity on the basis of circumstantial evidence such as parent-child resemblance’ (1994, 147).

I believe it is the maleness of the actors in these creation dramas which has most heavily influenced their categorisation as ‘pseudo-procreative’, based on the reasoning that, because ‘real’ birth is a female experience, male births must be fallacious in some way. Hence the label male pseudo-procreation, rather than simply male procreation. However, not only is the biological plausibility of birth narratives irrelevant if we follow Hauser-Schäublin in attending to the meaning that is produced rather than to the event itself, but there is no evidence that childbirth in Old Norse society was a purely female domain. On the contrary, there is ample literary evidence to suggest that men as well as women played a crucial role in Old Norse childbirth, Steinn’s assistance at Ragnhildr’s birth in *Óláfs saga helga* being just one example of many.[4] ‘Male birth helpers are no rarity in Old Norse texts’, as Verena Höfig has likewise recognised (2019, 143). While literary accounts are obviously not evidence for actual historical practices, the frequency with which men appear in childbirth scenes in Old Norse literature

[4] Male birth attendants also appear in *Ectors saga*, *Óláfs þáttr Geirstaðaálfs* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* while Sigurðr is taught runes for childbirth by Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál* and Sigvatr skáld superintends the birth and baptism of Magnús Óláfsson in *Heimskringla*. For a detailed discussion of the roles played by men in three scenes of childbirth from *Völsunga saga*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Oddrúnargrátr* see Olley 2018.

should at least make us think twice before we assume that childbirth in Old Norse society was a definitively closed female enclave.

Some critics would undoubtedly argue that such male interventions are themselves attempts by (presumably male) medieval authors or scribes to usurp or to appropriate the female sphere of childbirth, but such arguments suffer from the same adoption of modern 'scientific criteria' criticised by Hauser-Schäublin. The 'fact', assumed by such critics, that childbirth is a naturally female domain is itself merely part of our own society's epistemological construction of birth, based on our culture's privileging of the biological and the empirical, and therefore the female experience of birth, as more inherently 'real' or 'true' than other forms of knowledge and experience, an assumption which we should be wary of importing into our analysis of Old Norse culture.

Old Norse masculinities have come under increasing academic scrutiny in recent years.[5] As part of this much needed reappraisal, it has been suggested that we take instances of male procreative activity seriously, asking 'how different audiences would react to accounts of male pregnancy or breast-feeding, and whether that would be as literal or metaphorical representations of male nurturance' (Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 340). What would we see if we looked at male procreative endeavours on their own terms and not as necessarily female appropriations? Even if we allow our own epistemology to prevail and interpret the prevalence of men in Old Norse childbirth narratives as appropriative, this is in itself revealing. Childbirth in Old Norse society emerges as simply too important to have been allowed to remain in the hands of women, demonstrating the immense stake Old Norse culture had in childbirth and its political, social and spiritual ramifications.

[5] For a full summary of scholarship on this topic see Evans and Hancock 2020.

In summary, then, the concept of male pseudo-procreation arises from a modern, anachronistic definition of what constitutes 'real' childbirth which, taken together with a limited understanding of how birth was actually depicted in Old Norse literature and understood in Old Norse society, results in a paradigm which makes an arbitrary distinction between procreative acts with the same kind of meaning, based solely on the sex of their performer. When used in such a fashion, the label pseudo-procreation actually tells us more about our own cultural conceptions of childbirth than it does about the world of Old Norse myth or the society that found such myths meaningful.

Reassessing Pseudo-Procreation

What is pseudo-procreation then, or ought we to abandon the term altogether? I contend that the term may still hold analytical value when used to describe acts of apparent procreation which are subsequently revealed to be 'pseudo' or false in some way *according to the judgement of the audience within the text*. The remainder of this article is devoted to analysing two different sets of episodes which I think can, by this justification, be called pseudo-procreative, based not upon the identity of the performer but on the events' reception within their narrative contexts.[6] The episodes are as follows:

1. The adoption episodes in *Ála flekks saga* and *Finnboga saga* in which elderly women pretend to give birth to abandoned children whom their husbands have rescued.

[6] In the analysis that follows, translations are my own except where I have followed those provided in *Ála flekks saga* 2018, to which I was a contributor, and *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* 1999.

2. The bosom serpent[7] episodes in *Morkinskinna* (GKS 1009 fol., c. 1275)[8] and *Guðmundar saga D* in which women are discovered to have incubated an *ormr* inside themselves which must then be drawn out of them, usually through the mouth.

At first glance these two sets of episodes may appear strange bedfellows for analysis, one being about the ramifications of child exposure and the other a kind of medical curiosity. *Ála flekks saga* and *Finnboga saga* are both late medieval sagas, traditionally grouped among the *riddarasögur* and the *Íslendingasögur* respectively, although both demonstrate a tendency toward generic hybridity.[9] *Morkinskinna* and *Guðmundar saga D*, meanwhile, represent a thirteenth-century collection of kings' sagas on the one hand and a mid-fourteenth-century bishop's saga on the other.[10] Yet in spite of these differences of dating and genre there are some

[7] The term bosom serpent is drawn from folklore scholarship and my use of it here is indebted to Davide Ermacora, Roberto Labanti and Andrea Marcon (2016). For general discussions of the motif see Bennett 2005, 12–47; Bondeson 1998; and Cattermole-Tally 1995.

[8] The same episode can also be found with minor variations in *Hulda* (AM 66 fol., 1350–1374) and in *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol., 1387–1394). However, since there is not the space for a fully comparative discussion, I confine myself here to an analysis of the *Morkinskinna* version only. For a brief overview of the relationship between the manuscripts see Anderson and Gade 2000, 5–8. Manuscript datings for *Hulda* and *Flateyjarbók* are from handrit.is [accessed 15 April 2021].

[9] The earliest manuscript witness for *Ála flekks saga* is AM 589 e 4to from the second half of the fifteenth century (see *Ála flekks saga* 2018, 13). *Finnboga saga* was probably composed in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, with the earliest extant version surviving in *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol., c. 1330–1370) (see Margrét Eggertsdóttir 1993, 194). Manuscript dating for *Möðruvallabók* is from handrit.is [accessed 10 May 2022].

[10] The earliest manuscript witness for *Guðmundar saga D* is Stock. Perg. fol. no. 5 (c. 1350–1360) (see Skórzewska 2011, 26–27).

compelling thematic preoccupations which unite them: both sets of episodes can be interpreted as addressing the issue of pseudo-procreation, albeit from opposing perspectives.

The adoption episodes ponder the problem of a baby without the proper social context, the appearance of a child without the prior pregnancy and birth. Of course, as the saga audience, we may know the circumstances which led to the child's abandonment but to the adoptive couple within the narrative the child appears without explanation, prompting them to attempt to compensate for its lack of social identity. The bosom serpent episodes explore the opposite problem, arising when there is all the appearance of pregnancy and even an horrific birthing ordeal but no baby at the end of it. Thus, one type of episode has the expected outcome of a birth and the other all the symptoms of it, but both are incomplete, lacking some vital aspect of the birthing process which necessitates their 'pseudo' status. Moreover, the falseness of their procreative imitations is perceived within the texts themselves and is therefore evidently a contemporary, rather than a modern, analytical perception. The label pseudo-procreation can therefore be applied with greater justification.

While uncommon in the literary corpus as a whole, the persistence of both the adoption and the bosom serpent motifs across witnesses considerably removed from one another in date is striking, as is the diversity of genres in which these pseudo-procreative episodes appear. While I am certainly not suggesting that the authors of these various texts were consciously addressing the issue of pseudo-procreation, in the sense defined at the beginning of this section, it does seem to me that the advantages of retaining the term (in its reformulated sense) are demonstrated by its ability to cut across the traditional generic and chronological boundaries of Old Norse literary analysis and indicate surprising commonalities. By bringing texts from different periods and genres into dialogue it allows for otherwise hidden parallels to come to light, as the subsequent analysis will seek to demonstrate.

Adoption Rituals in Ála flekks saga and Finnboga saga

Ála flekks saga opens by introducing Ríkarðr, the king of all England and his wife Sólbjǫrt. This royal couple is notable in two ways: first, the king is blessed with foresight, and second, they are childless, to their *mikit mein* 'great sorrow' (*Ála flekks saga* 2018, ch. 1, 18–19). Just as Ríkarðr is on the point of leaving for a three-year expedition abroad, Sólbjǫrt announces a surprise pregnancy. Rather than this being an occasion for joy however, her husband commands her that, if she gives birth to a boy, he must be exposed (*þá skal þat út bera*, *Ála flekks saga* 2018, ch. 1, 18), upon pain of death to anyone who refuses to do so. If the child is a girl, however, then she is to be brought up.

Ríkarðr explains his reasoning with reference to his foresight, which has revealed to him that if the boy lives *hann muni eiga æfi bæði harða ok langa* 'he will lead a life both hard and long' (*Ála flekks saga* 2018, ch. 1, 18–19). Though the queen is unhappy about his decision, when she gives birth to a boy, she has two slaves take him out into a forest where they leave him under a tree. They tell the queen, and the king when he returns, that they killed the boy. Unbeknownst to them, of course, the lowly old man Gunni has found the child after hearing him crying (*Ála flekks saga* 2018, ch. 2, 18–19):

> tekr upp ok berr heim til kerlingar sinnar, ok sýnir henni ok segir, hvar hann hefði fundit, ok biðr hana leggjaz á golf. Hon gerir svá, ok lætr sem hon fœði svein þenna. Þau karl ok kerling unnu mikit sveininum, ok óx hann þar upp. En hvert þat nafn, sem þau gáfu honum at kveldi, mundu þau aldri at morni.

> He picks him up and carries him home to his wife, shows him to her and tells her where he had found him, and asks her to lie down on the floor. She does so, and acts as if she is giving birth to the boy. The old man and woman loved the boy

> greatly, and he grew up there. But whatever the name they gave him in the evening, they never remembered it in the morning.

The physical re-enactment of birth which follows Áli's rescue functions as an adoption ritual which enables Gunni and his wife Hildr 'to claim Áli as their own' (Hui et al. 2018, 56). Rather than simply taking the child, by re-enacting labour, Hildr restarts the birthing process in an effort to bring it to a more successful conclusion. This second birth is an attempt to undo the rejection of the first.

The pre-Conversion custom of infant abandonment, as depicted in later Old Norse sources, threatened not just physical death but also complete social erasure, in the form of namelessness, rejection and isolation. Social recognition and societal acceptance protected against abandonment and once a child had been ritually recognised by its father, sprinkled with water and given a name, or alternatively been placed at its mother's breast, its exposure constituted an illegal killing (Lawing 2013, 137; Schjødt 2008, 329; Clover 1988, 154; Pentikäinen 1968, 74–75). The liminal predicament of the abandoned infant, stranded somewhere between life and death, parallels that of the unborn child and rebirth therefore represents a logical means of reincorporating the child into the society from which it was cast out (Hui et al. 2018, 56–57). Since mother and father must be the ones to accept the child, Gunni and Hildr's drama casts themselves in these parental roles in order to legitimise their acceptance and naming of the child. However, the fact that no name seems able to stick to Áli problematises the success of their efforts at social reincorporation (Hui et al. 2018, 57).

A close parallel can be found in *Finnboga saga*. The reasons behind Finnbogi's exposure are quite different to those behind Áli's. Instead of a prophecy, Finnbogi's abandonment is motivated by revenge. Much like Ríkarðr, Finnbogi's father Ásbjörn commands the child be exposed when he is on the point of departure, this time for a trip to the Thing. His wife,

Þorgerðr, remonstrates with him, arguing that he should not do this *svá vitr ok ríkr sem þú ert, því at þetta væri it óheyriligsta bragð, þó at fátækr maðr gerði, en nú allra helzt, er yðr skortir ekki góz* 'as wise and rich as you are, because that would be the most wicked scheme, though a poor man might do it, but especially now, when you are not lacking in property' (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 2, 254).

Ásbjörn responds with a detailed account of his reasoning: *Þat var mér þá í hug, er þú fekkt í hendr Skíða austmanni Þórnýju, dóttur okkra, utan mína vitand, at ek skyldi eigi fleiri börn upp ala til þess, at þú gæfir í brott fyrir utan minn vilja* 'That was in my mind, when you gave our daughter Þórný into the hands of Skíði the "eastman" without my knowledge, that I should not raise any more children if you are going to give them away in marriage against my wishes' (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 2, 254–55).

When he is born the child is abandoned according to Ásbjörn's command, and found by a peasant called Gestr, the henpecked husband of Þorgerðr's foster-mother Syrpa. Finnbogi's identity is less of a mystery than Áli's, since as soon as Syrpa is shown the baby the saga narrator comments that *er hon sá, þóttist hon vita, hver hans ætt var* 'when she saw him, she thought she knew who his family were' (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 3, 256). Given Syrpa's expressly stated love for Þorgerðr, it is perhaps not surprising that in this instance it is Syrpa, where before it was Gunni, who initiates the re-enactment of labour. She asks her husband to carry their skin-cloak further into the room, announcing: *skal ek leggjast niðr ok láta sem vit eigim barn þetta'* 'I shall lay myself down and act as if we two are having this child' (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 3, 256).

Syrpa's sudden fertility elicits a sceptical and surprised reaction, already casting doubt on the legitimacy of the couple's procreation in the eyes of the surrounding community. Þorgerðr, when she hears that her foster-mother has had a child, *undraði þetta mjök ok hugði, at fóstra hennar mundi svá gömul, at hon mundi eigi barn mega eiga* 'wondered greatly at this

and thought that her foster-mother was too old to be able to have a child', although she does not say anything about her suspicions (*hefir um þetta fátt orða*, *Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 4, 257). In response to her foster-mother's request for food and bedclothes after the birth she sends things which are far too fine for the lowly Syrpa, who prefers to use rags, which will presumably excite less comment. Þorgerðr's rich gifts could well be seen as indicative of her suspicions that the child is really her own. The community at large has a similarly shocked reaction: *þótti þeim mönnum þat ólíkendi, er vissu aldr hennar* 'people thought it very unlikely when they knew her age' (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 4, 257). The word *ólíkendi* not only conveys the sense of improbability but can even connote a deception or dissimulation, indicating the high level of suspicion which surrounds the birth.

Much like Áli, the child is not named until some time after his rebirth, and even then, is only given the nickname *Urðarköttr* 'Wildcat', as Áli is given the nickname *flekkr* 'fleck'. Just as Syrpa initiates his rebirth, it is also she and not her husband who determines that this name will be *makligt* 'fitting', since he was found in an *urð*, an *urð* being a pile of stones (*Finnboga saga* 1959, ch. 4, 257). It is not until Urðarköttr is over twelve years old that he inherits the name Finnbogi from a dying man, along with all his possessions.

Just as with Áli, Finnbogi's initial lack of a 'human' name problematises the success of his social reincorporation. The name Urðarköttr is not only patently animalistic, but Syrpa explicitly links her choosing of it to the circumstances in which he was found, abandoned, as a child. Such a name recognises that he and his foster parents have not been able to move past the legacy of this early rejection but continue to allow it to define him, in spite of their efforts to re-enact the birthing process. Robin Waugh has proposed that in the experience of exposure elements of the landscape where the child was abandoned 'somehow make their ways into the interior of exposed children, who then retain this eco-internalization, this "animal-becoming," as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would describe it' (2017, 237, citing Deleuze and Guattari

1987, 246). Reading the episode through Waugh would suggest that social reincorporation is made more difficult by the child's now deeply embedded association with nature, the same kind of association exhibited by terminology for outlaws like *skógarmaðr* 'forest-man' or *urðarmaðr* 'scree-man' and which arises as a consequence of alienation from human society. Áli arguably displays an even more extreme kind of 'animal-becoming' than Finnbogi, actually being transformed into a werewolf at one point in the saga.

Rather than further reinforce the problematic binary between nature and culture, however, Áli's and Finnbogi's animalistic associations might be better understood as symptoms of underdevelopment rather than as the result of a newly-gained affinity with the natural world. Aristotelian theory prevalent in the Middle Ages held that a foetus moved from a vegetative to an animalistic existence before finally attaining complete human rationality (Dunstan 1988, 43). If, as Juha Pentikäinen (1968, 74), Carol Clover (1988, 154) Sean Lawing (2013, 136–37) and Jens Peter Schjødt (2008, 329) have all suggested, social and legal status was attained in part by naming, then neither re-enactment of birth completely restores the child to full personhood, allowing them to graduate from an animalistic to a human existence. Neither Áli nor Finnbogi are in possession of a fully functional (that is social and legal as well as physical) human identity in spite of their adoptive parents' best efforts. In fact, for both Áli and Finnbogi, their experiences of abandonment and rebirth lay the foundations for long-term issues with recognition and identity.

This is particularly explicit in *Ála flekks saga* (Hui et al. 2018, 57). Like Finnbogi, Áli takes on multiple names at different points in the narrative. He finally acquires the name Áli flekkr at eight years old, with no explanation for why this name proves more memorable than those that went before it. Later he introduces himself at the court of a maiden king under the guise of Stuttheðinn, a name meaning 'Short-Pelt' or 'Short-Cloak'. This both foreshadows the werewolf transformation which is yet to follow in the saga (Hui et al. 2018, 59) and constitutes

further evidence of his changing identity, but his concealment of his royal identity in the maiden-king episode also inverts Ríkarðr's initial refusal to recognize his son. In masquerading as Stuttheðinn, Áli wins his wife, the maiden-king, on his own terms and goes on to conceal the marriage from his father for several chapters. Áli's identity is then further destabilized by his wolfish transformation later in the saga. His second birth to Hildr and Gunni can thus be viewed not only as a re-enactment of his original birth but also as a prefiguring of a third birth, when he emerges from the wolf-skin 'rather like a child released from the womb' and subsequently reclaims his standing as the king's son for the third time in the narrative (Hui et al. 2018, 59). The parallel is particularly striking given Hildr's repeat involvement. She saves Áli from being killed whilst in wolf form, believing that she recognises his eyes and asking for quarter on the wolf's behalf. She then takes the wolf home and it is in her house, where she enacted Áli's second birth, that his third birth also occurs as he is freed from the wolf skin.

Similarly in *Finnboga saga*, Rebecca Merkelbach has drawn attention to the way in which 'episodes of belonging and alienation alternate' (2020, 122). Belongingness, which Merkelbach establishes is intimately bound up with a sense of identity, 'is challenged at several points which are then used to explore wider issues of social — and even ontological — status' (2020, 122). She identifies the abandonment and rescue of Finnbogi as a nameless child as the first of these episodes and is likewise struck by the ambiguous success of his foster-family's adoption, pointing to the continual reminders of Urðarköttr's unusual beauty which reveal his upper class origins and to his name which 'serves as an equally constant reminder of his uncertain ontological status' (Merkelbach 2020, 123). Urðarköttr is eventually reunited with his biological family but the success of this reincorporation is also debateable (Merkelbach 2020, 123) and it is not until the boy inherits the name Finnbogi, in a third birth comparable to Áli's release from the wolf skin, that he finally takes on a fully functional social identity. Yet even after this, there remains what Merkelbach calls an 'ambiguous ontological dimension' to

his character, expressed by his affinity with the paranormal, which she suggests is only laid to rest by his Christian burial (2020, 127).

Both the reaction of the community in *Finnboga saga* and the difficulties in establishing a firm identity experienced by both Áli and Finnbogi problematise the success of their pseudo-procreative births.[11] The inference of this failure to re-incorporate Áli and Finnbogi adequately into society is that there is something inherently false or artificial about the procreative ritual they underwent as infants since it did not successfully replicate the outcome of a 'normal' birth. In both sagas, this failure stimulates the further production of birth narratives, each one trying to overwrite and thereby address the gaps in the last, so that Áli's ritual rebirth is followed by his recognition and reincorporation into his birth family, followed by the revelation of his royal identity after his marriage, followed by his release from the werewolf transformation and third restoration to his royal status, and Finnbogi's ritual rebirth is followed by an ambivalent reunion with his birth family, which is later followed by his receipt of the name Finnbogi from a dying man.

Both by the reaction of the community to these 'miraculous' births and by their effects in the narrative upon Áli and Finnbogi the 'pseudo' nature of these births is clearly marked, something which cannot be said of the highly successful creations produced by the Æsir in Old

[11] Compare the more successful adoption episode in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar.* When the infant Tristram needs to be secretly adopted, attention is focused not on any pseudo-birthing ritual, although his supposed mother does *leggjaz í hvílu* 'take to her bed', but upon the churching that follows, which provides the opportunity for the steward's sister to *lét hvervitna boða, at hún hefði þetta barn fætt á þeim tíma* 'let everyone know that it was she who had given birth to this child at that time' (*Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* 1999, ch. 16, 48–49). Significantly, Tristram has already been named and baptised at this point and so there is no need for any attempt to re-establish his identity by re-enacting the birth. The Continental origins of this tale have likely also influenced the saga's very different treatment of infant adoption.

Norse myth.[12] To use the term pseudo-procreation with regard to these two episodes does not then impose a modern perception of artificiality onto these curious and unusual events but instead enables a deeper understanding of the causes behind the instability of identity experienced by both Áli and Finnbogi. Similarly, in the next example, the term pseudo-procreation opens up new analytical perspectives on the bosom serpent motif in Old Norse literature.

Bosom Serpents in Morkinskinna and Guðmundar saga D

The bosom serpent episodes of *Morkinskinna* and *Guðmundar saga D* all concern women who are afflicted with sharp stomach pains. One of the women is afflicted only for a few days before being healed but the other two begin to swell up, growing larger the longer they suffer. In all three cases the cause of their distress is found to be an *ormr* 'serpent', unwittingly ingested while drinking water, the growth of which inside them has been the cause of their swelling and their pain.[13]

[12] The frame narrative of *Gylfaginning*, which ends by revealing the illusory nature of everything the Æsir have shown and told Gylfi, might be worth further analysis in this regard but even this is presented as external to the myths themselves rather than representing a judgement of their artificiality from within the internal logic of the Norse cosmological order.

[13] The exact meaning behind *ormr* in these contexts is debateable. *Guðmundar saga D* consistently uses the term *vatnormr*, literally 'water serpent', a word Joanna Skórzewska calls 'rather problematic' and which she takes to mean 'some type of insect living in still water' (2011, 196n139). While the first *vatnormr* is small enough to fit in the palm of Bishop Guðmundr's hand, the second, which incubates for three years, is large enough to choke Ýngvildr Magnúsdóttir which might imply something more substantial than an insect and the subsequent poetry refers to it straightforwardly as a *linnr* 'serpent' (*Guðmundar saga D* 1878, ch. 83, 174). In *Morkinskinna* (2011, ch. 43, I 233–34) the creature is called *yrmlingr* 'wormling, little snake' and *ormr* 'serpent' but is described as having a *trjóna* 'snout' which indicates an ophidian rather than a worm (Ermacora, Labanti and Marcon, 2016, 292).

In *Morkinskinna* the cure is effected by King Haraldr Sigurðsson who visits the young woman, his mistress Ingibjǫrg, to diagnose her and to recommend a course of treatment, before disappearing to be with his queen, who is herself pregnant. According to his instruction, Ingibjǫrg is to be rendered as thirsty as possible in order to coax the creature out by its desperation for water.[14] She is to lie down beneath an obstructed waterfall where only a few tantalising drips can enter her open mouth and when the *ormr* emerges from that orifice, lured by the prospect of a drink, its upper half is to be chopped off by her father. Haraldr's prescription is successful but at the cost of great further suffering to Ingibjǫrg, who shuns Haraldr because of it. After taking a while to recover fully from her ordeal she ends her days in a nunnery after Haraldr refuses an eligible marriage offer for her.

In *Guðmundar saga D*, which presents two bosom serpent episodes back to back, the remedy is instead provided by Bishop Guðmundr whose posthumous apparition is able to heal both women. The first episode involves an unnamed woman from the West Fjörds who, after drinking tainted water, calls on the name of Bishop Guðmundr for aid in her suffering. Though a night spent vomiting seems to lessen the pain in her stomach she is still afflicted with a pain in her breast when a vision of Bishop Guðmundr appears to her, rebuking her for forgetting to cross herself before taking a drink. He then opens his palm to show her the *vatnormr* she ingested before healing her with a touch at the pain's epicentre. In the wake of her ordeal the woman undertakes a pilgrimage to Hólar, as she had promised to do, and gives up her formerly frivolous and heedless ways.

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[14] Thirst seems to be characteristic of serpents in Old Norse texts. In Chapter 42 of *Morkinskinna* the thirst of a serpent is exploited in a different way to help King Haraldr and his men find water, an episode compared with that of the bosom serpent by Rohrbach (2009, 139–40). Thirst is also Fáfnir's downfall as he is attacked by Sigurðr while on his way to get water. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for this insight.

The second episode involves Ýngvildr Magnúsdóttir, also from the West Fjörds, who likewise drinks tainted water from a spring, only belatedly noticing a *vatnormr* on the rim of the water pail. Her ordeal lasts much longer and her pains are described in some detail along with her ever expanding girth. Though fasting causes the pain to worsen she finds drinking a relief, the creature's evident thirst echoing King Haraldr's remedy in *Morkinskinna*. After three years, Ýngvildr has become weak and bedridden and is attended by a priest who calls on God to heal her, with the support of the Virgin and Bishop Guðmundr. He then sprinkles the bishop's bone water[15] over her lips and, when it runs down her throat, she feels something pressing forward there and starts vomiting blood. The priest then pulls the *vatnormr* out of her mouth while Ýngvildr (mercifully) loses consciousness. She is revived by a further sprinkling but takes over a year to recover fully from her malady.

While the adoption episodes in *Finnboga saga* and *Ála flekks saga* are clearly concerned with childbirth (even if the efforts made to mimic its effects largely fail in their intent) the connection between childbirth and the bosom serpent episodes is less explicit. It might well be asked why these stories should be interpreted as pseudo-birth narratives at all. Haraldr's healing of his mistress in *Morkinskinna* can be interpreted as part of his characterisation as a wise and learned king with the attendant royal healing abilities, while the healing of two women with *vatnormar* in *Guðmundar saga D* might be considered just formulaic medical miracle stories designed to demonstrate the power and sanctity of Bishop Guðmundr Arason.

However, there are a number of reasons to read the episodes as symbolically related to childbirth. In the first instance, the parallel between the incubation of the bosom serpent and pregnancy is made explicit in the texts. In *Morkinskinna* Ingibjǫrg's symptoms of a swollen

[15] Water in which the bishop's bones had been washed.

belly, fever, and thirst, are initially believed to be the inevitable result of the king's attentions: *Þat hyggja sumir menn at hennar vanheilsa muni vera af vǫldum konungs* 'some people thought that the king was the cause of her illness' (*Morkinskinna* 2011, ch. 43, I 232). The ambiguity of the language further reinforces this assumption. Ingibjǫrg's condition is consistently referred to as a *vanheilsa* throughout the passage. While the word literally means illness, it is a frequent euphemism for pregnancy in Old Norse texts. The parallel is taken even further by the news of the Queen's pregnancy (*Hon er sjúk ok skyldi fæða barn*, *Morkinskinna* 2011, ch. 43, I 232) which naturally contrasts with Ingibjǫrg's own situation. On the one hand is Haraldr's lawful wife, enjoying what we can assume to be a normal pregnancy and attended by her husband who declares himself duty-bound to stay by her side: *ek verð heim at koma á fund dróttningar* 'I must go home to see the queen' (*Morkinskinna* 2011, ch. 43, I 232). On the other is Haraldr's illicit mistress, suffering from an horrific bestial gestation and abandoned by her lover on the grounds that: *Nú skiptir engu um vist mína hér* 'my staying here makes no difference now' (*Morkinskinna* 2011, ch. 43, I 233). The presence of childbirth as a narrative subtext to Ingibjǫrg's ordeal is undeniable.

While there is less confusion in *Guðmundar saga D*, where the afflictions of the anonymous woman from the West Fjörds and of Ýngvildr Magnúsdóttir are attributed from the first to *vatnormar*, in her swollen condition Ýngvildr is likened to a woman pregnant with twins: *hún hafði digrleika til þótt hún gengi með tveimr börnum* 'she was as large as if she were carrying two babies' and is said to become stouter *á þann hátt sem höfn vex með konu* 'in the way a pregnancy grows in a woman' (*Guðmundar saga D* 1878, ch. 83, 173). To further cement the analogy, the *ormr* is later referred to as that *er með henni fæðzt hafði* 'which had been nourished in her' (*Guðmundar saga D* 1878, ch. 83, 173), evoking the common expression *að fæða barn* 'to give birth'. The vomiting of both women can also be read as broadly pseudo-procreative but the true pseudo-birth ordeal is evidently the disgorging of the serpents through

the mouth. The only bosom serpent episode to make no direct reference to pregnancy, that of the unnamed woman from the West Fjörds, is also the only one to lack an obvious pseudo-birth ordeal, with the serpent being vanished from inside her rather than drawn out orally. The coincidence of the language of pregnancy with the emergence of the creature from the mouth is clearly designed to establish a link between the two.

Finally, it should be remembered that St Margaret was known in the Middle Ages as the patron saint of childbirth because she was swallowed by a dragon and subsequently emerged, gloriously unscathed, after splitting the dragon apart from the inside. Though the term used for the dragon in the Old Norse version of St Margaret's life is *dreki* (*Heilagra manna søgur* 1877, ch. 5, I 478), there was a good deal of overlap between the concepts of *dreki* and *ormr* in Old Norse society (Mitchell 2019, 115; Gräslund 2006, 126),[16] such that the bosom serpent episodes may still be read as inversions of St Margaret's ordeal, in which instead of being swallowed by a dragon, a dragonish creature is swallowed by a woman. Given the considerable popularity of *Margrétar saga* in Iceland, as judged by surviving manuscript witnesses, it seems unlikely that such a resonance would have gone unappreciated by an Old Norse audience.[17]

Accepting that these episodes are instances of pseudo-procreation then, let us turn to their narrative function. On one level these serpent episodes are clearly moral punishments, comparable with the widespread *femme aux serpents* tradition, in which women were depicted being suckled by serpents in hell or purgatory, as a punishment for lust and/or refusing to nurse either their own children or orphans in need (Luyster 2001; Weir and Jerman 1986, 58–79). Certainly, the episode in *Morkinskinna* seems to be linked to Ingibjǫrg's position as the king's mistress. Lena Rohrbach suggests that for Ingibjǫrg 'die Anwesenheit von Schlangen für

[16] For a detailed discussion of the differences between the two concepts see Acker 2013.

[17] For a complete list of manuscripts see the entry for 'Margaret of Antioch' in Wolf 2013, 217–21.

Siechtum und innere Verrotung steht' [the presence of snakes represents infirmity and inner corruption] (2009, 275). The parallel between her pseudo-pregnancy and the queen's real pregnancy establishes normal pregnancy as the outcome of sanctioned sexual relations within marriage and reptilian invasion as the consequence of extramarital sexual behaviour. It is no coincidence that chastity plays a key role in the cure, as indicated both by Haraldr's instructions that the recovering Ingibjǫrg is to *syngva beati immaculati ok sjau sálma ok einkum Máríumessu* 'sing Beati Immaculati and seven psalms and especially the Marian mass' (*Morkinskinna* 2011, ch. 43, I 234) and by her ultimate confinement in a nunnery. Not only does Ingibjǫrg suffer through a parody of procreation but she is never to become a mother: the corruption of her reproductive role leads to its permanent loss.

Haraldr's sexual profligacy may likewise be the focus of subtle criticism. Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade have noted that the episode 'seems to form a matching contrast to King Magnús's desired liaison with Margrét' in chapter 23 of *Morkinskinna*, but where Magnús virtuously gives up his pursuit after a revelation from St Óláfr and instead acquires Margrét a suitable husband, Haraldr 'engages in quasi-magical practices and persists in his designs' (2000, 439n3). While there is no explicit allusion to lust in *Guðmundar saga D*, the unnamed woman from the West Fjörds is stigmatised as *mjök gálausa ok hègómafulla* 'very careless and vain' (*Guðmundar saga D* 1878, ch. 83, 171), moral failings which are corrected by her harrowing ordeal. Quite why Ýngvildr Magnúsdóttir should have to suffer is more perplexing. Her apparent crime was a failure to remember to cross herself before drinking but the punishment seems rather out of proportion to the offence.

While this and other questions remain open to further study, what is most important for the present argument is that, as with the adoption episodes, the unnatural or false character of these events is made explicit within the narratives themselves. Though the language and imagery of pregnancy plays an important role in these episodes as a means of making

intelligible an unusual physical ordeal, a clear demarcation between these horrific incubations and the experience of actual procreation is nevertheless maintained and it is this which renders the term pseudo-procreation appropriate.

Rather than failed births like the adoption rituals in *Ála flekks saga* and *Finnboga saga*, the bosom serpent episodes, particularly that in *Morkinskinna*, look more like anti-births, a kind of devilish or horrific inversion of pregnancy and delivery of the kind Amanda Luyster has suggested is depicted by a relief on the south porch of St Pierre, a medieval church in Moissac. There the scene of the Annunciation on the lowest level of the porch's east wall, in which Mary's impregnation is both effected and announced, is paralleled at the same level on the porch's west wall by a 'demonic inversion […], in which the woman is both told of and impregnated […] by demonic beasts', represented by a toad at her pudenda and another issuing from the adjacent demon's mouth (Luyster 2001, 188). Productive comparisons might also be made with Caesarean births, which came in the Later Middle Ages to be associated with the birth of the Antichrist, a figure with its own long history of association with the serpent and/or dragon (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 125–42, particularly 136).[18]

At a deeper level then these scenes seem to probe the limits of 'natural' procreation and to explore the dangers of its perversion. Perhaps paradoxically, the pseudo-procreative bosom serpent episodes of *Morkinskinna* and *Guðmundar saga D*, without actually featuring

[18] In this respect I think Lena Rohrbach (2009, 275) may have spoken too soon when she remarked of the *Morkinskinna* episode: 'Auffällig ist dabei die völlige Abwesenheit der konzeptionellen Verknüpfung der Schlange mit dem Antichristen, die in der christlichen Symbolik eine lange Tradition hat und sich in zeitgenössischen kontinentaleuropäische Textzeugen häufig aufspüren läßt' [At the same time, the complete absence of the conceptual association of the serpent with the Antichrist, which had a long tradition in Christian symbolism and which can be frequently traced in contemporary continental European textual witnesses, is striking].

childbirth directly, could be construed as far more nearly concerned with the concept of procreation than many explicit scenes of birth in Old Norse literature, which tend to be vehicles for much wider social and political commentary, rather than explorations of procreation as a phenomenon in and of itself. And it is here, I would tentatively suggest, that the two episodes of pseudo-procreation discussed, the adoption rituals and the bosom serpent motif, which are so different in narrative function, genre and date, find common ground. Both demonstrate an interest in what procreation is or should be, by modelling what it is not.

Conclusion

Childbirth is a culturally conditioned event. There has arguably never been any such thing as 'natural childbirth'. There is, however, in every society a constructed idea of what constitutes 'natural childbirth' which often passes for the real thing and which can be used as a foil against which to define the unnatural, the monstrous and the perverse. Ongoing debates surrounding the ethics and application of the continually advancing reproductive technologies (surrogacy, IVF, genetic editing, and stem cell research) demonstrate that the question of what is natural and what is artificial or 'pseudo' in procreation is a highly current and emotive one. The complex and fascinating depictions of pseudo-procreation here discussed suggest that such a question is not new but rather has a long and rich history that encompasses a heterogeneous selection of Old Norse literature, the very diversity of which invites further study.

Far from a superior male form of reproduction, which exalts the cultural and spiritual above the merely physical, pseudo-procreation, as reconceived by the present discussion, is distinguished by its failure adequately to mimic the processes of normal procreation, and associated not with men but with women in all the examples discussed above. In fact, it is noteworthy that, far from being women's business, both types of pseudo-procreative episode actually reinforce an impression of ordinary reproduction as a joint enterprise, shared between

men and women. Syrpa in *Finnboga saga* describes her imitation of birth as acting *sem vit eigim barn þetta* 'as if we two are having this child' (1959, ch. 3, 256), using the dual to encompass both herself and her husband, while the solitary nature of Ingibjǫrg's pseudo-procreative ordeal in *Morkinskinna* is explicitly contrasted with Haraldr's determination that his queen shall not be left to endure her pregnancy and birth alone. If it is possible to use this newly reconceived notion of pseudo-procreation, grounded in much later literary sources, to reflect back on the Old Norse myths with which this discussion began, then I would suggest that the Norse creation myths are perhaps better read in terms of female exclusion from the shared procreative process rather than as male appropriation of exclusively female capacities. This may seem like a minor semantic shift, but it is nevertheless a significant one.

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